

AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

Authoritarian regimes are characterised primarily by their having 'no turnover in power' of the executive. They lack free and fair elections, and they only represent and further the interests of a few elite groups within a population. Despite sharing these common attributes, different authoritarian regimes have considerable structural differences.

Totalitarianism is a form of extreme authoritarian rule in which the leaders wish to reshape and reconfigure human nature itself. The leadership seeks to provide a blueprint for the complete overhaul of human interactions and restructure them often in ways that are highly destructive. Whereas other authoritarian scenarios only pursue the necessary control to retain power indefinitely, totalitarianism exercises comprehensive power over people and every aspect of their lives. Such absolute control is achieved through extreme repression in the form of organised campaigns of terror which historically have included pogroms, labour or concentration camps, and sham trials, all of which serve to elicit conformity and subdue resistance. Totalitarian regimes are also highly reliant on indoctrinating the population into an ideology of the state to manufacture legitimacy for itself and create an organisational ethos. To authoritarian leadership, propagating an ideology is less important and perhaps something that is adopted expediently with changing alliances. Authoritarianism does not seek to mobilise a population to a particular end, but rather prefer an apathetic population. Today, very few totalitarian regimes remain.

Continuous and Categorical Typologies of Authoritarianism

These are employed to classify various types of authoritarian rule. Continuous typologies locate authoritarianism along a democratic-autocratic continuum which attempts to capture the gradations in authoritarian regimes. This conception recognises competitive authoritarian regimes which are hybrid regimes in which democratic institutions are allowed to exist but are utilised to manipulate election outcomes and undercut any opposition. This authoritarianism exists on a scale and categorising it thus addresses its fluctuating and evolving nature rather than seeing it as a static phenomenon.

Categorical typologies group authoritarianism based on a defining feature of that rule, for instance, the strategy used for control or the structural type of the regime. Some categorical forms of authoritarianism are:

Personalist Dictatorships

Leaders of these exercise unrestrained power. They enfeeble the military and curtail the legislature to allow themselves free rein while consolidating power over the media and the judiciary to obstruct and suppress any opposition. Due to these survival strategies, personalist dictatorships are quite long-lived.

Single-party Regimes

In these, a single party operates by determining all policy by holding all political positions. The party is a well-organised, self-governing entity thus checking the power of the leader to make autonomous decisions. All state apparatus, civil society, the military, and the media are under state rule.

Military Dictatorships

These are regimes that have seized power and begun to occupy the executive branch. Because a ruling junta forms a collective, decision making is not unilateral. They are relatively short-lived and are sometimes, though certainly not always, open to discussing the terms of their exit.

Durability of authoritarian regimes: Elections are periodically held in most authoritarian states today to legitimise their credentials and allow them to ensure and extend their longevity. Even though past authoritarian regimes were more overtly oppressive, such regimes today are more likely to absorb dissenters or rivals by offering them positions within the power hierarchy and thus neutralising them. Sometimes, because of the stability afforded by the durability of the system, especially if it results in economic growth, authoritarian rule enjoys palpable support.

Corruption and clientelism: Higher levels of corruption are a feature of authoritarian regimes as opposed to democracies. Clientelism or patron-clientelism is an essential survival tool for authoritarianism. It refers to personal relationships between citizen-clients and government-patrons based on the exchange of resources, goods, money, services, or access in return for the citizens' allegiance. Clientelist states can orient their institutions and services in such a way that their particular patrons are made the sole beneficiaries and so that they can police their political support.

How do authoritarian regimes perform?

According to IMF data, authoritarian regimes underperform economically compared to democratic ones. Corrupt, personalist rule performs the worst as individual survival of the ruler is the primary objective and in the process institutions, due process, and resistance are rendered ineffective allowing for the widespread plunder of the country. Single-party regimes in which a leader is constrained by party procedure perform the best economically among authoritarian regimes. Despite the economic drawbacks to authoritarianism, since the Cold War there have been some democratic overturns to authoritarianism indicating that democratic institutions can be upended and utilised to serve authoritarian ends.

Adapted from Natasha Lindstaedt, 'Democracies' in Daniele Caramani (ed), *Comparative Politics* (OUP 2020)

Further Reading

Paul Brooker, *Non-Democratic Regimes* (Palgrave Macmillan 2014)

Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge University Press 2007)

Larry Diamond, Marc F Plattner and Christopher Walker, *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy* (John Hopkins University Press 2016)

Kanishka Goonewardena, 'Populism, nationalism and Marxism in Sri Lanka: from anti-colonial struggle to authoritarian neoliberalism' (2020) 102 *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 289