Authoritarian innovations: theoretical foundations and practical implications

Thomas Pepinsky

To cite this article: Thomas Pepinsky (2020) Authoritarian innovations: theoretical foundations and practical implications, Democratization, 27:6, 1092-1101, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2020.1775589

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1775589

Published online: 16 Jun 2020.
Authoritarian innovations: theoretical foundations and practical implications

Thomas Pepinsky

Department of Government, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA

ABSTRACT
Curato and Fossati’s concept of authoritarian innovations encourages scholars to look beyond the nominal categories in which we may classify political regimes and to focus instead on how political decisions constrain or open up the space for mass political participation. In this commentary, I amplify the editors’ productive distinction between regimes and practices, outline the methodological implications of a meso-level approach to authoritarianism, and highlight how a practice-oriented approach complements a range of critical approaches to the supposed emancipatory potential of new media, economic growth, and other social and political phenomena. I conclude by stepping back from these applications of Curato and Fossati’s framework to consider whether any measures that restrict public participation is inherently anti-democratic.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 15 May 2020; Accepted 25 May 2020

KEYWORDS
Southeast Asia; authoritarianism; authoritarian innovations; practice theory; accountability; participation

Introduction
The 2010s will be remembered as a time of democratic decline, when both consolidated democracies and newly transitioning democracies faced serious challenges from antidemocratic forces, from populists on the right and the left to nationalists who prioritized national identity and social stability over civil liberties and political rights.1 Scholars grappling with these newly emergent threats to democracy have emphasized the importance of norms and informal practices for sustaining democratic rule, drawing attention not to formal institutions or social change, but rather to how political actors use the resources available to them.2 Democracy endures not because of the particular institutions that democratic actors inhabit or the laws that constrain them, but because actors agree to disagree, respect the rights of the opposition to participate and contest (when they are in power), and trust in the possibility of future change (when they are in opposition).

In this context of global challenges to democracy, Curato and Fossati introduce the term authoritarian innovations to describe “novel governance practices designed to shrink spaces for meaningful public participation”.3 This timely contribution, explic-ated with special reference to Southeast Asia, has global implications. In focusing
attention on practices rather than on regimes, institutions, or leaders, the concept of authoritarian innovations encourages scholars to look beyond the nominal categories in which we may classify political regimes and to focus instead on how political decisions constrain or open up the space for mass political participation. In doing so, we can identify a range of practices that affect the quality and character of mass politics in contemporary electoral regimes – in Southeast Asia and beyond – that fall outside of the formal rules that characterize them.

I hope to use this commentary to amplify Curato and Fossati’s productive distinction between regimes and practices, and then to build on it in two ways, drawing on both the contributions to this special Thematic Section and on the broader comparative literature on authoritarianism and democratization. First, methodologically, I outline the consequences of a meso-level approach for research designs that compare across countries or among individuals and groups within countries, arguing that the study of authoritarian innovations requires the kind of qualitative evidence and case-based knowledge that more quantitative approaches to comparative politics cannot provide. Second, conceptually, I identify a useful parallel between authoritarian innovations and a range of research on the social and institutional foundations of democracy and authoritarianism, highlighting how a practice-oriented approach complements a range of critical approaches to the supposed emancipatory potential of new media, economic growth, and other social phenomena. I conclude by stepping back from these applications of Curato and Fossati’s framework to consider whether any measures that restrict public participation is inherently anti-democratic.

**Regimes versus practices**

In focusing on practices, authoritarian innovations capture the practices that restrict political participation without specifying *a priori* the political regime in which they take place. Regimes may be defined as “the ensemble of patterns, explicit or not, that determines and channels of access to principal governmental positions, the characteristics of the actors who are admitted and excluded from such access, and the resources or strategies that they can use to gain access.” Simplifying, we may understand regimes as the procedures for allocating political authority within a defined community. Authoritarian regimes are those that, among other attributes, do not allocate political authority through competitive elections involving close to universal adult suffrage. Regimes, then, are nominal categories: democratic versus all others, or various typologies of authoritarianism (party, military, personalistic, etc.). Regimes may also vary continuously: more or less personalist, more or less contested, more or less participatory, and so forth.

Although no democratic theorist would hold that regimes are static or unchanging, a focus on regimes emphasizes the “ensemble of patterns” that governs the allocation of political authority, with an implicit focus on their stability, or at least predictability. A practice theoretic approach looks more closely at those patterns themselves. Responding to the observation that a focus on regimes obscures the common political changes found in electoral democracies like the Philippines and electoral authoritarian regimes such as Hungary, Glasius proposes to focus on *authoritarian practices*: “pattern[s] of actions, embedded in an organized context, sabotaging accountability to people (‘the forum’) over whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by disabling their access to information and/or disabling their voice.” This definition removes any
discussion of the allocation of authority at all, meaning that authoritarian practices may be found in the most competitive of democracies and the hardest authoritarian regimes alike.

Curato and Fossati, in drawing on Glasius’s work, stress the novelty of authoritarian innovations, where an innovation is novel if “it breaches existing norms or pushes the boundaries of acceptable conduct within a regime.” Here we see a productive tension between regimes and practices, with the latter constituting the regime but also potentially undermining it. Indeed, it is not hard to see how a series of authoritarian innovations, taken together, may change the qualitative character of a regime from democratic to something else, or from one sort of authoritarian regime to another one. For the contributors to this collection, such accumulated changes to the character of a regime are less important than are the innovations themselves and their implications for accountability and participation. This refreshing approach illuminates the related developments in a plainly flawed electoral democracy (Indonesia), a formerly authoritarian regime that had recently lost power in elections (Malaysia), and a durable authoritarian regime (Singapore). The concept of authoritarian innovations gives us a term that is capacious enough to recognize parallel developments across such regimes.

Nevertheless, the tensions between the concepts of authoritarian regime and authoritarian practice and innovation warrant fuller attention. Scholar of democratic and authoritarian regimes alike are paying increasing attention to the norms and informal institutions that structure politics. Although practices are conceptually distinct from norms and informal institutions, they each address the routinized patterns of social interactions that govern political life. To be clear, authoritarian innovations can be described separately from the question of regime change, but they should force scholars of regimes to reckon with the question of whether these innovations generate new logics of rule.

Likewise, practice theory provides a somewhat unsatisfying theoretical foundation for conceptualizing authoritarian innovations due to its ambiguous position on social change. In the words of one practice theorist,

however strong the emphasis on contingency in the form of rearrangements or innovation in practice is, change is also an intricate problem for praxiography. Practices are repetitive patterns, but they are also permanently displacing and shifting patterns. Practices are dispersed, dynamic and continuously rearranging, but they are also reproducing clusters.

A strong reading of this statement would render the notion of authoritarian innovation vacuous, as all practices are inherently changing, and practice theorists stress contingency (rather than structure or deliberation) in describing innovations in practices. Theoretically, it may be more productive to reground the concept of authoritarian innovation in the literature on informal institutions and political change.

The importance of qualitative evidence

This last observation – that the concept of authoritarian innovations has useful similarities with work on informal institutions and political change – provides a convenient segue to a discussion of methodology in the study of authoritarian practices. The works in this Thematic Section illustrate the essential role of qualitative evidence and contextual knowledge for identifying and making sense of the wide array of political dynamics
that fall under the rubric of authoritarian innovations. This kind of qualitative and contextual expertise is essential in two senses. First, authoritarian innovations are generally not “newsworthy” to a broader international audience reading English language news coverage. This means that unless researchers pay attention to local politics, they are unlikely to be able to identify authoritarian innovations as they happen (or, as in the case of Orbán or Duterte, they will only come to see them only when it is too late). Second, Curato and Fossati’s emphasis on “meaning” rather than simply “practice per se” reveals that grasping the political importance of authoritarian innovations requires an understanding of how local political actors conceptualize politics, which I have described elsewhere using the term “unit context.”

To even describe an authoritarian innovation properly is to engage with the broader conflicts over meaning and values in a given political regime.

Dettman’s contribution on Malaysia and Mietzner’s contribution on Indonesia illustrate the importance of this qualitative, contextual understanding of authoritarian innovations. After defeating the long-ruling National Front coalition in 2018 on platform of reform and democratization, the new Alliance of Hope government found itself perpetuating many of the authoritarian practices that its predecessor had employed, such as using the country’s Sedition Act to clamp down on criticism of Malay special rights. The “headline” of 2018 in Malaysia was political liberalization, but the practices of governance reveal the new government’s need to restrict contestation on deeply symbolic issues such as ethnic favouritism in order to preserve political stability. Likewise, in democratic Indonesia, both the (democratically elected) incumbent government and opposition forces have sought to restrict democratic competition and contestation; the former, most notably, has clamped down on criticism and sought to direct the internal affairs of the country’s opposition parties. Again, the “headline” of Jokowi’s administration since 2014 is that a mild-mannered, performance-oriented politician has twice defeated an aspiring strongman insider who has exploited religious cleavages to his benefit. But Jokowi’s practices of governance reveal “electoral narrowing” through a specific set of decisions designed to manage both how Indonesians participate in electoral politics and how they may voice opposition to or criticism of the government.

Such insights into authoritarian innovations in a tentatively liberalizing authoritarian regime and a flawed electoral democracy would be unavailable from a simple focus on the headlines of liberalization (Malaysia) and electoral stability (Indonesia). Much of the new cross-nationally comparative research on authoritarian regimes would likewise struggle to identify such practices because they cannot be captured easily as institutional structures, levels of spending, or degree of repression. Country reports from institutions such as Freedom House may provide some insights into important political developments that escape the headlines, but given their objective of producing cross-nationally comparable rankings of abstract concepts such as political rights, they are unlikely to probe deeply these authoritarian practices in order to uncover their meaning. A more microanalytical focus on research designs that can estimate the causal effects of policies or programmes is likewise ill-suited to capturing meaning in authoritarian innovations. Authoritarian innovations remind us of the importance of theoretically informed case studies analyses, relying on qualitative and field-based insights, to make sense of contemporary authoritarianism. The study of practices at the meso-level of analysis has a particular affinity for such contextually sensitive research.
Essentially democratizing forces

This discussion on the important of qualitative insights in context sensitive research brings me to my third and final point. A careful focus on how regimes – both authoritarian and democratic – respond to the incipient challenges to their rule reveals just how pragmatic they can be. Morgenbesser’s “menu of autocratic innovation” details the many tools that contemporary authoritarian regimes use to restrict participation and contestation, and it is striking how many of these (the rule of law, digital media, think tanks, and many others) are also customarily used to promote democratization or to deepen existing democracies. In my view, the single most important substantive conclusion to draw from this collection of essays is that there are no essentially democratic institutions or essentially democratizing social forces.

Democracy is, of course, a multifaceted concept, subject to intense disagreement even among democratic theorists and certainly as well among mass publics. As a consequence, politicians may easily invoke a rhetoric of “strengthening” or “protecting” democracy as a justification for measures that effectively restrict contestation or participation. And indeed, Curato and Fossati note that “the very nature of the idea of democracy as a complex, multi-dimensional construct is not lost to advocates of authoritarianism, who systematically exploit this ambiguity to their own advantage”.

Political elites – democratically elected or not – may argue that certain subjects are too sensitive for open political debate, that raising them at all (as in Dettman’s example of Malay rights in Malaysia, or Mietzner’s example of identity politics in Indonesia) would threaten the social stability required for democratic politics to operate. Political elites may likewise argue that under a constitutional order, governments must take a firm hand to ensure that voting takes place in lawful manner. These are tensions found in all democracies: Germany regulates speech that threatens to incite hate, and in the United States, President Trump has advocated heavy regulation of voter registration and vote identification to ward off an imaginary threat of illegal immigrant voting.

The inherent ambiguity and uncertainty in democracy – in Przeworski’s words, democracy is inherently a system of “organized uncertainty” – comports well with process-oriented theories of democratization and arguments that reject structural, sociological, or economic preconditions for democratization. In focusing on authoritarian innovations, however, we can see clearly the uncomfortable implications of such an approach. Economic growth, the spread of new media, and the rise of the middle class each may be probabilistically associated with democracy, but these correlations are probably not causal and they are certainly not deterministic. The concept of authoritarian innovations focuses attention on the potentially anti-democratic features of each of these kinds of social change.

Tan’s perceptive case study of Singapore provides a compelling analysis of how Singapore’s durable authoritarian regime has harnessed digital media to strengthen its rule. This set of tactics exemplifies some of what is found in Morgenbesser’s analysis of sophisticated authoritarianism across Southeast Asia. While allowing digital media to flourish, Singapore’s authorities can use the courts to prosecute online criticism as defamatory, and have embraced the messaging potential of online media to reach its citizens. Singaporeans – like people around the world – are connected to a degree that would have been almost unimaginable outside of speculative science fiction two decades ago, and yet this connectedness has decidedly not fostered democratization in Singapore, because authorities have worked assiduously to avoid it.
Stepping back from this particular case study of digital media, the lessons of Tan’s analysis of Singapore comport well with the lessons from Dettman and Mietzner. In starkest terms, the general conclusion to draw from these together is that no institution, technology, or discourse is inherently democratic. We have known for decades that countries with that have formal legislative institutions are not necessarily democracies, but we also know that digital media is a tool that may be used by authoritarian regimes and democratic regimes alike to police citizens and constrain public discourse, and a discourse of protecting civil liberties or particular social rights can be used to restrict the terms of contestation. The effects of institutions, social change, discourses, and technology all depend on how they are used, by regimes and oppositions alike, and to what end. The effects of social forces, economic change, and discourse are all essentially, inherently political.

My sceptical read, prompted by this collection of pieces on authoritarian innovations, of the emancipatory potential of economic development, digital media, rights discourses, anti-corruption bodies, and other factors often thought to be the antecedents of democracy resonates with an established literature in comparative politics and critical political economy. One prescient volume that anticipated the contingencies and limits of social and economic change on democratization in the Asian context is Robison and Goodman’s _The New Rich in Asia_, which drew on the experiences of rapid economic growth and social change of the 1980s and early 1990s to question whether modernization theory would apply neatly or unproblematically in East and Southeast Asia. Economic growth produced socioeconomic change, but with the emergent middle classes dependent on state protection and an active public sector, this did not produce mass support for political change. To understand the effects of economic development in these cases required attention to the relationship between those affected by change and the political regimes in which they were embedded; so, too, with authoritarian innovations that exploit archetypically “democratic” institutions.

Morgenbesser’s conceptual overview of the “menu of authoritarian innovation”, however, pushes this conclusion even further, in directions that previous analysts of social change and democratization might not have anticipated. Not only have authoritarians harnessed parliamentary institutions and discourses for anti-democratic ends, they have learned to do so by watching and learning from pro-democracy forces: “an uncomfortable truth about innovation, however, is that many of the included ‘autocratic’ techniques can be traced back to ‘democratic’ architects.” Authoritarian actors such as Cambodia’s Hun Sen learn that democracy-promoting election monitoring lends credibility to electoral results, and respond by promoting their own “neutral” electoral monitors who, unsurprisingly, conclude that fundamentally flawed elections are free and fair. Having learned from the experience of how trolls may shut down criticism and debate in online communities centred in democratic contexts, the Thai military regime – like regimes in Russia, Egypt, Iran, and others – mobilizes online troll armies to dilute critical news and distract mass publics in the face of unpleasant or damaging political developments. Formally unconnected with the regime, they free the government from having to enact strong repressive measures to control political speech.

In sum, the very institutions and discourses that emerged to foster democratic debate and mass participation decades ago have been turned by savvy authoritarians into tools that restrict participation and contestation. It is hard to think of a single democratic innovation that cannot be perverted this way, from free online communities beset by troll armies, to think tanks that produce pro-regime press releases and uncritical
analyses, to parliaments stacked with incompetents and sycophants. The meso-level focus on authoritarian innovations, on what regimes and politicians do, is particularly well-suited to identifying such anti-democratic uses of otherwise democratic practices.

Conclusion

In advancing the concept of authoritarian innovations and applying them to Southeast Asian cases, the contributions to this Thematic Section make an important innovation in the contemporary literature on authoritarianism. As noted previously, some theoretical and conceptual problems do remain, as with the tensions between practices and regimes and the ambiguity of practice theory’s account of social change. But the payoffs from this meso-level approach are substantial, foregrounding good empirical case-based knowledge, revealing common authoritarian practices that span traditional regime types, and highlighting the anti-democratic potential of purportedly democratizing institutions and discourses. In various ways, implicitly and explicitly, each of the contributions lends support to these conclusions. Scholars of other regimes and other parts of the world can build on them: it is easy to identify authoritarian innovations in the Philippines both under Duterte and under previous administrations; in Putin’s Russia; in Venezuela under Maduro; in Uganda under Museveni; in Egypt under Morsi as well as el-Sisi; in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic; and in Trump’s America.

By way of conclusion, I want to sketch out one consequence of authoritarian innovations that may have tricky normative implications. As defined by Curato and Fossati and employed in these essays, an authoritarian innovation is anything that restricts meaningful participation. But democracy is not the same thing as participation. Many democracies place limits on mass participation, through indirect elections, strong parties that control membership, and the very phenomena of representation (by legislators) or delegation (to bureaucracies or to executives). These are, prima facie, not anti-democratic phenomena, although they often are unpopular among those who correctly diagnose that their means of participation have been restricted under the current political regime and system of laws (such as Bernie Sanders’ supporters in the 2016 U.S. election, or France’s gilets jaunes of 2019 who lambasted the Macron government’s economic policy choices). To hold that any restriction on participatory space is authoritarian is, in my read, too strong of a position. The implication is that democracy requires the maximal expansion of meaningful participation, which pushes the notion of democratic politics towards a populist or exclusively plebiscitary conception of democracy that eliminates horizontal accountability altogether and prioritizes vertical accountability through mass participation.

Surely that is not what the concept of authoritarian innovations is meant to do. Here, though, we see just how challenging the problem of authoritarian practices is. Authoritarians do restrict participation in the name of “protecting democracy”. But democrats do the same. Democracy is about uncertainty, and this is one implication of that uncertainty.

Notes

4. Glasius, “What Authoritarianism Is …”
5. O’Donnell and Schmitter, Transitions from Authoritarian Rule, 73.
6. Alvarez et al., “Classifying Political Regimes.”
7. Geddes, “What Do We Know.”
15. Gerring, “Mere Description.”
17. Pepinsky, “The Institutional Turn in Comparative Authoritarianism.”
24. The classic statement is Rustow, “Transitions to Democracy.”
29. For a review of modernization theory and democracy in Southeast Asia, see Bertrand, “Growth and Democracy in Southeast Asia.”
30. See also O’Donnell, Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism.
32. See Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin, Democracy, Accountability, and Representation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Thomas Pepinsky is Tisch University Professor in the Department of Government and Associate Director of the Modern Indonesia Project at Cornell University.

ORCID

Thomas Pepinsky http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4000-217X
References


