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NGOs and Authoritarianism

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In January 2017, China's new 2017 Overseas NGO Law came into effect, restricting the rapidly growing community of international NGOs (INGOs) by requiring that all foreign NGOs be monitored and overseen by a Professional Supervisory Unit—typically a government ministry or government-run NGO. The law also imposes strict requirements on the issue areas foreign NGOs can address, limiting them to education, technology, sports, poverty alleviation, and other non-contentious issues. In debates over the law, the Chinese Communist Party identified INGOs as direct threats to national security and designed the law to limit Western influence and insulate China's domestic NGO sector from foreign values, allowing the government to "better protect China from perceived external threats to its sovereignty and social stability" (Shieh 2017).

China's anti-NGO law is part of a larger global trend of closing civic space in authoritarian regimes. Crackdowns and restrictions on NGOs have increased in frequency and severity. In 2015, Russia passed its Undesirable Organizations law, giving the government the ability to blacklist any foreign or international organization and force them to shut down. In May 2017, Egyptian president Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi signed legislation that had sat in draft form since the 2011 uprising, imposing harsh jail sentences for any foreign NGO undertaking political activities or operating without paying a substantial registration fee. Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Myanmar, Cambodia, Bahrain, Hungary, and other authoritarian regimes have passed similar restrictive NGO laws in recent years. In its 2017 report on global civic space, CIVICUS found that only 3% of the world's population lives in open societies with minimal restrictions on associational activity, with the majority living in countries with obstructed or repressed civic space (CIVICUS 2017).

Despite this increasingly closed space for global civil society, international NGO continue to operate in authoritarian regimes, even in counties that have become

more hostile. As of May 1, 2018, over one thousand foreign NGOs have gained either permanent or temporary official legal status in China under the provisions of the 2017 Overseas NGO law, including ten that work on labor issues and many others that deal with other potentially contentious issues (Batke 2018). More curiously, since the 1990s, China has strategically invited dozens of Western NGOs to set up offices locally, specifically to provide policy guidance and technical governing expertise (Wheeler 2013). Greenpeace—one of the most radical and outspoken INGOs in environmental advocacy—has offices in Beijing and has helped draft laws related to renewable energy and other environmental issues (Teets 2014). Though the 2017 law emphasizes the national security risks of foreign NGOs, consulting with INGOs is a regular policy practice for the Chinese government. Despite their public pronouncements that NGOs are threats, authoritarian regimes around the world allow them and rely on them.

This presents a perplexing phenomenon. Authoritarian restrictions on domestic and international civil society have increased over the past decade, but authoritarian states continue to allow—and even invite—NGOs to work in their countries. Though the services and advocacy provided by NGOs can challenge the legitimacy and power of authoritarian regimes, the majority of autocratic states allow NGO activities, and NGOs in turn continue to work in these countries in spite of the heavy legal restrictions and attempts to limit their activities. This chapter examines the theories about and the experiences of domestic and international NGOs working in authoritarian countries. Each of the countries discussed in this chapter have been classified as autocracies by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014) at some point since 1990. Some cases have democratized between 1990 and 2018, but the relationship between state and civil society is still shaped by the country's authoritarian legacy. The review is premised on the theory of authoritarian institutions: dictators delegate political authority to democratic-appearing institutions in order to remain in power and maintain stability. After providing a brief overview of authoritarian institutionalism and balancing, I discuss how domestic and international NGOs fit into authoritarian stability-seeking calculus. I then look at three forms of state–NGO relationships in the context of authoritarianism and explore how autocrats have addressed and regulated international NGOs in particular. Finally, I conclude with suggestions for future research on NGOs and their relationship with and role in authoritarian regimes.

Authoritarian institutions

Despite the popular image of all-powerful dictators who exert total control over their countries, authoritarians are often precariously positioned and run the risk

of regime collapse or overthrow. A growing literature in comparative politics argues that authoritarianism is a dynamic form of governance, with rulers engaging in constant legislative, constitutional, and institutional reforms as part of a complex multi-level game played by the regime, elites, opposition forces, international actors, activists, and social movements (Stacher 2012, 31). Autocrats must carefully balance external actors and institutions to remain in power (Levitsky and Way 2010), and failure to do so can lead to regime collapse (Heiss 2012; Svolik 2009). Ultimately, the persistence or collapse of authoritarian regimes depends on the quality and management of their institutional restraints and rivals (Brownlee 2007, 202), and if "rulers counter [threats to their rule] with an adequate degree of institutionalization, they survive in power" (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007, 284).

Political institutions lie at the core of modern authoritarianism and autocracy. As such, throughout this chapter, I use an institutional definition of authoritarianism. Autocracy is not the opposite of democracy—autocracy occurs when an executive achieves power through undemocratic means, when a democratically elected government changes the formal or informal institutions to limit competition in the future, or when militaries prevent electoral competition (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014). An autocrat interested in maintaining power over their population without turning to absolute totalitarianism can either outlaw opposition to their policies through political repression, or improve the popularity of their policies by manufacturing political loyalty and creating a veneer of popular consent (Wintrobe 1990; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006), and autocrats carry out both strategies by navigating and manipulating the institutional landscape in their states. However, interacting with external institutions is often fraught with risks. Though coercive institutions like the military and secret police forces are instrumental for maintaining state authority, finding the right balance of repression is difficult. Civilian authoritarian regimes often rely on strong militaries for legitimacy and coercion, but as regimes face economic hardship, popular unrest, or political instability, those militaries can emerge from their barracks to overthrow the failing state and instate new civilian authorities (Cook 2007), as most recently seen in the military's interventions against both Hosni Mubarak and Mohamed Morsi in post-2011 Egypt. Internal police forces, deputized by autocrats to prevent coups against their regimes, pose a similar dilemma: secret police agencies that are too powerful could potentially stage their own coup against the autocrat, but forces that are too weak—and thus unable to revolt—are also unable to exercise coercive authority over the population and are thus ineffective at preventing popular coups (Greitens 2016). Striking the right balance of coercion is difficult and failure to do so can lead to regime collapse.

Because it is infeasible to rely solely on violent oppression to maintain power, autocrats have increasingly allowed for a degree of institutional dissonance and

competition to manufacture popular consent and loyalty (Brumberg 2002). Today, dictatorships don "democratic garb" (Brownlee 2007, 25) and mimic democratic institutions to ensure their survival, offset domestic pressure, and boost their international reputation (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 2014; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). As seen in Figure 1, most authoritarian regimes hold competitive elections (Levitsky and Way 2010) and allow for multiparty legislatures (Blaydes 2011), and many have empowered an independent judiciary (Ginsburg and Moustafa 2008) and use independent central banks to set monetary policy (Boylan 2001).[1] While these reforms—many of which are hallmarks of democratization—appear momentous to outsiders, these democratic-appearing institutions are designed to increase regime stability and longevity. For example, Egypt has held competitive parliamentary elections for decades, but not with the purpose of giving citizens representation in government. Instead, regimes have used elections to dole out patronage to politicians who proved their loyalty through competitive elections, thus mediating (or prolonging) distributional conflict between lower elites who could theoretically oppose the regime (Blaydes 2011). Dictators create pseudo-democratic institutions to control the severity of the threat that elites pose to authoritarian stability. Parties, judiciaries, elections, and reforms are allowed, but they are kept weak and "dependent on the regime to ensure that they do not develop any real power or autonomy" (Frantz and Ezrow 2011, 7).

However, this devolution of control to democratic-appearing institutions—many of which can be actively opposed to the regime—creates a challenging competitive dynamic. If the political institutions in a regime are competitive enough, opponents and activists can use them as a means for obtaining actual power within the government (Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014). Under this form of competitive authoritarianism, there is genuine competition for power through elections, though the playing field is generally skewed toward the incumbents. Political competition under authoritarianism is often "real but unfair" (Levitsky and Way 2010, 5)—but still real.

Efforts to influence, control, or diminish opposing institutions can often backfire. State-sponsored labor unions were some of the most active anti-government protesters in Egypt and Tunisia in the 2011 uprisings (Beinin 2011), and opposition parties like the Muslim Brotherhood used competitive parliamentary elections to their advantage and regularly won large proportions of seats (Wickham 2002). These groups' political success allowed them to more effectively mobilize popular support against the regime and was a major factor in the Muslim Brotherhood's

1. Data comes from Coppedge et al. (2018). Regime type is based on V-Dem's "Regimes of the world" index. I consider all closed autocracies and electoral autocracies as "autocracies"; all other regime types are "democracies."

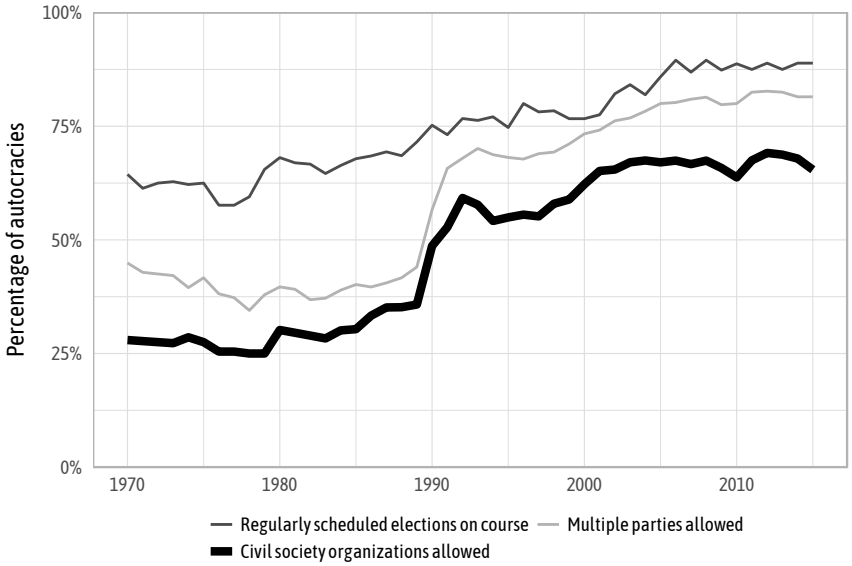

Figure 1: Adoption of pseudo-democratic institutions in authoritarian states since 1970

victory in the 2012 Egyptian presidential election. Dictators can permit nationalist anti-foreign protests to credibly signal their intentions during international crises and in effect use popular anger to increase regime stability in the international arena. However, these protests can spin out of control as opposition elites co-opt the protests, thus backfiring and destabilizing the regime (Weiss 2013). Initiatives to increase authoritarian legislative accountability to the public can also backfire—legislators in authoritarian regimes who are legally required to disclose their political activities and finances become less outspoken of the government and are less likely to be reelected or receive regime patronage, and are thus more likely to keep their activities hidden (Malesky, Schuler, and Tran 2012).

Today, authoritarian adoption of ostensibly democratic institutions has become standard practice, and while elections, political reforms, protests, and legislative politics all appear to push countries towards democratization, autocrats have instead used these institutions to maintain stability. This strategy of institutional balancing carries significant risks, though, and can inadvertently challenge autocratic power. The key for authoritarian survival is thus striking the right balance of institutional independence and control.

NGOs and authoritarian institutions

NGOs and other civil society organizations have become yet another democratic-appearing institution that authoritarians can use to enhance regime stability, and associational life has become a common feature of autocratic rule. Figure 1 shows the growth of autocratic allowance of civil society since the 1970s: by 2015, more than two-thirds of authoritarian countries permit citizens to associate in civil society organizations, following trends similar to other pseudo-democratic authoritarian institutions. Empowering NGOs allows autocrats to expand their control over society and take advantage of the services and expertise provided by these organizations, but doing so also runs the risk of allowing these organizations to destabilize the regime. NGOs in authoritarian regimes are political wildcards (DeMars 2005) and autocrats watch them closely. Much of the uncertainty about the role of NGOs in authoritarian politics is rooted in the ambiguity of the relationship between civil society and government in general. Ahmed and Potter (2006) provide a helpful typology of three forms of NGO–state relationships: NGOs can collaborate and reinforce, oppose, or substitute for state power. Below, I explore how the dynamics of authoritarian institutional politics color each of these relationships.

NGOs as collaborators and reinforcers of authoritarian power

The idea that NGOs and civil society support and collaborate with governments was first made popular by De Tocqueville and later championed by Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1994). This view sees groups of citizens actively engaging with the government to advocate for reform, rights, change, or other services. The vibrant associational life that grows out of this engagement forges links that cross social boundaries—bowling clubs, parent/teacher associations, neighborhood groups, volunteer organizations, and other nonprofit groups tend to include members from multiple social strata, thereby breaking down vertical social boundaries and increasing social trust. This associational life increases civic engagement, embeds norms of reciprocity into society, and helps improve democratic governance—in other words, civil society ultimately strengthens and bolsters the state.

The dictator's goal of using democratic-appearing institutions is not ultimately to improve democratic governance, but to improve authoritarian stability. Tocquevillian NGOs at first do not appear to fit well into this authoritarian stability-seeking calculus. However, Antonio Gramsci offers a bleaker view of civil society's role in supporting the state and allows us to see that civil society under authoritarianism has a different purpose than it does under democracy. Gramsci argues that NGOs and civil society actually contribute to "a more subtle and sophisticated form of state power," one that "serves as an outer perimeter of defense for a hegemonic state" (Cook 2007, 7, 143). The state can exert control over NGOs to more deeply

insinuate itself into society by distorting the networks that civil society organizations create. Instead of allowing for horizontal networks of civic engagement, authoritarian states work to ensure that formal civil society organizations are vertically linked to the state's central authority.

For example, in post-Oslo Palestine, hundreds of new associations and NGOs appeared in the wake of the new peace process, but access to resources was limited by these organizations' connections to Yasser Arafat's ruling Palestinian National Authority (PNA). Palestinian civic associations that supported the PNA received more funding from the government and national donors. As such, many Palestinian association leaders built vertical networks linking their organizations to the state, rather than with members of the communities they served. In one instance, a sports club in Ramallah transformed into a community office connected directly to the PNA, allowing its members to access medical assistance and other unrelated benefits from the government. The PNA successfully insinuated itself into society and transformed civil society's horizontal networks of reciprocity to vertical patronage networks (Jamal 2007).

Laws regarding the allocation of NGO funding can also influence the shape of crosscutting networks in authoritarian states. The legal environment of post-Soviet Russia siloed the burgeoning democracy aid sector and stifled its growth. Henderson (2003) shows how in the early 1990s, foreign donors interested in democratization flooded Russia's civil society sector with aid, which provided hundreds of NGOs with valuable equipment and training and increased their organizational capacity. At the same time, however, competition for democratization aid changed the nature of these organizations. Similar to Palestinian nonprofits aligning themselves with the PNA to secure funding, foreign aid to Russian NGOs created the unintended consequence of creating patron-client ties between international donors and Russian recipients, strengthening vertical ties rather than the horizontal networks necessary for a more robust and socially responsive civil society sector. Instead of a strong grassroots civil society, foreign democratization aid in post-Soviet Russia—enabled by laws that shaped the distribution of foreign funds—helped created a "professionalized realm of NGOs, inaccessible to most local groups and compromised by its links to a neoliberal vision of development" (Hemment 2004, 215). This effectively allowed the Russian state to contain the side effects of democratization aid and neuter NGOs that could potentially destabilize the regime.

Russia has continued to regulate its civil society sector in a way that has linked it more closely to the state and moved it away from its intended constituents. In 2004, Vladimir Putin established the Public Chamber, a public funding mechanism for distributing funds to all civil society organizations. Subsequent anti-NGO laws passed in 2006, 2012, and 2015 strengthened the new office and shaped it into one of

the only legitimate means for domestic NGOs to obtain financial support, linking civil society directly to autocratic state authority (Flikke 2015). Russian NGOs now often act as "the agents of [state-determined] social policy, not the influencers of it," (Crotty, Hall, and Ljubownikow 2014, 1264) and the civil society sector appears to be an extension of the state.

NGOs frequently support and reinforce authoritarian state power in more overt ways, with civil society organizations providing governments with technical and political expertise. Often this capacity building is sorely needed—humanitarian NGOs dealing with disaster relief, refugee assistance, poverty alleviation, and development provide critical services throughout the world. In many countries, NGOs are the main provider of public goods. For instance, in 1999, NGOs provided 40% of health services in Zimbabwe (Ahmed and Potter 2006, 63). Authoritarian states regularly encourage these kinds of NGOs in order to take advantage of their funds and expertise. From 2004–2016, China partnered directly with foreign NGOs to enhance service delivery, education, disaster response, and environmental protections throughout the country—as mentioned previously, even highly contentious Greenpeace has an office in Beijing. However, while the work that humanitarian NGOs do is important, Jennifer Brass (2016) argues that in more repressive and corrupt countries, NGO-based service provision prolongs and props up bad governments by lending them legitimacy. Governments will often invite foreign NGOs into their countries or establish domestic NGOs to help with specific projects and then take credit for their work. In Kenya, Brass finds that citizen perceptions of government quality improved when NGOs provided services, since citizens "expected exceedingly little from their government, so they tended to be pleased to receive any services at all, regardless of the source" (Brass 2016, 27).

NGOs can thus simultaneously improve state capacity and bolster the international legitimacy of authoritarian countries. NGOs can be a powerful tool in authoritarian stability-seeking calculus, particularly when the legal environment restructures horizontal civil society networks into direct links with the state (Marzouk 1997). This type of institutional co-optation transforms NGOs into "mediators between the people's demands and the administration's offers" (Néfissa 2005, 8) and allows authoritarian regimes to remain in power longer.

NGOs as opponents to authoritarian power

In contrast to the notion that civil society grants legitimacy to authoritarian governments, others have argued that civil society stands in opposition to the state. The deeper social connections formed by participating in associational life can allow members of these organizations to "stand up to city hall" (Jamal 2007, 4), to pursue their community self-interests, or to help maintain moral order and social

norms. In this view, civil society organizations act as watchdogs against the government, providing members of society with a vehicle for popular mobilization. Furthermore, these organizations help citizens overcome collective action problems inherent in standing up to repressive regimes, since civil society "helps to back trust whenever there is a sufficient number of citizens who feel vengeful enough to work towards exposing publicly the illegal acts or malpractices of both private and state agents" (Platteau 2000, 308).

Accordingly, NGO activities in authoritarian countries can have real, measurable effects on domestic politics and pose significant risks to regimes that allow them to operate. At times, domestic civil society organizations can organize citizen action and mount direct opposition to the state. As autocratic governments in Latin America in the 1980s banned political parties and removed officials with leftist views, for instance, former state employees "founded private think tanks and other organizations that came to serve as the nucleus of opposition to military rule" (Ahmed and Potter 2006, 65). Similarly, the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East were largely facilitated by domestic civil society organizations. In Egypt, union workers in the Nile Delta, university students, youth organizations like the 6 of April movement, and prominent regional human rights NGOs held regular protests and directly challenged the state in the years prior to 2011, setting the stage for the dramatic collapse of former president Hosni Mubarak's regime (Heiss 2012).

Importantly, the ability for NGOs to successfully stand up to the state depends largely on their power relative to the state. As I discuss later, autocrats tend to engage with civil society on their own terms and work to ensure that the NGOs they allow to operate in their country contribute to regime stability. Today authoritarian governments are generally much more effective at limiting the political power of NGOs and other civil society organizations through harsh legal restrictions. NGOs that pose a danger to the balance of authoritarian institutions are far less likely to be allowed to operate freely.

Because of this, scholarship has turned to look at the role of international civil society as a bulwark against recalcitrant states, since these organizations tend to enjoy greater operational freedom by working from abroad. Countries that receive negative evaluations in human rights reports and press releases from international NGOs see a marked reduction in foreign direct investment inflows (Barry, Clay, and Flynn 2013) and tend to respond with better compliance to international human rights norms (Murdie and Davis 2012). Murdie (2014) concludes that international NGOs focused on service provision and human rights advocacy have improved human security outcomes in authoritarian regimes, providing more access to water and increased adoption of human rights norms. Human rights shaming campaigns by international NGOs can also dictate the allocation of international aid to recipient countries. When INGOs highlight government abuses in countries with more

limited influence in global affairs, donor agencies are more likely to channel their aid to domestic NGOs and condition their aid on improvements in human rights, thus forcing repressive countries to engage in unwanted domestic policy reform (Dietrich and Murdie 2017). NGOs—both domestic and international—thus pose a legitimate threat to authoritarian stability and dictators must balance out their influence.

NGOs as substitutes for authoritarian power

Finally, when autocrats are unable to balance the institutional challenge posed by civil society, they run the risk of ceding responsibility for public service provision and even losing a degree of political control over their countries. Because they often play a critical role in providing social services, close networks of development NGOs and INGOs in countries with weak national governments can marginalize the state and become substitutes to political and economic power.

The case of Kenya is instructive. As international aid agencies increased their work in East Africa in the 1990s, donors preferred to channel their money through NGOs, since they saw civil society as less corrupt and more reliable than Kenyan authorities. Large donor agencies began to require that governments work directly with NGOs to receive any funding. However, the regime resisted these efforts, and in 1997 President Daniel arap Moi warned that NGOs involved in education were a "threat to the security of the state" (Brass 2012, 215). As domestic and international NGOs gained more legitimacy and received greater funding, they posed a growing threat to the stability of Moi's authoritarian rule. Moi lost the 2002 presidential election to opposition leader Mwai Kibaki, who embraced the powerful NGO sector wholeheartedly as a means to both enhance his regime's stability and to collect international aid funds. Under Kibaki, NGOs became part of the regime's social service apparatus, and today NGOs throughout East Africa and other authoritarian states "sit on government policymaking boards, development committees, and stakeholder forums; their strategies and policies are integrated into national planning documents; and their methods of decision making have, over time, become embedded in government's own" (Brass 2012, 218). In contrast to Russia's takeover of the NGO sector with the Public Chamber system, in Kenya and elsewhere NGOs have exerted much more agency and have had control over how they influence government policy.

NGOs have substituted for authoritarian state power in many other countries, often with negative consequences. In many instances, states with fewer resources or with weak government capacity purposely "cede responsibility for the provision of basic services" (Bratton 1989, 569) to better-funded NGOs in an effort to maintain political stability. Doing so, however, deeply entrenches the economic

and social power of these NGOs, and "no incentive is ever provided to them to promote the kind of changes which would ultimately reduce their dependency on foreign donors" (Martin 2002, 12). In other countries, NGOs attract skilled workers by offering higher salaries, which allows them to siphon off the most skilled public sector employees and further weaken state capacity (Ahmed and Potter 2006; Chege 1999). In Zambia, development NGOs have been far more successful than the government in providing social services and public infrastructure (Ahmed and Potter 2006, 66), which in turn has led to the "steady erosion of state [political] hegemony and credibility" (Ihonvbere 1996, 196).

In more extreme cases of authoritarian state weakness or collapse, NGOs can even replace the political authority of the state. In Haiti, where NGOs provide 80–90% of the state's health and education services, large foreign organizations have parceled out the country into specific demarcated territories. Given the reach of the NGO sector, the national government has "ced[ed] near sovereign control to these NGO 'fiefdoms' " (Schuller 2012, 6) and exerts little political influence in those regions. In South Asia, the Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee (BRAC) runs tens of thousands of schools, hospitals, and other social services and has become a powerful parallel political force that often rivals the government (Ahmed and Potter 2006; Haque 2002; Stiles 2002). In these cases, regimes have lost control over the balance of political institutions and have become supplanted by the civil society sector, which in turn has weakened their hold on political power within their states.

International NGOs and legal restrictions on civil society

International NGOs pose a unique challenge to authoritarian political stability. Dictators face a more limited array of policy choices for controlling foreign organizations in their countries. While it may be easy for an autocrat to harass domestic activists or incorporate local NGOs into formal governance structures, it is far riskier to do the same to foreign activists or aid workers, since international NGOs often have the legal and political backing of their home states. Accordingly, autocrats must tread carefully when dealing with these organizations. Relying on non-state actors as part of stability-seeking institutional balancing is fraught with risk. As seen previously, NGOs—both domestic and international—have real effects on domestic politics and policies and pose significant risks to the regimes that allow them to operate.

States today confront a complex mix of actors and issues on the international stage, where activists, bureaucrats, legislators, judges, firms, civil society organizations, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), media organizations, and foreign

states interact and influence domestic policy and behavior (Linos 2013; Slaughter 2004). Similar to their domestic counterparts, international NGOs can provide particularly acute pressure against authoritarian regimes, especially as they work in concert with foreign governments and domestic NGOs to pressure and shame states that behave poorly (Kelley 2017; Kelley and Simmons 2015). Domestic NGOs that are restricted, blocked, or co-opted by their government will turn to allies in the international NGO community who then lobby their home states to convince international organizations to put high-level pressure on the offending regime, thereby creating an opening for the original domestic civil society organizations to advocate for policy changes. This movement of advocacy power follows a boomerang pattern, moving from domestic NGOs to INGOs to foreign states and international organizations to domestic NGOs again (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

With repeated boomerang-like pressure from domestic NGOs and international NGOs, responses to individual issues can evolve into human rights norms, resulting in the institutionalization of new policies and practices within an offending state. Risse and Sikkink (1999) describe this process of norm socialization as a spiral, or a sequence of repeated boomerang effects. Domestic actors repeatedly turn to INGOs and transnational networks for help in their advocacy and slowly wear down the state. Initially the state denies the accusations of repression and claims that foreign human rights norms are invalid, but with repeated domestic and international pressure, the regime will begin to make concessions to the human rights network. Continued pressure helps formalize these concessions into actual legislation, and as politicians adhere to these policies they internalize the human rights norms that underpin the policies, thus resulting in long-lasting reform.

Autocrats facing spiral-like advocacy from INGOs and the international community must think carefully about how to respond in order to maintain their domestic institutional balance. For repressive regimes, ceding too much ground to international human rights advocacy can empower local dissidents and activists and threaten stability, while not ceding enough ground can pave the way for international shaming and economic sanctions. Authoritarian states engage with international civil society selectively depending on rational calculations of how that engagement might be beneficial to the regime. Autocrats tend to follow international norms on their own terms and allow INGO activities only when doing so "allows the regime to shore up its authority and legitimacy and to deflect international pressures" (Hawkins 1997, 407–8). Autocrats can use international NGOs to stabilize and reinforce their political power at home. As discussed previously, because competition for foreign patronage created an absence of strong links between Russian advocacy groups and the public, the Russian state has been able to restructure the civil society sector so that only NGOs that "work on issues that align with the national interest" receive funding and support (Henderson 2010,

254), short-circuiting international spiral pressure and silencing domestic advocacy movements.

Dictators can also respond to international pressure in more roundabout ways that appear to acquiesce to human rights norms but still provide the regime with control over the influence of international NGOs. For instance, Kelley (2012) finds that since election monitoring has become a global norm, most authoritarian governments—even those that fully intend on cheating and manipulating their elections—permit election-monitoring INGOs as a way of appearing credible and democratic to peer nations. In 2000, international aid agencies pressured Robert Mugabe to allow Western election monitors to observe the Zimbabwean presidential elections. Mugabe assented to their demands, but also invited dozens of regime-friendly monitoring NGOs who endorsed his electoral landslide as fair and legitimate. Russia followed a similar strategy in its 2008 presidential elections, inviting election-monitoring NGOs that were based in other autocratic states. These "zombie" NGOs provide autocrats with a facade of international legitimacy (Walker and Cooley 2013). Even if large INGOs like the Carter Center condemn authoritarian elections and biased and unfair, dictators with control over domestic media can use glowing NGO reports to "spin the story to the domestic audience and to friendly governments in their regions" (Kelley 2012, 55).

However, because autocrats are rarely able to completely control and balance all rival institutions, these strategies for dealing with international NGOs have the potential to backfire. While countering objective monitoring NGOs with reports from friendly organizations does provide regimes with substantial international reputational benefits, the presence of high-quality monitors still makes it more difficult to cheat and is associated with better election quality, fewer violations of electoral law, and more incumbent turnover (Kelley 2012, 124). Rulers in competitive authoritarian regimes can and do lose elections monitored by international NGOs.

To offset the risks and reap the rewards of allowing NGOs in their countries, dictators expand and contract the legal environment for civil society in response to threats to regime stability. Authoritarian regimes tend to crack down on NGOs in response to domestic instability, civil unrest, coups and protests in neighboring countries, and other threats to institutional balance (Heiss 2017). The type of crackdown dictators impose on NGOs takes a variety of forms, though, and the decision to restrict NGOs is tied directly to political considerations. Chaudhry (2016) finds that states resort to violent crackdowns when NGOs pose immediate threats to stability, but that doing so leads to international condemnation and increased domestic unrest. When the threat from NGOs is less immediate, states instead turn to legislation, which enables rulers to more carefully regulate civil society and balance their potential destabilizing influence. This trend aligns with other

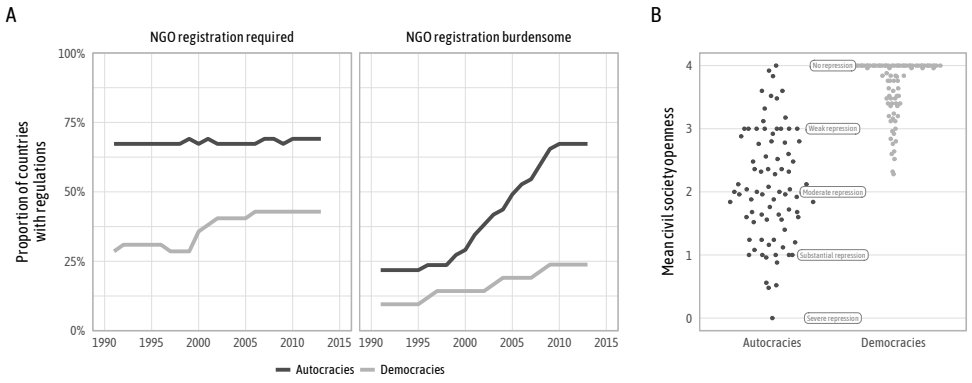

Figure 2: Civil society repression and regulations

research on NGO regulations in OECD countries: Bloodgood, Tremblay-Boire, and Prakash (2014) argue that NGOs face more restrictive regulations in countries where they pose more of a threat to the political order. Incorporating domestic and international NGOs into authoritarian stability-seeking calculus poses definite threats to regime safety and legal restrictions help regulate those risks.

Restrictions on NGOs have increased in both autocracies and democracies since the 1990s, but in different ways. Panel A in Figure 2 shows the prevalence and severity of NGO registration laws in 98 countries from 1990–2013.[2] Both types of regimes require NGO registration—nearly three-fourths of autocracies have had formal registration requirements for decades, while democracies began increasing registration requirements in the early 2000s. Stricter registration requirements do not necessarily make life more difficult for NGOs, though, and this increase in NGO laws in democracies is likely attributable to the routinization of NGO–government relations (Chaudhry and Heiss 2017). This is apparent in Panel A: NGO registration has become substantially more burdensome in autocracies than in democracies. Autocrats have passed dozens of restrictive laws aimed at limiting the scope of foreign-connected NGOs and incorporating domestic NGOs into the state. Panel B highlights the contrast of the severity of NGO regulations across regime types. The overwhelming majority of democracies impose almost no restrictions on civil society organizations working in their countries. Autocracies,

2. Data for Panel A comes from Christensen and Weinstein (2013), and data for Panel B comes from the "CSO repression" variable in Coppedge et al. (2018), averaged over 1990–2016. CSO repression is measured on a 0–4 scale, with 4 representing the most democratic and open civil society (i.e. no repression) and 0 representing the most restricted civil society (i.e. complete repression and liquidation of civil society). Regime type is determined the same way as Figure 1.

on the other hand, are much more heterogenous in their treatment of NGOs, with most imposing moderate restrictions.

Most authoritarian legal restrictions on civil society today target the funding of domestic and international NGOs from international aid agencies and foundations. Autocrats have turned to anti-NGO legislation—and foreign funding laws in particular—for multiple reasons, including increased nationalism and xenophobia, counterterrorism policies, and a "wider questioning of Western power" (Carothers 2015, 9; see also Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014). Fears of foreign influence in domestic politics underlie all these factors, and the decision to limit the space for NGO funding and advocacy is tied directly to concerns of regime stability and institutional balance. For instance, Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash (2016) find that autocrats are more likely to adopt laws that restrict foreign funding to NGOs in response to increased aid flows from foreign donors, but the likelihood of legal restrictions on NGOs nearly doubles if foreign aid flows increase during competitive elections where regimes are most politically vulnerable. These anti-NGO restrictions are often effective and states are able to limit INGO influence in their countries. In the wake of its 2012 Foreign Agents law and 2015 Undesirable Organizations law, which granted the government broad authority to expel NGOs it deemed threatening, dozens of organizations have been shuttered and ejected from Russia. Similarly, Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash (2015) find that in response to anti-foreign funding laws passed in 2009, most domestic human rights NGOs in Ethiopia either closed down or rebranded and changed the issues they addressed.

Conclusion

The ongoing constriction of civic space in China, Russia, Egypt, and elsewhere represents a broader trend of how authoritarian states relate to and regulate civil society organizations in their countries. Dozens of autocratic countries have imposed similarly harsh restrictions and NGOs will likely continue to face worsening legal environments in the future. Civil society, and NGOs in particular—institutions foundational to democratic governance—have become increasingly important for authoritarian stability. Like other democratic-appearing political institutions, NGOs behave differently in authoritarian contexts. Authoritarianism can force civil society organizations to pursue vertical linkages with the state rather than horizontal networks with society, thus strengthening the state. This close connection and subservience to the state can often effectively handicap NGOs in authoritarian states. At the same time, NGOs can act as opponents to authoritarian power, protecting human rights, promoting political reforms, and posing serious challenges to authoritarian institutional balancing. Under other circumstances, NGOs can even

tip the scales of authoritarian balancing and supplant autocratic political and economic authority. Working with international NGOs adds an additional dimension to stability-seeking calculus, and autocrats have responded to this new challenge with restrictive anti-NGO and anti-foreign NGO regulations.

The dynamics of domestic and international civil society under authoritarianism is a burgeoning field ripe for additional research. Many important questions remain unanswered and deserve more attention. I briefly expose three future avenues below. First, while there is substantial research describing the conditions under which authoritarian states restrict civil society, it is unclear whether anti-NGO regulations achieve their goal of maintaining regime stability. More attention should be given to the relationship between domestic political stability and legal crackdowns on NGOs—do these laws actually help autocrats balance out other rival institutions and remain in office longer? Chaudhry (2016), Heiss (2017), and others have started to examine this question, but more work remains to be done.

Second, the definition and treatment of NGO restrictions has thus far been somewhat inconsistent due to limitations of data. Some studies (Christensen and Weinstein 2013; Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2016) look at the passage of laws themselves and categorize them according to the restrictions they impose on advocacy, entry, and funding. Analyzing only *de jure* laws, however, misses the on-the-ground *de facto* implementation of those laws, and the two do not always match. Until 2017, Egypt's civil society sector was regulated by Law 84 of 2002, which gave the government substantial latitude in how it could relate to NGOs. Under the provisions of this 2002 law, the Egyptian government was able to selectively expel or allow NGOs to operate. Research that only counts laws does not account for this enforcement flexibility. Newer sources of data, such as the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset (Coppedge et al. 2018), include *observed* measures of civil society repression instead of laws and can be useful for examining the effects of the actual implementation of anti-NGO regulations. This improved data is not a panacea, though. It is exceptionally difficult to distinguish between laws that target *domestic* NGOs and *international* NGOs. With the exception of China's 2017 Overseas NGO Law, which explicitly targets international organizations, most authoritarian laws regulate both types of NGOs. V-Dem does not distinguish between domestic and international NGO repression, nor do most other data sources. Future research needs to disentangle these layers of authoritarian NGO regulations.

Third, what do these anti-NGO laws do to NGOs themselves? How do these laws change organizational behavior and programming? NGOs must balance their normative principles against the instrumental need of organizational survival. NGOs face a tradeoff between mission and money and must pursue both simultaneously (Heiss and Kelley 2017)—they must "instrumentally pursue their principled objectives within the economic constraints and political opportunity structures imposed

by their external environments" (Mitchell and Schmitz 2014, 489). When legal environments are limited and restricted, NGOs face a strain on their stated mission, vision, and values. This strain is particularly acute for international NGOs, which must debate whether to (1) make concessions to authoritarian demands (and potentially compromise their values) to maintain access to the country and carry out their mission, or (2) honor their vision and values, disobey or avoid authoritarian restrictions, and run the risk of expulsion from the country. Exploring how NGOs resolve this existential debate and work around civil society restrictions is worthwhile, and results from these future studies will enable NGOs to better respond to the ongoing expansion of anti-NGO laws in authoritarian states.

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