REVIEW ARTICLE

Social contention, authoritarian resilience, and political change

Defect or Defend. Military Responses to Popular Protests in Authoritarian Asia, by Terence Lee, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015, 252 pp., index, GBP 38.50 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-421-41516-1.

Social Protests and Contentious Authoritarianism in China, by Xi Chen, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, 241 pp., index, GBP 29.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-107-42936-9.

Urban Mobilizations and New Media in Contemporary China, edited by Lisheng Dong, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Daniel Kübler, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015, 193 pp., index, GBP 60.00, ISBN 978-1-4724-3097-7.

Youth Politics in Putin's Russia. Producing Patriots and Entrepreneurs, by Julie Hemment, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2015, 261 pp., index, GBP 22.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-253-01779-6.

Abstract

This article takes stock of recent advances in the field of comparative authoritarianism. The four books reviewed shed light on the effects of social activism, claim-making and social protests on authoritarian resilience. Taken as a whole, they intervene in the scholarly debates that examine the rise of collective, often contentious action under authoritarian rule. In so doing they account both for how states tolerate or even encourage collective action and the extent to which, in turn, protests by distinct social groups re-shape the political system. As authoritarian institutions, democratic-looking or otherwise, have received considerable attention of late, this article calls for greater attention to the economic and ideational dimensions of authoritarianism and, more generally, a broader research agenda.

Keywords: contentious authoritarianism, regime durability and change, authoritarian institutions and resilience; social and political protests, claim-making, activism; army intervention and defection.

Introduction

Judging from the expanding coverage at political science and international and area studies conventions, the increasing number of graduate-level courses taught on this subject, and even the number of review essays(!), comparative authoritarianism seems to be a field of research whose time has come. Russia's resurgence, the appeal of

China's model of governance, and even the backsliding of some democracies in Europe and elsewhere contribute to explain this surge in attention by academics, policy-makers and practitioners.

The debate tends to split between two camps, one investigating and emphasising the economic dimension of authoritarianism, with the other teasing out the origins, role, and effects of authoritarian – but democratic-looking – institutions.[1] This latter approach has become mainstream, aided by the proliferation of what Levitsky and Way have called "competitive authoritarian regimes"[2] and perhaps even the fact that institutions are more readily observable and measurable phenomena, unlike patronage. Protest and contention have also acquired central stage in the literature on comparative authoritarianism, with current scholarship on the Arab uprisings providing the impetus behind much (though not all) of the recent work on the subject. The books reviewed here, with one exception, fit in the institutionalist approach to comparative authoritarianism. Written by two political scientists (Lee[3] and Chen[4]), an anthropologist (Hemment[5]), and a group of sociologists (the contributors to the Dong, Kriesi and Kübler volume[6]), they were selected as they represent the growing interdisciplinary nature of this area of research. Fundamentally, they all ask essential questions about the evolution of state-society relations under authoritarian rule.

The article is divided into four sections. The next section provides some context by providing a succinct overview of the state of the research in the areas of popular protest and regime response and change. The third zooms in on the books under review by discussing their commonalities and differences. The fourth section highlights some of the limitations of current scholarship. The fifth section concludes with some suggestions for future research in this exciting field.

Popular protests and regime response

Contentious politics, broadly understood as "nonroutine political events involving considerable popular mobilization" [7] is central to understanding why and how authoritarian regimes endure and collapse. As Slater has put it, contentious politics has been approached as a "product … [and] producer of political phenomena". [8] In fact, scholars have focused on both directions of the causal mechanism, examining the impact of repression on protest,[9] whereas others have examined contentious politics as a causal variable explaining the variation in political outcomes. [10] The Middle East provides fertile ground for developing theories of regime change (and continuity) given the presence of instances of both regime success and failure. In their search for an explanation for the timing and the varying outcomes of the Arab uprisings some scholars have sought to identify pathways to transition[11] or macro-level explanations of events in the region (with an emphasis on state formation). [12] Others have shed light on the specific role of civil resistance[13] or the digital media[14] as key factors enabling protests. Differences in approaches and emphasis aside, these authors share a strong sensitivity to context, specifically the role of history, in terms of the distinctive experience of state formation in the Middle East.

Lastly, attention to issues of research design and methodology has also grown. Research design has been subject to more rigorous scrutiny, resulting in more solid work in recent years. Rigorous methodological questions have been posed of late too, demonstrating the acquired sophistication of the field. Moreover, interest in the causes of regime durability has also sparked renewed attention to the compilation and use of datasets too.[15] This, in itself, is particularly exciting as the diversity of the approaches

adopted to investigate similar research questions and pursue comparable lines of enquiry make for a lively and productive interdisciplinary conversation.

Common themes and contributions

The four volumes under review advance our understanding of authoritarian stability and change, and the sources of regime resilience. They do so through rigorously-designed in-depth case studies (some comparative) that go well below the surface and highlight the "deep politics"[16] and the causal logics and mechanisms that recent work had noted as missing aspects in the scholarship on authoritarianism. I discuss the volumes' contributions - two substantive and one methodological - in turn.

The first is towards a more nuanced understanding of state-sponsored activism, which constitutes the main focus of Julie Hemment's *Youth Politics in Russia.* Drawing on the author's anthropological work in the Russian city of Tver in 2006-2011, the book focuses on four state-designed and -sponsored youth projects, or "belligerent patriotism": [17] the well-known *Nashi* ('ours') organization, the Seliger summer educational camp, pro-natalism, and sexualised political campaigns.[18] Nashi, formally known as the "Youth Democratic Anti-Fascist Movement – Ours!", in particular, is perhaps the best-known case of those pro-Kremlin organizations set up in the early 2000s. Established in 2005 (and essentially defunct by 2012) and with over 120,000 members in its heyday, *Nashi* epitomises those movements seen in the West as attempts at re-creating Soviet-era state-led social mobilization. Hemment convincingly shows that while there were connections with the Soviet period, typically in the symbols, images and the logics which are reminiscent of times past, such projects were born in

reaction to more recent experiences. One was that of the "colour revolutions" (2003-2005) in post-Soviet countries, which Russian policy-makers sought to counter and prevent on their own territory. The other experience requires that the Russian experience is understood not in isolation, but as part of a broader renegotiation of the contract between the state, civil society and individual citizens. These projects are, as Hemment aptly puts it, "forged at the crucible of shifting relations between states, society and capital that are taking place globally" and in their participation the Russian youth responds and channels a sense of loss, indignity and outrage. As such, they "respond to 21st-century disenchantments that are widely shared: cycles of economic crisis, disillusion about political liberalism, and the ever-widening gap between the affluent and the precarious under globalizing neoliberalism". [19] Hemment does an excellent job of revealing the instabilities of the Putin-era social engineering: Despite the fact that the governing intent was very pronounced in state projects, the technologies the state devised were "frequently ignored by the state agents responsible for their dissemination, projects were chaotic, unstable, and part of a diffuse and uncertain project of governing that did not emanate from a unified state […] They were the 'creations of diversely positioned actors'". [20] Moreover, as she uncovers "ardent activists, unengaged young people, occasional participants"[21], Hemment finds that state-sponsored activism has actually yielded rather unintended effects in that people did indeed grow more active, but not necessarily in the directions the state had hoped.

The second contribution revolves around the effects that rising social and political contention has on regime stability and regime responses. Both *Urban Mobilizations and New Media in Contemporary China*, edited by Lisheng Don, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Daniel Kübler, and *Social Protest and Contentious*

Authoritarianism in China, by Xi Chen, discuss the way in which changes in China's political system have led to a surge in claim-making and collective action against the government, with a variety of social groups involved in protests, including pensioners, laid-off workers, peasants, urban homeowners, demobilised army officers, and people with disabilities.[22] In *Urban Mobilizations and New Media in Contemporary China* the contributors examine a variety of instances of urban mobilization, focusing in large measure on environmental protests, but – as a team – interrogate the role of the new media in the forms and strategies of collective action in China. Despite the various foci of the protests some commonalities stand out: most popular forms of contentious action seek the redress of routine instances of injustice for which the victims hold the government and its agents accountable.[23] Crucially, the individual chapters highlight the benefits that the internet revolution has brought to political communication, such as the emergence of alternative sources of information (to those emanating from the state), which help to promote a public sphere and civil society and that can be used as effective tools for organised collective action. New mobilizing structures have emerged – despite the "Great Firewall" – and new repertoires of contention and strategic frames have been developed. This will all be of considerable interest to scholars of social movements, who will not help but notice that China has in its own distinctive way become a "social movement society" too.

The focus on urban mobilization and the role played by the new media makes the scope of this volume more limited compared to *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*, by Xi Chen, although both books are fundamentally concerned with similar dynamics. The key question in Chen's book is: How can we account for the emergence of contentious authoritarianism , understood as "a strong

authoritarian regime [which] accommodates widespread and routinized collective protests”, [24] in the 1990s? To answer this question Chen engaged in extensive work on the *xinfang* system (literally “letters and visits”, the state’s main institution for dealing with citizens’ complaints and petitions)[25] in the Hunan province and, to a lesser extent, the Henan province.[26] The story begins with the decline of the work unit system, which has dramatically changed the Chinese political landscape over the past two decades. This is key to understanding a fragmented and decentralised state such as China, because such a shift in state-society linkages from the “unit system model” to the “government-citizen model” dramatically affected political participation and political contention in two respects. First, instead of particularistic struggles by individuals within work units, group struggles that directly target the government have begun to surface. Because “tensions between the centralised power structure and the extensive non-binding consultation have created abundant contradictions and ambiguities within the political system”[27] ordinary people are tempted to address their issues directly to key leaders at various levels. Yet, since the volume of petitions far exceeds the capacity to adequately deal with them, petitioners get frustrated, resorting to “trouble-making tactics”. Such actions, in turn, generate a sense of urgency which yields a response from the government. [28] Demands are then (partly) met. However, ambiguities and contradictions alone cannot account for the surge in collective action, Chen argues. What follows is a combination of strategic pattern of protest opportunism - where troublemaking creates bargaining power - and pressure on officials which gives way, from time to time, to obedience. This also helps sustain the struggle.[29]

A key point made by Chen is that the rise of routinized protests in most cases contributed to regime stability, not change. Social protests have become a form of

“contentious bargaining […] rational and strategic.[30] Taken together, this widespread practice of routinized, institutionalised collective claim-making does not threaten regime stability but actually helps maintain it.[31] The conclusion is that the state deals with contentious bargaining in two ways, through procrastination and accommodation. As long as protesters do not engage in more threatening activities, protests are tolerated. This is in line with Dong, Kriesi and Kübler’s conclusion that “economic struggles can be noisy, but they seldom threaten political stability”. [32]

So what happens when limited, sporadic, economically-motivated, and government-tolerated claim-making morphs into something else, namely widespread popular mobilization aimed at toppling the leaders from power? At what point, and with what degree of brutality, do the elites decide to crack down on the protesters? When do the armed forces suppress protests and under what circumstances, and why, do they refrain from doing so? These are some of the questions and issues that Terence Lee engages with in his *Defect and Defend: Military Responses to Popular Protests in Authoritarian Asia.* Drawing on the cases of the Philippines, Indonesia, and (for control purposes) Myanmar and China, Lee examines the responses of the armed forces of authoritarian regimes when they are confronted with popular unrest. The critical variable in determining the outcome of popular revolts against dictatorial rule, Lee contends, is the response of the armed forces, and specifically whether they defect and join the protestors to bring down the autocratic regime, or use force to defend dictatorial rule.[33] Key to that answer is the variation in dictatorial forms, namely whether the authoritarian regimes share power or whether personalism prevails within the regime.[34] The argument put forward by Lee is that “personalistic authoritarian rule leads to disaffection and often divisions within the armed forces”,[35] which creates favourable

conditions for estranged senior officers to defect when mass protests erupt. However, if dictatorial rule is organised around power-sharing institutions that mitigate personalist favoritism, the defection of the armed forces is less likely as mechanisms are in place to retain regime cohesiveness that curtail the discretionary behaviour on the part of the dictator. Although Lee is primarily concerned with four cases in (East) Asia, the issue is certainly relevant to other parts of the world, such as the Middle East and North Africa.

Lastly, from a methodological point of view, scholarship on authoritarianism is becoming more and more sophisticated. The volumes by Lee and Chen deserve a special mention for the methodologically rigorous reflection that accompanies their analysis. Their work certainly takes and lives up to the challenge of devoting more time to gather "more micro-level evidence and attention to causal mechanisms". [36] In addition, Chen's work deserves special mention here for bringing together evidence from a wide range of sources, including the *xinfang* bureaus, government archives, on-site observations, interviews with officials and petitioners, and media coverage, all of which helped develop the event catalogues upon which his analysis is based. Hemment and some of the contributors to the volume by Dong, Kriesi and Kübler engage in a (digital) ethnography of authoritarianism which makes for a very interesting, if challenging, way of understanding how society responds to state policies.

Limitations

The books under review have delved into the configuration of the arrangements between regime and society, whereby the former allows the latter to engage in sustained collective action and claim-making as long as social contention does not threaten

regime stability. In this section I identify some minor limitations – substantive and methodological - of the four volumes (which are otherwise excellent pieces of scholarship), and highlight areas that have received less attention in the literature. First, where the authors tend to be more hesitant is on elaborating on the sustainability of such arrangements. The emphasis on the flaws in the regime's institutional design and the scepticism that Russia and China might have developed a sustainable and convincing alternative to liberal democracy as a form of governance suggest that change might not be postponed *sine die*. Understanding what we should be on the look-out for as we seek to understand whether intra- or systemic regime change is forthcoming would be helpful.

Next, what Lee and Chen lose, by their own admission, in external validity they certainly gain in internal validity. The authors, especially Lee, are very open about the fact that the evidence and the claims are "empirically bounded"[37] and therefore more suited to theory-generation than theory-testing (which in no way diminished the value of such books, to be clear). That said, one wonders about the broader comparative lessons that can be drawn, also in light of the fact that the portability of the argument to other regions, such as the Middle East and North Africa, appears limited. As for Chen's book, his argument is that the surge in collective claim-making in China is the logical consequence of the changes in the Chinese political system toward its special version of "socialist democracy".[38] Contentious authoritarianism, however, is a very rare phenomenon.[39] How much of what we learn about China is confined to the experience of that country?

If one were to find areas that have received less attention in scholarly debates on comparative authoritarianism, the economic dimension of authoritarianism would probably rank quite high. This is a traditionally difficult area to conduct research on,

partly because of the methodological and empirical challenges that accompany the subject. Yet, the widespread presence of neo-patrimonial regimes in some regions of the world (e.g., the post-Soviet space) warrants further research.[40] In line with Pepinsky's remark that authoritarian regimes do more than just "survive/collapse and grow/stagnate", [41] more in-depth evidence is also needed on the economic-military nexus in countries transitioning from military rule like Myanmar or reverting to it, such as Thailand. Getting a sense of the economic policies of the former regime is vital to understanding how to unpack the ties between economic groups and factions within the military. Next, empirical applications of Gerschewski's framework, and most notably in-depth studies of legitimation would be helpful, especially in non-contentious authoritarian regimes such as Uzbekistan's, where the regime is seeking to complement its rather effective reliance on repression with (self-)legitimation as well as co-optation.

Conclusion and way ahead

Taken together, these four books considerably advance our understanding of authoritarian regimes, the impact of protests on regimes, and the circumstances under which change occurs. Readers will gain valuable insights not only into authoritarian institutions per se, but of their effects on regime durability. Chen, and Dong, Kriesi and Kübler show how the routinization of claim-making and protests has contributed to regime stability in China. Hemment demonstrates how state projects might have been conceived with a similar purpose in mind and yet had a number of unintended effects and consequences. Lee's focus on the armed forces follows in the great tradition of scholarship on the military[42] by returning some attention to the "more authoritarian

features of authoritarian regimes”. [43] Lastly, as scholarship on how authoritarian regimes operate inside China and Russia, even at a local level, is now flourishing, understanding what they do beyond the territory they control warrants further investigation. [44] One promising area concerns the relationship between authoritarianism and conflict. Recent work on this issue has investigated the effects of variation in regime type on conflict[45] and whether, in the post-Soviet context, non-western actors induce or in some contexts help manage or mitigate conflict, domestic or international. [46] At times of heightened tensions both in the post-Soviet periphery and the South China sea new research appears timely.

Endnotes

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[1] Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*; Gandhi, *Institutions under Dictatorships*; Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization.*

[2] Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism.*

[3] Lee, *Defect or Defend.*

[4] Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*,

[5] Hemment, *Youth Politics in Russia*

[6] Dong, Kriesi and Kübler, *Urban Mobilizations and New Media.*

[7] Slater, *Ordering Power*, 5.

[8] Slater, *Ordering Power*, 275.

[9] Boudreau, *Resisting Dictatorship*.

[10] Slater, *Ordering Power*.

[11] Brownlee, Masoud and Reynolds, *The Arab Spring*.

[12] Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East*; Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings explained.*

[13] Roberts, Willis, McCarthy and Garton Ash, *Civil Resistance*; Gerges, *Contentious Politics in the Middle East.*

[14] Howard and Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave.*

[15] For datasets on regime types and the effects on regime durability see Geddes, “What have we learnt” (monarchy, one-party, military, personalist regimes); Kailitz, “Classifying political regimes” (electoral

autocracy; communist ideocracy; one-party, monarchy, military, liberal democracy); Hadenius and Teorell, "Pathways from Authoritarianism" (monarchy, electoral, one-party, multi-party, military autocracies, liberal democracy).

[16] Pepinsky, "The Institutional Turn in Comparative Authoritarianism", 650.

[17] Hemment, *Youth Politics in Russia*, 1.

[18] Hemment, *Youth Politics in Russia*, 12.

[19] Hemment, *Youth Politics in Russia* 10.

[20] Hemment, *Youth Politics in Russia*, 13.

[21] Hemment, *Youth Politics in Russia*, 13

[22] Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*, 189.

[23] Dong, Kriesi and Kübler, *Urban Mobilizations and New Media*, 1.

[24] Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*, 189.

[25] Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*, 28. This is not the only form of claim-making, but unlike the others (moderate petitions litigations, meditation) they are seen as more moderate and non-antagonistic. Crucially, while other forms of contentious actions (letters and individual visits) have not increased, the number of collective petitions has spiked in the past two decades.

[26] Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*, 219-220.

[27] These are examined in depth in chapter 3 on the effects of market reforms on state structure and strategies for dealing with social contention (59-86). Chapter 4 examines the xinfang system as a form of institutional appropriation, whereby an institution set up for managed participation has been turned into a tool for contentious bargaining (87-134).

[28] Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*,190

[29] Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*,192.

[30] Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*, 207.

[31] Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*, 212.

[32] Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*, 208.

[33] Lee, *Defend or Defect*, vii.

[34] Lee, *Defend or Defect*, 198.

[35] Lee, *Defend or Defect*, 22-59.

[36] David Art, "What do we know about authoritarianism", 369.

[37] Lee, *Defend or Defect* 197.

[38] Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*, 190.

[39] Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*, 189.

[40] Hale's work on patronal politics is a valuable step in this direction (Hale, *Patronal Politics*).

[41] Pepinsky, "The institutional turn in comparative authoritarianism", 650-651.

[42] Perlmutter, *The Military and Politics in Modern Times*; Huntington, *Soldiers and the State*; Barany, *How Armies Respond;* Callahan, *Making Enemies*; Callahan, *Making Enemies.*

[43] Art, "What do we know about authoritarianism", 369-370; Pepinsky, "The Institutional Turn in Comparative Authoritarianism", 651.

[44] For a debate on whether authoritarian states promote a certain type of regime type see Tansey, "Questioning "autocracy promotion" and Tolstrup, "Problems in Studying the International Dimension of Authoritarianism".

[45] Colgan and Weeks, "Revolution, Personalist Dictatorships and International Conflict".

[46] Sasse, "International linkages and the dynamics of conflict"; Fumagalli, "Stateness, contested nationhood, and imperilled sovereignty".

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