

1 Introduction

Authoritarian rule is in the midst of a transformation. From the advent of a social credit system in China, enlistment of winning (but loyal) opposition candidates for elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, utilization of machine-learning techniques to predict mass protests in Russia, permanent hiring of Western public relations firms by the monarchy in Saudi Arabia, deployment of intrusion malware to monitor opposition actors in Uganda, and the takeover of independent media outlets by foreign shell companies in Venezuela, many authoritarian regimes around the world are exhibiting change. “Faced with growing pressures,” Dobson (2012: 4) writes, “the smartest among them neither hardened their regimes into police states nor closed themselves off from the world; instead, they learned and adapted.” In similar terms, Puddington (2017) describes how authoritarian regimes have sought to stop democracy by learning and copying the best practices of democracy. Despite growing awareness of this seemingly global transformation, fundamental questions remain about the exact nature of it.

Authoritarian rule has been a mainstay of political life in Southeast Asia. Since most countries gained independence between the 1940s and 1960s, a string of personalist dictators, military juntas, royal families, and single parties have flourished and faltered in the region. In contrast to other regions of the world, such as Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America, Southeast Asia resisted the historical change wrought by democratization. Underpinned by a “remarkable range of political forms” (Hewison, 1999: 224), the region has instead proven to be an ideal – yet relatively underappreciated – testing ground for theories of authoritarian politics. A distinct body of comparative research has examined how Southeast Asia’s mix of authoritarian regimes embraced formal democratic institutions (Case, 2002), proficiently used repression against organized resistance (Boudreau, 2004), and cunningly relied upon elite protection pacts to maintain power (Slater, 2010). The very familiarity of authoritarian rule, however, has tended to preclude comparative analysis of its transformation. The stubborn regularity of flawed elections, wicked certainty of repression, and fierce continuity of ruling parties, to name but a few of the enduring characteristics of authoritarian rule in the region, promote ambiguity about whether that rule has actually changed. This Element therefore addresses the following question: How has authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia evolved?

The unequivocal answer is that the overarching resilience of authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia has masked the underlying evolution of it. The most important change has been the emergence of distinct forms of authoritarianism within the region over time. In particular, it is now possible to identify the presence of *retrograde* and *sophisticated* authoritarian regimes in Southeast

Asia. This argument is advanced using two tools of descriptive analysis: indicators and a typology. Drawing on established and original research, a theoretical framework comprised of seventy-three indicators is developed to judge the quality of authoritarian rule in the region. To distinguish between retrograde and sophisticated behavior, authoritarian regimes are assessed for how closely they apply the known advantages of authoritarian politics as well as how closely they mimic the fundamental attributes of democracy. Based on this set of indicators, a simple typology is utilized to capture the categories of retrograde and sophisticated authoritarianism. To distinguish the quality of authoritarian rule at the aggregate level, the performance of authoritarian regimes is standardized and located on a scale ranging from retrograde (0) to sophisticated (100). Seeking to affirm the standing of Southeast Asia as a natural laboratory for comparative analysis, especially on questions probing the very nature of authoritarian politics, the evolution of authoritarian rule in the region is traced from 1975 to 2015.

The Element showcases two original empirical findings about the story of authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia. The first discovery concerns the range of variation. Rather than being a region defined by uniformity, the analysis indicates the presence of retrograde and sophisticated authoritarianism across cases (e.g., Brunei vs Singapore) and within them (e.g., Malaysia and Myanmar). The former distinction underscores how authoritarian regimes display varying degrees of interest in pursuing innovation; while the latter distinction reveals how leadership turnover can contribute to either deterioration or improvement in the quality of authoritarian rule. The second discovery concerns the direction of change. Notwithstanding the aforementioned across-country and within-country variation, the analysis shows that *every* surviving authoritarian regime has become less retrograde and more sophisticated over time. The slower-moving case of Laos and the faster-moving case of Vietnam, for example, have exhibited a greater degree of sophistication with each passing decade. Taken together, these two empirical findings highlight how the familiarity of authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia has tended to obscure its deeper transformation.

The understanding of authoritarian rule presented in this Element is different from existing conceptualizations within the field of comparative authoritarianism. The “continuous” approach disaggregates political regimes by placing them on a spectrum ranging from democracy to authoritarianism, which results in many falling within the gray zone between these two root concepts (Diamond, 2002; Schedler, 2006; Levitsky and Way, 2010). The “categorical” approach disaggregates authoritarian regimes according to preselected criteria, such as their decision-making arrangements (Geddes et al., 2014), exit avenues

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from office (Cheibub et al., 2010), and modes of political power maintenance (Wahman et al., 2013). Despite identifying with the second approach, this Element makes a few advancements. In particular, it uses a far greater range of preselected criteria (i.e., indicators) than is customary to distinguish among authoritarian regimes. The cited categorization schemes mostly focus on the institutional features of dictatorships, including whether they maintain elections, legislatures, and parties, while also examining the processes by which dictators enter and exit office. Such features represent a small fraction of the ways by which authoritarian regimes are measured in the pages to follow.

A more important difference to existing conceptualizations stems from the focus on the quality of authoritarian rule. In contrast to other categorization schemes, which only permit comparisons within and between cases, this Element goes a step further by allowing for a comparison to the ideal of “sophisticated” authoritarianism. This contribution is made possible by synthesizing insights from existing research areas of comparative authoritarianism, such as those focused on institutions (Gandhi, 2008), repression (Greitens, 2016), information (Truex, 2016), development (Knutson and Rasmussen, 2018), and foreign policy (Tansey, 2016a). The classification of authoritarian regimes therefore becomes not just about the identification of certain preselected criteria, but why personalist dictators, military juntas, royal families, and single parties should embrace specific features and techniques for the sake of their own survival. The Element, simply stated, offers a normative conceptualization. Seeking to underscore the staying power of authoritarianism, rather than the moving power of democratization, this unconventional approach is intended to stand as a contribution to our accumulated knowledge of authoritarian politics.

To investigate the evolution of authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia, this Element is divided into three sections. The first part explains the indicators and typology that are central to the theoretical framework. The section includes an explanation of exactly how retrograde and sophisticated behavior is judged at the indicator and aggregate level. Working through the relevant features and techniques, the second part demonstrates the prevalence of retrograde and sophisticated practices among Southeast Asia’s authoritarian regimes. The third part tests the theoretical framework against nine country studies in the region from 1975 to 2015: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam. The centerpiece of the empirical analysis is the Quality of Authoritarianism (QoA) data set, which captures the specific indicators of the theoretical framework. Using a standardized scale ranging from retrograde to sophisticated authoritarianism, this section analyzes both broad patterns (by dimension, regime type,

regime subtype, and democratization episode) as well as specific findings (by country-case). The most important finding is the overall trend away from retrograde authoritarianism and toward sophisticated authoritarianism. The Element concludes by reflecting on the contribution of the analysis in conceptual, theoretical, and empirical terms, but also the potential for generalizing its approach to scrutinize the quality of authoritarian rule in other regions of the world.

2 The Quality of Authoritarian Rule

This Element is a work of pure description. In spite of the pejorative connotations sometimes attached to this term, which are typically applied to research that does not seek a causal understanding of the world, the author embraces the idea that description is a distinctive – and essential – task of political science. In the view of Gerring (2012a: 109): “We need to know how much democracy there is in the world, how this quantity – or bundle of attributes – varies from one country to country, region to region, and through time. This is important regardless of what causes democracy or what causal effects democracy has.” The same logic holds true for autocracy. Given its descriptive intention, the hope is that other scholars might subsequently use the research presented in this Element to pursue causal arguments. An obvious direction would be to explore the relationship between the quality of authoritarian rule and whether regimes perish or survive. The immediate focus here, however, is on analyzing the evolution of authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia and classifying the varying forms produced as part of this transformation. Among the many tools that may be employed for this task, this Element relies upon indicators and a typology (see Gerring, 2012b). Let us examine each in turn.

Indicators

To distinguish between retrograde and sophisticated forms of authoritarianism, a set of indicators were selected based on a maximal strategy of conceptualization. This strategy aims for the inclusion of all nonidiosyncratic characteristics that define a concept in its purest form. Moving forward, there are three immediate questions:

- (1) What indicators comprise the theoretical framework?
- (2) How do the indicators measure the quality of authoritarian rule?
- (3) What counts as retrograde or sophisticated behavior?

The indicators used to capture the quality of authoritarian rule were initially selected based on their substantive importance to authoritarian politics. The

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very first indicator in the QoA data set, for example, addresses whether a constitution exists under authoritarian rule. This formal institution has been closely studied by scholars working in the field of comparative authoritarianism for the last two decades. Another portion of indicators was constructed to account for intuitively important features and techniques. The way some dictators have hired public relations firms in Washington, DC, for instance, has been covered by journalists but not investigated by scholars. The overarching goal was to present an analytical framework that draws on scholarship from across the field of comparative authoritarianism, while also incorporating insights from media reports about some of the innovative features or techniques practiced by authoritarian regimes around the world. The outcome is a total of seventy-three indicators: thirty capturing hitherto uncoded features or techniques of authoritarian rule, twenty-nine sourced from existing cross-national time-series data sets on authoritarian politics, and fourteen relying on information from national governments or intergovernmental organizations. The corresponding codebook (Morgenbesser, 2020) offers further details on the indicators that comprise the theoretical framework and explains how the various scores are derived.

The chosen indicators are designed to measure the quality of authoritarian rule in any authoritarian regime. A key feature is the use of an ordinal scale – that is, numbers that both label *and* order. Take the previous example of constitutions under authoritarian rule, which relies on data from Law and Versteeg (2013). Instead of simply coding the absence or presence of this formal institution among Southeast Asia’s authoritarian regimes, a rating is applied to the different constitutions in effect. Having no constitution (0) or a weak constitution (0.33) is classified as retrograde behavior and having a modest (0.66) or strong constitution (1) represents sophisticated behavior. This ordering process is repeated for every indicator contained within the theoretical framework. It is what informs the country-year scores for each authoritarian regime and what makes the resulting typology possible.

The third question is what counts as retrograde or sophisticated behavior. This critical judgment is based on two criteria. The first criterion implicitly relies on existing research concerning authoritarian politics. This scholarship has generated an extensive list of benefits, dividends, or rewards authoritarian regimes can reap by possessing certain features and practicing certain techniques. The work of Ginsburg and Simpsen (2013: 5–10), for example, establishes several positive effects of having a strong constitution, rather than having no constitution. When the absence/presence of a specific feature or technique is known to confer such advantages, the behavior is coded as sophisticated. The opposite rule also applies. When the absence/presence of a specific feature or technique is known to confer

disadvantages, the behavior is coded as retrograde. The second criterion is the explicit degree to which the adoption of those features and techniques allows authoritarian regimes to mimic the fundamental attributes of democracy. The logic here is that more sophisticated authoritarian rule will involve higher rates of mimicry to democratic forms (albeit without democratic substance). The likes of Eritrea, North Korea, and Turkmenistan might rely upon far-fetched elections, mass organizations, personality cults, universalistic ideologies, and wholesale repression, but they make little effort to appear anything other than full dictatorships. Beyond such cases, it is assumed that authoritarian regimes want to appear more like democracies. The attributes used to judge this behavior are based on a lexical definition of democracy (see Table 1). To return to the previous example, an authoritarian regime that has a strong constitution is more sophisticated than an authoritarian regime that has no constitution, because maintaining this institution allows it to mimic the liberal, participatory, and egalitarian attributes of democracy. In this way, by combining an extensive set of additive indicators, it is possible to establish typological differences in the quality of authoritarian rule.

Typology

The second tool employed to make the argument is a simple typology consisting of two regime categories: retrograde authoritarianism and sophisticated authoritarianism. The benefits of typologies are that they address complex phenomenon without oversimplifying, clarify similarities and differences among cases to facilitate comparisons, provide a comprehensive inventory of all possible kinds of cases, incorporate interaction effects, and draw attention to the kinds of cases that have not occurred and perhaps cannot occur (George and Bennett, 2005: 233–262). In accordance with the norms of standard categorical scales, the two categories created here are mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive (Bailey, 1994; Collier et al., 2008). Not only can the form of authoritarian rule be categorized dichotomously, but all authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia can be categorized into one of the two categories –retrograde or sophisticated – at any point in time.

Since this Element is concerned with how authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia has evolved, it is worth underscoring that the typology is mostly employed at the aggregate level of analysis. An authoritarian regime with a strong constitution is more sophisticated than an authoritarian regime without a constitution, but this is merely one indicator for one country-year. The behavior of authoritarian regimes can alternate between retrograde and sophisticated from one indicator to the next, but focusing on such micro-level variations offers little insight into their overall quality or evolution. The more interesting question is how

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Table 1 Classification of the fundamental attributes of democracy

Electoral	Liberal
Principles: Contestation and competition. Question: Are government offices filled by free and fair multiparty elections? Institutions: Elections, political parties, competitiveness, and turnover.	Principles: Limited government, multiple veto points, horizontal accountability, individual rights, civil liberties, and transparency. Question: Is political power decentralized and constrained? Institutions: Multiple, independent and decentralized, with special focus on the role of the media, interest groups, the judiciary, and a written constitution with explicit guarantees.
Majoritarian	Participatory
Principles: Majority rule, centralization, and vertical accountability. Question: Does the majority (or plurality) rule? Institutions: Consolidated and centralized, with special focus on the role of political parties.	Principle: Government by the people. Question: Do ordinary citizens participate in politics? Institutions: Election law, civil society, local government, and direct democracy.
Deliberative	Egalitarian
Principle: Government by reason. Question: Are political decisions the product of public deliberation? Institutions: Media, hearings, panels, and other deliberative bodies.	Principle: Political equality. Question: Are all citizens equally empowered? Institutions: Designed to ensure equal participation, representation, protection, and politically relevant resources.

Source: Coppedge et al. (2011: 254)

authoritarian regimes variously perform *over time* with respect to *all* the indicators. By addressing this question, it becomes possible to account for the transformation of authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia.

The difference between retrograde and sophisticated authoritarianism is at the core of the theoretical framework advanced here. A fuller discussion of the exact

distinction between these categories, however, is better left to the second half of the Element. It is here that the typology is “put to work” via the introduction of a standardized score (i.e., a combined measure for the indicators). At that point the quality of authoritarian rule is judged on a scale ranging from retrograde (0) to sophisticated (100). By standardizing the data this way, it is easier to compare the quality of authoritarian rule within and across cases in Southeast Asia. The typological distinction between the two categories is as follows:

- An authoritarian regime is *retrograde* insofar as it possesses a minority of indicators and insufficiently mimics the fundamental attributes of democracy.
- An authoritarian regime is *sophisticated* insofar as it possesses a majority of indicators and sufficiently mimics the fundamental attributes of democracy.

The remainder of this Element follows a straightforward path. The next section elaborates on this introduction by explaining the set of indicators used to capture the quality of authoritarian rule. Special attention is paid to separating retrograde and sophisticated behavior at this indicator level. Section 4 employs the aforementioned typology to demonstrate the varying quality of authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia, making a major effort to distinguish retrograde and sophisticated forms at this aggregate level.

3 Between Retrograde and Sophisticated Authoritarianism

An imprudent direction from here would be to simply list all the indicators and explain the inherent differences between retrograde and sophisticated behavior. Instead, some system of organization is required. In this section, the seventy-three indicators are grouped into five dimensions of authoritarian rule: institutional configuration, control system, information apparatus, development scheme, and international conduct. These dimensions are *not* causal mechanisms (or anything close to it). Rather, they are scaffolding for sorting the disparate features and techniques characteristic of authoritarian rule. Some readers might disagree with the names of the dimensions, along with how the indicators are clustered, but any viable method for organizing indicators of this kind requires some degree of arbitrariness. The task of scrutinizing the quality of authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia over the course of four decades now begins in earnest.

Institutional Configuration

The field of comparative authoritarianism has devoted significant attention to the study of formal institutions in authoritarian regimes. A now common view is that courts, constitutions, elections, legislatures, and parties are useful for managing

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interrelationships among leaders, political elites, opposition groups, and citizens. Across Southeast Asia, for instance, scholars have demonstrated how Singapore’s court system constrains dissent (Rajah, 2012), Myanmar’s constitution preserves military power (Croissant and Kamerling, 2013), Cambodia’s elections routinize the distribution of patronage (Noren-Nilsson, 2016), Vietnam’s legislature co-opts delegates from different geographic areas and functional backgrounds (Malesky and Schuler, 2010), and Malaysia’s dominant party was an exemplar of coalition building, policy innovation, and money politics (Gomez, 2016). The substantive point of this section is not just that authoritarian regimes utilize institutions, but that the quality of their efforts vary considerably (see Table 2). The following section pieces this arrangement together.

Table 2 Institutional configuration

Indicators		Retrograde	Sophisticated
Constitution			
Constitution type	– None	✓	
	– Weak	✓	
	– Modest (sham)		✓
	– Strong		✓
Executive office			
Selection mode	– Succession	✓	
	– Election		✓
Term limits	– One (no return)	✓	
	– One (can return)	✓	
	– Multiple (no return)	✓	
	– Multiple (can return)		✓
	– Unlimited		✓
	– None specified		✓
Term limits change	– Executive decree	✓	
	– Legislative vote	✓	
	– Judicial ruling	✓	
	– Plebiscite/referendum		✓
Succession rules	– Unregulated	✓	
	– Designational		✓
	– Regulated		✓
Succession outcome	– Opposed	✓	
	– Unaffiliated	✓	
	– Loyal		✓

Table 2 (cont.)

Indicators		Retrograde	Sophisticated
Elections			
Sanctioned	– No	✓	
	– Yes		✓
Administration	– Autonomous	✓	
	– Controlled	✓	
	– Ambiguous		✓
Scheduling	– Exact periods	✓	
	– Inexact periods	✓	
	– No formal schedule		✓
Systemic parties	– No	✓	
	– Yes		✓
Legislature and parties			
Selection mode	– None	✓	
	– Appointed	✓	
	– Elected		✓
Pluralism	– Single-party	✓	
	– Multi-party		✓
Systemic parties	– No	✓	
	– Yes		✓
Cooperative forum	– No	✓	
	– Yes		✓
Advisory congress	– No	✓	
	– Yes		✓

Not all constitutional arrangements in authoritarian regimes are equal. Since they differ in terms of their form and effect (Law and Versteeg, 2013: 882–886), it is possible to identify retrograde and sophisticated types. The former is denoted by no constitution or a weak constitution. Since 1975, the only authoritarian regime in Southeast Asia to rule without a constitution was in Cambodia. After taking office in January 1979, the Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Party exercised uninhibited power – rather than legal authority – until a new constitution was promulgated in June 1981 (Slocomb, 2003: 67–74). The absence of a constitution during this period meant that it was impossible for the ruling party to mimic the liberal, participatory, and egalitarian attributes of democracy – nor did it attempt to do so. During the Cold