1 Introduction

1.1 Authoritarian Anti-corruption

Corruption – commonly defined as the misuse of public office for private gain – constitutes a serious, even existential challenge for many governments around the world. When officials and bureaucrats embezzle public funds or take bribes in exchange for favors, governance is weakened and everything from public goods provision to infrastructure projects and military readiness may be impacted.\(^1\) Corruption undermines economies in numerous ways, including by creating resource misallocation, raising transaction costs among economic actors, and disincentivizing public and private investments.\(^2\) Although corruption can sometimes help cut through regulations and “grease the wheels” of economic development, the consensus in corruption studies remains that in the long run it is nearly always detrimental to growth.\(^3\) In part because of its negative effects on government and the economy, but also because of its inherent unjustness, corruption is a major cause of public discontent and unrest.\(^4\) Public anger over corruption, often triggered by scandals involving leaders or their immediate families, can erupt into large-scale protests that bring down governments or leave them badly damaged. Remarkably, between 2005 and 2019 alone, the political fallout from corruption forced as many as forty-eight presidents and prime ministers to resign or face being ousted before the end of their term. This number includes Brazil’s President Dilma Rousseff, who was

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\(^1\) Heidenheimer and Johnston (2002); De Vaal and Ebben (2011); Mungiu-Pippidi (2015); Montes and Paschoal (2016).

\(^2\) Shleifer and Vishny (1993); Mauro (1995); Kaufmann (2005); Rose-Ackerman and Palifka (2016).

\(^3\) Leys (1965); Huntington (1968, 64); Rock and Bonnett (2004); Darden (2008); Méon and Weill (2010); Kroeber (2016).

\(^4\) Seligson (2002); Anderson and Tverdova (2003); Chang and Chu (2006).
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Ousted in 2016, South Korea’s President Park Geun-hye, who was impeached and removed from office in 2017, and South Africa’s President Jacob Zuma, who resigned under pressure in 2018.\(^5\)

Authoritarian regimes, despite being less accountable to their citizens than democratic governments, are by no means immune to the problems brought by corruption. Many authoritarian regimes have faced challenges from corruption-related protests and mass movements, including recently in Algeria, Egypt, Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Venezuela.\(^9\)

Opposition figures often campaign on the promise of cleaning up government, which is broadly appealing to citizens and can unify those with diverse political views. For example, the most prominent dissident against President Vladimir Putin’s rule in Russia is lawmaker and anti-corruption crusader Alexei Navalny.\(^7\) In some countries, corruption has even led to a rise in violent extremism.\(^8\) Autocrats can try to censor the media and suppress scandals before they come to light, but corruption is not easy to hide – modern citizens have many sources of information and can observe the consequences when officials demand bribes or steal public funds. In part for this reason, autocrats can be remarkably frank about the threat corruption poses. In his first speech as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Xi Jinping denounced corruption as a plague that unchecked could “doom the party and the state.”\(^9\)

Corruption and its consequences have directly contributed to the breakdown of many authoritarian regimes. Anger at government cronyism and other corruption, alongside economic failings, was one of the key causes of the Kyrgyz Revolution of 2010, which led to the fall of Kyrgyzstan’s President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and regime change. In the first major rupture of the Arab Spring, Tunisia’s President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled the country in 2011 in the face of widespread protests over unemployment, corruption, and poor economic conditions. In 2018, Malaysia’s entrenched ruling party coalition suffered a surprise electoral defeat after revelations of large-scale embezzlement by Prime

\(^5\) Carothers (2020b).
Minister Najib Razak. That same year, mass protests in Armenia against political repression and corruption swiftly ended decades of rule by the Republican Party. How politically damaging corruption is may depend on numerous factors, including how it affects the economy, the public’s tolerance for scandals, and the regime’s ability to suppress dissent, but autocrats engaging in corrupt practices are often taking a political risk.

This book focuses on an important but largely unanswered question: Under what conditions do authoritarian regimes curb corruption? Why do some autocrats attempt to reduce abuses of power while others do not, and why do their efforts succeed or fail? General scholarship on corruption control has overwhelmingly focused on democracies, but corruption’s many negative effects make corruption control a consideration for powerholders everywhere. While there have been useful studies of authoritarian anti-corruption campaigns, very few studies seek to explain why some nondemocracies control corruption better than others or why authoritarian reform efforts are or are not successful.

Despite the ways in which corruption can threaten authoritarian regimes, the conventional wisdom among many scholars and analysts is that autocrats rarely if ever enact meaningful anti-corruption reform because the benefits of corruption far outweigh the risks. There are good reasons for this view. The fact that unaccountable leaders are prone to enriching themselves at the public’s expense almost goes without saying; lurid stories of autocrats’ wealth have been popular since antiquity and originate in every region of the world. Revelations that a president-for-life may have a $1.4 billion mansion full of expensive “gifts” may be angering but not surprising. Besides filling their pockets, corruption can also help autocrats stay in power. A large literature shows that distributing spoils and patronage in exchange for political support

10 For example, Klitgaard (1988); Pope (2000); Quah (2013); Johnston (2014); Mungiu-Pippidi (2015); Rose-Ackerman and Palifka (2016); Rotberg (2017); Chen and Weiss (2019). Gillespie and Okruhlik (1988, 1991) include many authoritarian cases in their analyses of anti-corruption campaigns in the Middle East but do not attempt to explain corruption control outcomes.

11 There are thousands of studies focused on corruption control in China, not to mention those focused on corruption. A few that have been particularly useful in preparing this book include Lü (2000), Manion (2004), and Thornton (2007). Other studies in this category have examined Singapore, the Soviet Union, Vietnam, Rwanda, and elsewhere. See Quah (2017), Duhamel (2004), Malesky and Phan (2019), and Crisafulli and Redmond (2012) respectively.

12 Two such studies are Hollyer and Wantchekon (2015) and Yadav and Mukherjee (2016), which I discuss in Sections 2.2.3 and 7.3.1 respectively.

13 See, for example, McGuire and Olson (1996); Carothers (2002, 16); Chang and Golden (2010); Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2011); Brancati (2014, 317); Pui (2016, 267).

is one of the most basic and essential strategies autocrats use to maintain their regimes.\textsuperscript{15} Unsurprisingly then, supposed anti-corruption campaigns launched by authoritarian leaders are often no more than empty gestures at reform or excuses to purge political rivals. Even if autocrats wanted cleaner government, they would face the daunting prospect of having to give up substantial power and control to get there. This is because, as anti-corruption experts emphasize, democratic institutions are critical to corruption control.\textsuperscript{16} The rule of law, competitive elections, checks and balances, public oversight from civil society, and other democratic institutions constrain the exercise of public power and create accountability mechanisms that can incentivize good behavior. In sum, the thinking goes that, while democratic politicians may have incentives to try to curb government wrongdoing, for autocrats, “bad behavior is almost always good politics.”\textsuperscript{17}

My research shows that, despite the reasoning outlined, substantial anti-corruption efforts by authoritarian regimes are more common and more often successful than is widely assumed. Since 1950, there have been at least thirty-four such efforts, meaning national-level government initiatives that involve investigations and prosecutions of alleged wrongdoers and attempts at legal or other institutional reforms. In at least ten cases, regimes have succeeded in curbing corruption overall, yielding political and economic benefits. Singapore is sometimes cited as an exceptional case of authoritarian anti-corruption success,\textsuperscript{18} but the phenomenon is far more than a Singaporean fluke. Curbing corruption has been a major agenda item for many authoritarian regimes that are “high-performing” in terms of governance outcomes.\textsuperscript{19} In Taiwan in the early 1950s, the newly arrived Kuomintang (KMT) leadership pursued an ambitious set of reforms that brought previously rampant corruption under control and laid a new foundation for regime stability and growth. Many anti-corruption success cases have occurred in East Asia, but I find that there have also been effective reforms by autocracies as diverse as Cuba, Ethiopia, Qatar, and Rwanda.\textsuperscript{20} My assessment of anti-corruption

\textsuperscript{15} Geddes (1999); Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003); Brownlee (2007); Magaloni (2008); Blaydes (2011). For a critique of the authoritarianism literature’s overemphasis on patronage, see Levitsky and Way (2012).

\textsuperscript{16} Pope (2000); Brunetti and Weder (2003); Alence (2004); Johnston (2005, 2014); Lindstedt and Naurin (2010); Mungiu-Pippidi (2015); Rose-Ackerman and Palifka (2016).

\textsuperscript{17} Quotation from the subtitle of Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2011).

\textsuperscript{18} For example, Oehler (2005); Mungiu-Pippidi (2015, 131, 149); Quah (2017).

\textsuperscript{19} Mungiu-Pippidi and Johnston (2017).

\textsuperscript{20} I use the terms “authoritarian” and “autocratic” interchangeably throughout this book. Both refer to all nondemocratic regimes.
outcomes is based on scoring anti-corruption enforcement and the extent of institutional reforms in each case, as I discuss in Section 2.3.

One logical explanation might be that the authoritarian regimes that enact corruption control are partly democratic or are on the softer end of the authoritarianism spectrum. Some scholarship suggests that authoritarian regimes with quasi-democratic institutions, such as semi-competitive elections or legislatures that allow some opposition party members, have stronger checks on government wrongdoing.21 These regimes – often termed competitive authoritarian, electoral authoritarian, or hybrid regimes – stand in contrast to “fully authoritarian” regimes, which lack meaningful political openness and competition;22 for example, Haiti, Serbia, and Malaysia have quasi-democratic institutions, whereas China, Eritrea, and Saudi Arabia are fully authoritarian.23 Another possibility would be that authoritarian regimes are more likely to curb corruption if they are characterized by power-sharing among elites or “collective leadership,” such as the Vietnamese Communist Party in Vietnam, as opposed to personalist or one-man rule, such as the Kim family regime in North Korea.24 Personalist regimes, in which the leader monopolizes power, generally provide worse governance and are less stable than regimes in which the leader shares power, even if in a much more limited fashion than under democracy.25

However, my findings suggest that the reality is closer to the opposite. Successful anti-corruption reforms have all or nearly all occurred under fully authoritarian regimes and have been led by powerful autocrats largely unconstrained by institutions or norms of collective leadership. In other words, reforms have originated from some of the leaders for whom the phrase “absolute power corrupts absolutely” should be most relevant.26 In South Korea, General-turned-President Park Chung-hee failed to reduce corruption during the quasi-democratic Third Republic in the 1960s but successfully enacted reforms after consolidating his power under the repressive Fourth Republic in the 1970s. More recently, Rwanda’s President Paul Kagame has been lauded by international media

21 Boix (2003); Blaydes (2011); Yadav and Mukherjee (2016).
22 Carothers (2002); Diamond (2002); Levitsky and Way (2002); Schedler (2002). These terms are not exactly interchangeable but reflect largely overlapping conceptualizations of authoritarian regimes with some form of quasi-democratic institutions.
23 For a more comprehensive explanation of the differences between fully authoritarian regimes and regimes with quasi-democratic institutions, see Levitsky and Way (2010).
24 On collective leadership, see Nathan (2003); Thayer (2010); Hu (2015); Shirk (2018).
25 Geddes (1999); Esrow and Frantz (2011); Kailitz (2013); Frantz and Kendall-Taylor (2017).
26 “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” See Acton (1907).
and development organizations for leading effective anti-corruption reforms, despite the fact that he rules the country with an iron fist.

In sum, substantial authoritarian corruption control occurs in spite of prevailing assumptions about autocrats’ political incentives, and reforms are often led by regimes that should be among the least likely to curb government wrongdoing. What explains these findings?

My main argument in this book is that corruption control in authoritarian regimes, rather than resulting from democratic constraints on power or accountability mechanisms, depends on motivated authoritarian reformers having a free hand to enact and enforce anti-corruption measures. Anti-corruption efforts are likely to succeed when autocrats are motivated to curb corruption, have discretionary power over their regime, and have sufficient state capacity to implement reforms. Anti-corruption efforts often have multiple goals, but autocrats are most likely to be motivated to curb corruption when they have ambitious state-building agendas that corruption threatens to undermine. Scholarship has found that autocrats invest in strengthening or reforming the state apparatus for various reasons, including in order to respond to foreign threats, to achieve rapid state-led growth, or to carry out revolutionary or ideologically motivated projects, such as Communism. Unlike many other autocrats, leaders driven to engage in state-building have strong incentives to reverse corruption’s negative effects on government and the economy. Motivation to curb corruption alone, however, is not sufficient; autocrats also need discretionary power, meaning broad control over their regime’s operations and the ability to act unilaterally without institutional constraints. Crucially, discretionary power allows autocrats to enact reforms that will necessarily challenge the corrupt financial and political interests of many regime insiders and supporters. Anti-corruption efforts led by less powerful autocrats have often been blocked or undercut by defenders of the corrupt status quo in the regime and the bureaucracy, such as the failed reforms in Vietnam initiated by General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh in the late 1980s and General Secretary Le Kha Phieu in the late 1990s (see Chapter 7). Even if powerful leaders drive anti-corruption forward, reforms still need to be implemented throughout the regime and state in order to be effective. For this reason, a certain level of state capacity is, alongside motivation and discretionary power, a necessary condition for corruption control success.

I further argue that the effective combination of motivation, discretionary power, and state capacity allows autocrats to take a distinct

27 Waltz (1979); Woo-Cumings (1998); Zhu (2002); Becker and Goldstone (2005); Doner et al. (2005); Thornton (2007).
Authoritarian approach to curbing corruption. Rather than drawing on quasi-democratic institutions, the authoritarian approach involves autocrats tightening control over the regime and the state to enforce discipline, often through extralegal means. Ideally, officials and bureaucrats will be constrained from engaging in corruption and face a disincentive to wrongdoing in the form of potential sanctions from above. I find that this approach has certain common features across diverse cases: autocrats centralize power over anti-corruption enforcement, increase top-down control over officials and bureaucrats, and use censorship and propaganda to build support for their reforms.

This book’s findings are based on my examination and comparison of authoritarian anti-corruption efforts in China, South Korea, and Taiwan, as well as in a broader set of authoritarian regimes around the world. I focus on examining nine anti-corruption efforts, both successful and unsuccessful, led by the CCP in China, military-backed governments in South Korea, and the KMT in pre-democratic Taiwan. This set of cases provides analytically useful variation in outcomes both cross-nationally and within countries over time. To research these anti-corruption efforts, I conducted sixteen months of fieldwork in East Asia between 2015 and 2019 and drew on a wide range of primary sources, including Chinese- and Korean-language archival materials and interviews with government officials, relevant civil society actors, and corruption control experts. Table 1.1 provides brief descriptions of these cases and their outcomes.

Going beyond the main cases in China, South Korea, and Taiwan, I also conduct minor case studies of corruption control efforts in Cuba, Malaysia, Rwanda, Singapore, and Vietnam. These shorter analyses serve as “plausibility probes” of my theory’s applicability in diverse authoritarian contexts. Overall, I identify and analyze anti-corruption efforts in twenty-four authoritarian regimes between 1950 and 2019 (see Appendix A for a full list of cases).

To assess outcomes systematically, I introduce a novel scoring system for anti-corruption efforts. Previous studies have often not established comprehensive criteria for determining success or failure or even what constitutes an anti-corruption effort. My proposed scoring system, elaborated in Chapter 2, assesses key aspects of anti-corruption enforcement and rulemaking to capture the extent to which a government has disciplined corrupt actors and enforced new laws, bureaucratic changes, or other institutional reforms checking corruption. Although developed

28 Eckstein (1975); Levy (2008).
based on East Asian cases, it provides a general framework that scholars and policymakers can use to judge whether an authoritarian regime is engaged in a superficial anti-corruption campaign or is undertaking substantive reforms. In addition, this scoring system has the advantage of focusing on actual government actions rather than using perception-based measures of corruption control, which are likely to be less accurate for typically nontransparent authoritarian regimes.

Table 1.1 Authoritarian anti-corruption efforts in China, South Korea, and Taiwan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>1951–53</td>
<td>The Three Antis–Five Antis Campaign curbed corruption and helped the new ruling party to penetrate and reform China’s complex urban centers.</td>
<td>Successful Reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1962–65</td>
<td>The Four Cleans and the Socialist Education Movement disciplined rural cadres in large numbers but failed to institutionalize new anti-corruption standards.</td>
<td>Failed Effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1989–90</td>
<td>The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) increased anti-corruption prosecutions after the Tiananmen Square protests, but reforms were half-hearted and soon abandoned.</td>
<td>Failed Effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012–</td>
<td>Xi Jinping’s campaign is much-debated, but it has produced positive changes in bureaucratic behavior and disciplined numerous high-level officials.</td>
<td>Successful Reform (Ongoing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>1961–63</td>
<td>Park Chung-hee purged politicians and businesspeople but then backpedaled and allowed corrupt practices to continue.</td>
<td>Failed Effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1973–77</td>
<td>Park’s General Administrative Reform reduced corruption and improved the quality of South Korea’s bureaucracy.</td>
<td>Successful Reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1980–81</td>
<td>Chun Doo-hwan’s “Purification” campaign purged the civil service but failed to revive the disciplinary standards of the 1970s.</td>
<td>Failed Effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>1950–52</td>
<td>The Kuomintang (KMT) Reconstruction substantially improved party organization and discipline following the Nationalists’ defeat in the Chinese Civil War (1945–49).</td>
<td>Successful Reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1969–73</td>
<td>Chiang Ching-kuo’s Governmental Rejuvenation reversed a growing trend of bureaucratic inefficiency and helped keep overall corruption low.</td>
<td>Successful Reform</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.2 Significance for the Study of Authoritarianism

This book makes several contributions to our broader understanding of how authoritarian regimes stay in power and how they govern. First and foremost, my findings challenge the increasingly influential view that authoritarian regimes are strengthened – where strength means higher regime durability and better governance outcomes – by becoming partly democratic. Several strands of scholarship have boosted this intuitive explanation for why so many authoritarian regimes not only survived the Third Wave of democratization in the 1980s and 1990s but also have thrived in the twenty-first century. First, more and more, scholarship advances the view that quasi-democratic institutions, rather than being harbingers of democratization, enhance authoritarian regime durability by providing autocrats with better information and control mechanisms. Second, the influential “selectorate theory” of politics contends that autocrats with broad bases of support have incentives similar to democratic leaders facing mass electorates and are therefore more likely to govern for the benefit of the country instead of just for a small group of regime insiders. Third, scholarship suggests that authoritarian regimes with institutional checks on the individual leader’s power provide better governance and more stability than those characterized by personalism. However, corruption control does not follow the logic laid out in this scholarship. Successful corruption control in authoritarian regimes has occurred in fully authoritarian regimes and has depended on autocrats being sufficiently unconstrained to push through reforms. Having quasi-democratic institutions rarely if ever helps authoritarian regimes curb corruption and may incentivize autocrats and their allies to rely heavily on corrupt practices to stay in power. For an authoritarian regime, the risks of partial democratization may be higher and the benefits may be lower than scholars currently understand.

Second, autocrats are widely seen as benefiting from corruption, but this view should be balanced with an understanding that corruption has costs and curbing it can also be beneficial. In the cases I identified, anti-corruption successes have brought political and economic benefits for the regimes that achieved them, including helping autocrats advance critical state-building projects that corruption had hindered. The Three Antis—Five Antis Campaign in the early 1950s helped the newly in power CCP to extend its control into Chinese cities and to begin reforming their

30 Gandhi and Przeworski (2007); Cox (2009); Blaydes (2011); Svolik (2012); Simpser (2013); Geddes et al. (2018, 120–53). For a review of this literature, see Brancati (2014).
31 Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003).
32 Geddes (1999); Ezrow and Frantz (2011); Frantz and Kendall-Taylor (2017).
economies. Successful corruption control helped the KMT to address organizational dysfunction and restructure itself after the retreat to Taiwan in 1949 and was part of how Park built a developmental state in South Korea. In Qatar, Rwanda, and Singapore, anti-corruption reforms have been the first step for rulers pursuing ambitious development projects and have brought these regimes international praise and investment. In China, in recent years, Xi’s anti-corruption campaign has strengthened party organization and improved party discipline, addressing what Xi and other leaders saw as a growing crisis of CCP governance in the 2000s. In these cases and others, curbing corruption is likely to have had less easily observable benefits for regimes as well, such as reducing public discontent over corruption.

Third, general explanations of authoritarian regime durability often emphasize the enduring influence of regime origins and initial conditions, but this misses the importance of some regimes’ ability to self-reform. Some scholars argue that regimes with origins in revolutionary struggle, such as the KMT-led regime in China and later Taiwan, are highly durable. Others find that regimes founded in the course of counterrevolutionary consolidation among elites against certain types of threats, such as the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in Malaysia, are stable. Although strong political foundations can indeed make regimes last, my research shows that regimes also benefit from being able to reform themselves. Having strong foundations is not the same as being adaptable and capable of change in the face of new or newly urgent threats. The KMT and UMNO regimes were highly durable, but in both cases their inability to meet growing demands for an end to government corruption – Taiwan in the 1990s and Malaysia leading up to 2018 – contributed to their ultimate ouster from power. My highlighting of regime adaptation and self-reform builds on existing scholarly work on policy experimentation, learning, and responsiveness by authoritarian regimes, especially in the China field.

Fourth, although personalist rule is commonly – and accurately – associated with chaotic governance and economic mismanagement, the discretionary power that many personalist autocrats enjoy can be critical to enacting challenging reforms, such as corruption control. Autocrats unconstrained by quasi-democratic institutions or collective leadership arrangements are able to impose reform measures that are painful for many regime insiders and other political actors profiting from corruption. Discretionary authority allows autocratic reformers to