

Myanmar: Authoritarian values in a democratic system

When leaders have supreme executive control over a country, the government gains the ability to act in its own self-interest and disregard the concerns of the majority.¹¹ Authoritarian governments are structured to keep citizens suppressed and obedient by means of severe discipline. When a country implements unjustified laws, it immediately loses its ability to protect the fundamental rights of the citizens. An authoritarian government can be defined by encompassing the following criteria: First, the government limits civil liberties and neglects civilian human rights. Second, executive power is centralized in the hands of one or a few leaders. Lastly, political corruption creates a standard for unreasonable execution of power in the government. While many transitioning countries in their early “new regime” years have a slow incline into a true democracy, others fail at ever reaching a democratic state.²² Despite Myanmar’s disestablishment of its supreme authoritarian military rule, the country still lacks the necessary requirements to be a democracy due to the actions of the government perpetuating their former authoritarian rule.

By focusing on the disparity between authoritarianism and democracy, we gain a helpful perspective to evaluate governments. This is useful because the fundamental aspects of a democracy are in opposition to the values of authoritarian governments. The Economist Intelligence Unit annually evaluates and ranks the level of democracy and freedom in each country around world. The countries are ranked based on numerous factors such as pluralism,

^{11.} *"Authoritarianism."* International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences

²² “Democracy and Authoritarian Government.”, Sociology Guide

media independence, legislative framework, abuse, and more. Moreover, these “judging factors” can accurately predict whether or not a state is democratic. This is useful because authoritarianism can be defined in opposition of democracy. Given this, authoritarianism must meet the following criteria: 1) Centralization of executive power to one or a few unelected individuals. 2) Arbitrary execution of power. 3) Rejection of basic human rights.

Centralized Sovereign Power

In authoritarian states, the entirety of power resides with one or a group of individuals who can transform the country as they see fit. Authoritarian governments are generally categorized into autocracies and various types of oligarchies. An autocracy is a type of authoritarian state where power is centralized with one individual leader. Oligarchies are governments run by a group of individuals, ranging from a few powerful leaders to a military faction.³² Due to leaders unrestricted control in authoritarian states, the citizens are not given a fair choice in who governs them. Consequently, the government has no obligation to follow the opinions of the majority, and can implement changes with their exclusive discretion.

Not only can the leaders of authoritarian states create reforms as they see fit, they also have the ability to put in place preventative measures to oppress the public and punish dissidents. The right for citizens to vote has become an essential aspect of a free and fair democracy, however not assured in authoritarian governments. Many states list the right to vote in their constitution as a way to ensure the fundamental rights of its citizens are protected.⁴³ Conversely, authoritarianism aims to minimize the power that citizens have by creating laws that force people to follow their corrupt government. The fundamental purpose of voting is to have impartial

³² “Democracy and Authoritarian Government.”, Sociology Guide

⁴³ Diamond, L. *“What Is Democracy?”*

representation in the government. Additionally, it is important that the public can fairly elect officials who they believe will best serve their country. In authoritarian states, free and fair elections aren't desirable to the sovereign leaders because it undermines their power by allowing citizens to change unfavorable aspects of the how the country is run.⁵² However, even when a more liberal, "electoral" authoritarian government, such as Russia, allows its citizens to 'vote' in elections, the system thwarts its opposition from succeeding. Often-authoritarian governments use pseudo-voting as a tool to give the false impression of political support. It is not surprising that electoral authoritarian governments are the most common political regime in developing worlds as this type of government outwardly gives the perception of inclusion and growth, while still maintaining dominant control.⁶⁴

Arbitrary Execution of Power

Authoritarian governments use their power to create arbitrary laws and keep their regime in power. In many of the large contemporary military run governments such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Peru, laws have been enforced to prevent activists from expressing opposition to the government.⁷⁵ Democracies create laws with functional purpose, so that all citizens are equally protected and the security of the state is sound. Alternatively, authoritarian governments are not held to the same moral standards. Their laws typically serve the function of oppression and instilling fear in citizens, so that their "values" align with that of the government.

Singapore can serve as an example of how political corruption can transpire when an

⁵² Senzai, Farid. "Comparative Politics." Class Notes

⁶⁴ *Lynne Rienner Publishers / Electoral Authoritarianism The Dynamics of Unfree Competition.*

⁷⁵ Myint, Aung Phone, "Legal Hybridity: Rule of Law under Authoritarianism"

authoritarian government passes subjective law. Subsequent to the first set of elections following independence from the British Colony in 1959, Singapore's new government led by the PAP began to implement similar laws to the preceding oppressive government. Additionally, the PAP kept in place the undependable judicial court as a way of compromising a just system. This eventually led the PAP to create policies that suppressed their opposition by eliminating a truly free and fair competition. In addition, the use of media censorship led to the dismantling of Singapore's independent press and the absolute control of available information.⁸⁵ Singapore models how new governments can begin with national support, but once power is established the new government can strip individuals of their intrinsic liberties.

The absence of a governmental body to discuss, debate, and compromise on the best conduct of the country creates a dynamic where the decisions of a small body will affect millions of unrepresented individuals. By understanding the division and distribution of punishment and rewards, we can determine the overall fairness and level of social justice in a state. Authoritarian states have the ability to create a basic quality of life for all its citizens, however, when those who hold significant power choose to instead use their power to instill ascendancy, the country as a whole ends up suffering.⁹⁶ Thomas Aquinas wrote, "Justice is a certain rectitude of mind whereby a man does what he ought to do in the circumstances confronting him." Aquinas believes that social justice is the natural and moral responsibility owed to one another.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, authoritarian states disregard these rights to create a corrupt system of rule where power is executed arbitrarily in order to adhere to the agenda of a singular entity.

⁸⁵ Myint, Aung Phone, "*Legal Hybridity: Rule of Law under Authoritarianism*"

⁹⁶ "Weaker Section and Minorities." Social Justice Topic, Religion And Social Justice ,Sociology

¹⁰⁷ Zajda, Joseph I., Suzanne Majhanovich, and Val Dean. Rust. Education and Social Justice.

Rejection of basic Human Rights

Governments that do not establish rights for its citizens neglect the well being of the majority. Alternatively, democracies set an example of social justice by protecting human rights of all citizens. Authoritarian states do not establish a civil constitution or laws to protect citizen rights, ultimately creating a system that promotes sovereign control over citizens. For example, the military run governments in Latin America employed, “public instruments of surveillance, repression, and torture with unusual ruthlessness and efficiency” (Collier, Cardoso p165)¹¹⁸, as a way to maintain order.

Numerous international organizations have tried to establish international human rights laws that would protect individuals from inhuman treatment. However, most authoritarian governments still neglect these rights and do not allow their citizens to be given any sort of power or freedom. In 1948, the United Nations wrote an unprecedented document universally acknowledging and protecting the fundamental human rights of all people regardless of nationality. This document, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights lists all of the rights individuals have and intentionally begins the document stating, “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” This was the first time International law stated that rulers and the ruled should indeed have equal rights. The Universal Declaration of Human rights elaborates on the treatment citizens, “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”¹²⁹ By writing this revolutionary document, The United Nations created a moral standard for how people around the world must be treated. Despite the grave

¹¹⁸ Collier, David, and Fernando Henrique. Cardoso. *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America*.

¹²⁹ Pfanner, Toni. *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 867."

importance of protecting human rights, authoritarian governments will prioritize the state's security over ethically treating its citizens.

Evaluating Myanmar:

Criteria 1 — Centralized Power

While Myanmar has held numerous elections since 1990, electoral corruption has remained a pressing issue. Although Myanmar claims that their elections are free and fair, they cannot truly have free and fair elections when hundreds of thousands of citizens are discriminated and disqualified for nationality, religion, and martial choice. This flawed system resulted in over 36,000 eligible voters in the 2010 elections to be improperly categorized so that they were disqualified. If the National League for Democracy (NLD) had not recognized what was happening in time for the election, tens of thousands of individuals would have not been able to vote.¹³¹⁰ It is not surprising that the citizens who reject military oppression the most are the same ethnic minorities who have been persecuted for decades by their government. This furthers the argument that when the military acts in its own favorable conduct they continue to control and command how the country operates.

In 2010 Myanmar finally established a civil parliament, which would allow the civilian majority to gain representation in the government for the first time since gaining British independence. Due to the most recent 2008 military-drafted constitution, preventative measures were put in place to keep power from returning to civilians.¹⁴¹¹ The constitution allows military officials to veto any amendment, ultimately hindering the ability for another parliamentary party to develop new policies. Additionally, the constitution states that 25% of the seats in parliament

¹³¹⁰ RFA's Burmese Service. "Western Election Observers Invited."

¹⁴¹¹ "An Unfinished Peace." The Economist.

must automatically be assigned to military officials. Although the NLD currently makes up 80% of the contested seats in parliament, they cannot implement new legislature to move the country away from its oppressive military past. Although parliament can elect the president, the most powerful positions in the country are still appointed by the military. The head of the army, not the president, selects the key security ministries such as defense, home affairs, and border affairs. The citizens of Myanmar have the ability to freely vote for whichever party best represents their views, just as most parliamentary democracies. Nevertheless, Myanmar remains politically rooted in authoritarian values due to the parliaments inability to fairly represent and implement policies that support the interests of the majority.¹⁵¹¹

Criteria 2 — Arbitrary Execution of Power

When a country lacks an unbiased judicial court the government and its citizens cannot be held accountable for their actions. In recent years Myanmar has attempted to establish the first independent court system. However, the lack of sufficient resources prevents the development and implementation of a truly fair judiciary system. Without an independent court to hold individuals liable for their actions, punishments continue to be determined based on a system that encourages corruption.¹⁶¹⁰ Moreover, the court system is unable to hold the armed forces liable for their actions, fostering a culture of impunity for abusive military leaders.¹² This has resulted in the continuation of aggressive military tactics, similar to that of the suppressive military junta rule. In one instance, in 2015 the Red Cross attempted to evacuate displaced people who were under attack by the ethnic Kokang insurgents as well as the Myanmar armed forces. During the

¹⁵¹¹ "An Unfinished Peace." The Economist.

¹⁶¹⁰ RFA's Burmese Service. "Western Election Observers Invited."

¹² Kurlantzick, Joshua. "Myanmar's Rights Record Deteriorates in 2014." Council on Foreign Relations

evacuation, the Myanmar military began firing at the Red Cross convoys, forcing them retreat. While the actions of the military may only reflect the intentions of one group, these decisions ultimately leads to unchecked foreign contention.

Despite the fact that NLD leaders understand the consequences of their military's violation of basic human rights, they refuse to take a public stance due to the possible repercussions of opposing the military.¹⁷¹² This dynamic between the military and the reigning government shows the lack of true power that Myanmar's new government has. Furthermore, the recent political reforms have proven to be ineffective. Due to the absence of accountability in the government, Myanmar's military leaders continue to hold the most power. Additionally, the military can act independently from the government creating a division of authority. Without checks and balances in place to prevent one body from having more power than another, Myanmar's military perpetuates its authoritarian foundation.

Criteria 3 — Rejection of Human Rights

Neglecting basic freedoms is debatably the most critical indication of an authoritarian government in Myanmar. The primary responsibility in a free and fair society is to protect the rights and liberties of its citizens. Due to the crippling authority that the military still has over the government, the elected parliament is unable to respond when Myanmar's armed forces violate human rights. Authorities continue to arrest and imprison activists for peacefully exercising their rights. Additionally, journalists must self-censor when reporting on the government or military for fear of harassment, intimidation, and imprisonment.¹³ Without free, unbiased press, the citizens of Myanmar cannot have access to the complete truth about what is occurring in their

¹⁷¹³ "Amnesty International Report 2015-2016." Myanmar

own country. Although the government has opened up the Internet for public use, they monitor and censor the information that enters and leaves the country. In 2013 several individuals were detained because of social media posts that ridiculed their military.¹⁸¹³ Additionally, the government blocks information that is seen as a threat to the state.-The lack of transparency between the government and citizens creates a corrupt system where citizens believe their concerns can impact the country, but the motives of the military continue to take precedence.

The most evident violation of basic rights in Myanmar is the inhumane treatment of the Muslim minority, the Rohingyas. A growing national hatred for the Muslims has led to the government completely discriminating against the one million Rohingya inhabitants in Myanmar. Numerous vaguely worded laws have limited the freedoms that any individual, regardless of religion, must follow. For example, individuals can be imprisoned for inciting others, gathering an unlawful assembly, and practicing “insulting religions” These laws have led to constitutional laws forbidding the Rohingyas from voting in elections, receiving education, and having equal opportunities for employment.¹⁹¹³ The Rohingyas have been driven from their villages by the military with over 140,000 forced to live in isolated camps. In 2015, the Myanmar government took away the identity cards from all Rohingyas, denying them the right to citizenship. Consequently, the inhumane treatment of Muslims has driven thousands of Rohingyas to risk their lives by seeking refuge in neighboring countries.²⁰¹⁴ Moreover, the International Human Rights Watch has recently accused Myanmar authorities of committing crimes against humanity in Myanmar’s recent campaign of ethnic cleansing.

¹⁸¹³ "Amnesty International Report 2015-2016." Myanmar

¹⁹¹³ "Amnesty International Report 2015-2016." Myanmar

²⁰¹⁴ "Apartheid on the Andaman Sea." The Economist

Conclusion

Myanmar's government has come a long way from the destructive military regime that oppressed the country for half a century. However, by satisfying the previously established criteria for authoritarian governments, it is evident that Myanmar continues to be governed by authoritarian ideologies through political culture. There are many reasons why a government cannot successfully democratize, but for Myanmar the most obvious explanation is the lack of support from the powerful military leaders. For democratization to take place in an authoritarian state those who hold power must be committed to transforming the government into a democracy. In Michael Soadro's chapter on what it takes for a country to become a democracy, he attributes the commitment of elites (the authoritarian leaders) as the primary condition for modern democratization to take place. Sodaro continues by stating that, "... [the leaders] must accept democracy's core values, above all freedom, inclusion, equality, equity, tolerance, and compromise".²¹¹⁵ The motives of the military continue to be rooted in prejudice values, because not only do they lack "democracy's core values", they reject them.

The people must be able to have a voice in the decisions that will ultimately affect their lives. Although the majority of Myanmar's population has the ability to vote for the party they want in parliament, these elected individuals are in reality powerless figure heads. Like many countries that democratize abruptly without internal support, the leaders implement just enough freedoms to reject the authoritarian title. Unsurprisingly, the chief military ruler who brought Myanmar into a "parliamentary democracy" only recently described the country as "[ruled by] disciplined democracy". This statement completely alters the basis of how we define

²¹¹⁵ Sodaro, Michael J. Democracy, What Does It Take?" *Comparative Politics: A Global Introduction* ." p223. Print.

democracies. Ruling by “disciplined democracy” ultimately admits to giving the impression of freedom, while continuing to govern by military control.

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