

Summary

The recent emergence of authoritarian countries, such as China, as leading economic powers, increasingly engaged in the developing world, has coincided with a 'democratic recession' in certain developing countries. Are these two processes related? Is the rise of authoritarian powers leading to authoritarian diffusion in the developing world as economic linkages increase? Although there is a well-established literature on democratic diffusion (von Soest 2015; Lankina and Getachew 2006; Elkins 2011), authoritarian diffusion is an emerging and increasingly important area of research (Gel'man and Lankina 2008; Ambrosio 2010, 2018). So far, the scholarship has focused on the effects of Russia's economic engagement with its neighbouring countries, finding evidence that authoritarian diffusion is happening (Libman and Obydenkova 2014; Vanderhill 2012; Lankina et al. 2016). However, the literature has not investigated whether authoritarian powers, through economic links, are having influence beyond their own neighbours.

China's increasing role in Sub-Saharan Africa provides an ideal setting to explore this issue as democratic and liberal institutions in these states have not yet been consolidated (Lynch and Crawford 2011) and China has different levels of engagement in different Sub-Saharan African countries (Mohan and Power 2008). Although, the scholarship has argued about the negative political impact of Sino-African cooperation (Haglund 2008; Ovadia 2013; Tull 2006), no one has yet investigated if Chinese economic engagement is affecting the quality of liberal-democratic practices and attitudes in Sub-Saharan African countries.

This thesis tests the hypothesis that higher economic linkages with China have a negative impact on both levels of and attitudes towards liberal-democracy in African states. This is, first, examined at the individual level, by investigating the demonstration effect of the Chinese financed projects, whose geolocated data is combined with the sub-national variation on citizens' attitudes toward liberal-democracy. Then, it tests the learning mechanism of diffusion, at the individual level, by conducting an original survey-experiment in Kenya, a typical African country that has encountered challenges in consolidating its democratic regime and has experienced an increase in Chinese economic engagement. Lastly, the hypothesis is examined at the country level, using time-series data on levels of Chinese economic engagement (trade flows) and levels of liberal-democracy.

The findings do not provide strong evidence that authoritarian diffusion is happening at the individual and institutional levels in Sub-Saharan African countries as a result of increasing Chinese economic engagement. Across the different levels and employing different methods and measurements of the dependent and independent variables, the effect is not robust. However, the survey-experiment shows that learning about particularities of the Chinese model influence Kenyan respondents to have a higher preference for the selection of politicians through performance-based appointment rather than through an electoral process. This indicates that what might be diffused is not the authoritarian aspects of the China model, but the performance-based selection of political officials, which is something citizens of African countries have not experienced

yet. In general, the results suggest that authoritarian diffusion might not happen at a distance, as geographic distance increases cultural distance and informational gaps between the actors involved in the diffusion process.

Overall, this project contributes to our understanding of the diffusion of authoritarian norms and practices in the developing world by providing a first test of whether China's increasing presence in Sub-Saharan Africa is leading to changing levels and attitudes towards liberal-democracy. It suggests that the democratic rollback currently experienced by the Sub-Saharan African countries might not be due to the economic linkages with authoritarian regimes.