

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Authoritarian resurgence: towards a unified analytical framework

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Abstract

This introductory note to the Special Issue 'Autocracy Strikes Back: Authoritarian Resurgence in the Early 21st Century' situates this collection of articles in the burgeoning literature on authoritarian resurgence, and illustrates the conceptual terrain on which these articles make their contribution. In this regard, we discuss autocratization, authoritarian resilience, democratic transition failure, and autocracy-to-autocracy transition as processes of regime change representing different ways in which authoritarian resurgence may advance. Relatedly, we clarify how these processes of regime change differ from each other and provide a few basic coordinates to frame their comparative analysis.

Keywords: Authoritarian resilience; authoritarian resurgence; autocracy-to-autocracy transition; autocratization; failed democratic transition

Introduction

Things have changed since the beginning of the 1990s, when the so-called 'third wave of democratization' (Huntington, 1991) was peaking and analysts announced 'the global resurgence of democracy' (Diamond and Plattner, 1993). Nowadays, quite a different spirit informs the question that echoes with increasing frequency throughout the lobbies of the international organizations and of the academic institutes that monitor the state of democracy across the world. Is a new age of authoritarianism beginning?

The third wave of democratization started in the 1970s in Southern Europe and reached the shores of Latin America and East Asia in the following years. Between the end of the 1980s and the mid-1990s, Central-Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and sub-Saharan Africa experienced similarly dramatic series of regime breakdowns followed by democratic reforms. These events have influenced heavily scholars' approach to the study of regime change and their perceptions about the future of democracy. In particular, the idea spread that democracy represents the ultimate end of a country's political development and that democratization unfolds in a relatively linear set sequence of stages, which starts with the breakdown of an autocratic regime, continues with the institutionalization of democratic procedures (e.g. universal suffrage, elections and multipartyism), and concludes with the consolidation of democracy.

After decades of unprecedented democratic progress, political development in the world seems to have changed direction, though. From Eastern Europe to Latin America, relatively young democratic countries elect governments that adopt illiberal laws to expand their decision-making power and to limit political pluralism, justifying these measures by the need of tackling urgent social and economic issues. Democracy in Asia and in the Middle-East North Africa region

continues to struggle to take root and some of the few success stories in these geopolitical areas either have proved ephemeral or have ended unhappily. Several former Soviet republics have remained autocratic or have rapidly returned to autocracy. Virtually, any sub-Saharan country in which democracy advances is matched by another country in the continent in which authoritarianism consolidates. Even in Western countries, democratic institutions and liberal values are increasingly perceived as inefficient instruments to address the contemporary social and economic challenges.

The recent history has thus demonstrated that late-20th-century optimism about the future of democracy was resting on shaky ground. The crisis and fall of autocracy in a country do not necessarily trigger democratization. Non-democratic governments can be replaced by new but similarly authoritarian elites. Likewise, an authoritarian ruling élite can operate institutional transformations to adapt and survive, even if this requires liberalizing some political space for the civil society and opposition groups, holding façade elections, and/or retiring from the foreground. Moreover, even when democratic transitions begin, these processes can fail and be obstructed by both internal and external factors and agents. Most importantly, democratic regimes can become autocratic.

Collectively, these events, which have proliferated during the early years of the 21st century, represent the signals of a possible *authoritarian resurgence* and the topic that this special issue of the Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica examines in-depth. To be sure, we do not aim to take a specific position in the dispute on the future of democracy and political freedom. Some scholars have recently suggested that an outright reverse wave of regime changes has begun (Diamond, 2015; Luehrmann and Lindberg, 2019), others are more cautious (Levitsky and Way, 2015; Schmitter, 2015). In both cases, authoritarian resurgence is an empirically relevant phenomenon of our age, and for this reason it deserves attention. Accordingly, the main goal of this collection of articles is to examine *how* authoritarianism is rising again.

Before presenting the five essays this special issue consists of, the remaining of this introductory note accomplishes two preliminary tasks. First, we review the literature on political regimes and regime change to show how scholars' attention has progressively shifted from democracy to autocracy. Second, we sketch a few basic coordinates to frame the comparative analysis of the different ways in which authoritarian resurgence may proceed, namely, autocratization, authoritarian resilience, democratic transition failure, and autocracy-to-autocracy transition.

From democratization to authoritarian resurgence

Between the 1980s and the early 1990s, the debate on regime change has focused on 'third wave' democratic transitions (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Diamond *et al.*, 1989; Huntington, 1991; Przeworski, 1991). In stark contrast with the previously prevailing pre-conditionist approach inspired by modernization theory (Lipset, 1959), the emphasis was on agency, that is, the preferences of the relevant actors, their choices, and their interactions. This change of perspective was accompanied by the new idea that any country can experience democratization and achieve democracy, even in the presence of apparently unfavourable social, economic, and cultural conditions.

However, demo-optimism was short-lived. By the mid-1990s, it gave way to more pragmatic questions about the 'challenges of consolidation' (Haggard and Kaufman, 1994; Linz and Stepan, 1996). This was the prelude to a phase of demo-scepticism concerning the actual impact of third wave democratic reforms, in the first part of the 2000s (Carothers, 2002). Scholars engaged in the analysis of the problems related to the quality of democracy (Morlino, 2004), the defects of many new democratic regimes (Merkel, 2004), and the emergence of 'hybrid regimes' (Diamond, 2002; Levitsky and Way, 2002; Schedler, 2002).

By the mid-2000s, disenchantment about the actual record of the third wave of democratization has transformed in outright demo-pessimism. The still vague 'worrisome signs' noted by

Puddington and Piano (2005) soon turned into more alarming claims regarding the ‘resurgence of the predatory state’ (Diamond, 2008). More recently, symposia have been published on the decline of democracy (Diamond, 2015; Levitsky and Way, 2015; Schmitter, 2015) and the global spread of authoritarianism (Diamond *et al.*, 2016).

Hence, the idea of an incipient phase of authoritarian resurgence has progressively gained attention. However, despite the recent exponential growth of this literature, relatively little attention has been devoted to examining in a comparative perspective the different ways in which authoritarian resurgence may proceed.

Framing authoritarian resurgence

Admittedly, ‘authoritarian resurgence’ is a thought-provoking heading, which contrasts somehow with the analytical rigour and the realism that inform the proposed collection of articles. We do not rest on the assumption that the world has entered a new era of authoritarianism (but see Luehrmann and Lindberg, 2019). Rather, we aim to examine how authoritarianism is making its way back as an alternative to democracy. In particular, this special issue deals with four main processes of regime change that advance the ongoing trend of authoritarian resurgence, namely, autocratization, authoritarian resilience, democratic transition failure, and autocracy-to-autocracy transition.

Autocratization is a process of regime change towards autocracy that makes the exercise of political power more arbitrary and repressive and that restricts the space for public contestation and political participation in the process of government selection. More specifically, in their contribution to this special issue, Cassani and Tomini (2019) use autocratization as an umbrella concept encompassing a rather broad range of regime transitions sharing the same direction. These include outright transitions from democracy to autocracy, but also transitions that do not necessarily result in the outright breakdown of a democratic regime (e.g. Hungary in 2011) and transitions occurring in countries that are already authoritarian (e.g. Central African Republic in 2003). So defined, autocratization can be pursued by different actors – for example the incumbent ruler, the military or a rebel force – with different purposes – either consolidating power or taking power – and in different ways.

Authoritarian resilience consists in a process of regime transformation that the ruling elite (or a faction of the ruling elite) of an existing autocracy promotes and carries out to hold on to power and to preserve the core authoritarian nature of the regime. Typically, this transformation is a response to an ongoing crisis of the regime, or an attempt to anticipate and prevent a possible crisis. The observed transformation should thus be thought of as a process of adaptation through which the ruling elite aims to (re)consolidate the regime (Nathan, 2003). Often, this process of adaptation-through-transformation leads to the introduction of new rules to manage intra-elite relationships and/or a partial and controlled liberalization of the political arena. In their case-study on Myanmar, Ruzza *et al.* (2019) show that an authoritarian ruling elite’s strategy to adapt and survive may even encompass retiring from the foreground while maintaining key reserved domains. However, authoritarian resilience may also result from a process of autocratization through which a non-democratic regime becomes more (rather than less) authoritarian (e.g. Republic of Congo in 2015).

Democratic transition failure is a back and forth process of regime change that starts and ends with autocracy. More specifically, a democratic transition fails when an authoritarian regime collapses, founding elections of a new democratic order are held, but autocracy is reinstalled soon after. These ‘round trip’ processes of regime change should not be misinterpreted as episodes of autocratization. However, in some cases, the distinction is admittedly challenging (Brownlee *et al.*, 2015), especially when the democratic transition process advances slowly – for instance when an interim government is established – and its failure becomes manifest with some delay. To be sure, the new autocratic regime may or may not have the same institutional features

of the previously collapsed autocracy. Likewise, the failure of a democratic transition does not necessarily bring the previous ruling elite back to power, as Resta (2019) clarifies in her analysis of Egypt included in this special issue.

Concerning authoritarian ruling elite turnovers, an *autocracy-to-autocracy transition* occurs when the ruling elite of an existing authoritarian regime is replaced by a new but similarly authoritarian elite. Consistently with the focus on ruling elite changes (Brownlee *et al.*, 2015), in his contribution to this special issue Del Panta (2019) considers a relatively broad range of autocracy-to-autocracy transitions. In this regard, it should be noted that sometimes these elite-level transitions lead to a change in the institutions that characterize the political regime, but this is not necessarily the case. Likewise, elite turnover at the executive is a key difference between autocracy-to-autocracy transitions and cases of authoritarian resilience, in which the ruling elite holds on to power. Even this distinction remains open to interpretation, however, if we consider the case of Myanmar, in which the 2015 elections have marked a change of government, if in the context of a broader strategy of authoritarian resilience orchestrated by the military. Moreover, the sample of 21st century autocracy-to-autocracy transitions that Del Panta (2019) analyses include a few events that could be alternatively classified as failed democratic transitions (e.g. Egypt) and autocratization (e.g. Central African Republic).

The above discussion highlights a few basic elements that help us frame the four main processes advancing authoritarian resurgence in a comparative perspective. The premise is that the above four processes of regime change do not represent mutually exclusive categories. As discussed, some cases of possible overlapping exist, while other cases could be interpreted in different ways. Nor do we expect the four categories to be collectively exhaustive, since other forms of authoritarian resurgence may exist.

Nonetheless, a first useful distinction refers to the direction of these processes of regime change. Accordingly, authoritarian resurgence may result either from a process through which a democratic country *becomes* authoritarian, following autocratization, or from a process through which a country *remains* authoritarian. Another distinction can be made between processes through which a country remains authoritarian either *following* failed democratization, *thanks to* transformation, or *despite* elite turnover.

The protagonists of these processes of regime change represent a further dimension of variance. In this regard, we should separate cases in which a change in the ruling elite occurs from cases in which there is no government turnover. Moreover, when we examine the constellation of actors involved in these processes, we could distinguish domestic from international agents, as Natalizia (2019) correctly points out in his contribution to this collection of research works.

The content of this special issue

This special issue consists of five articles that treat different ways through which authoritarian resurgence advances, address different questions, and focus on different geopolitical areas. More specifically, as anticipated, the collected articles examine the following processes of regime change: autocratization, authoritarian resilience, democratic transition failure, and autocracy-to-autocracy transition. Collectively, these papers map the contemporary manifestations of authoritarian resurgence, present new data on the phenomenon and discuss some of its causes.

The article of Andrea Cassani and Luca Tomini (2019) deals with contemporary processes of autocratization and pursues a twofold goal. First, it presents a framework for the comparative analysis of these processes of regime change to account for their possible trajectories and for the various ways in which they can happen. Second, it offers new data on post-Cold War cases across the world. Using these data, Cassani and Tomini (2019) map the geographical and historical trends of contemporary autocratization and highlight that the empirical relevance


of the phenomenon has been growing since the early 2000s, even though this syndrome has spread unevenly across the world and has mainly affected hybrid ‘semi-democratic’ regimes.

Based on a similar cross-regional approach, the article of Gianni Del Panta (2019) deals with autocracy-to-autocracy transitions. Building on an updated typology of non-democratic regimes and through a qualitative case-by-case assessment, Del Panta (2019) tracks 21 such events occurred between 2000 and 2015, noticing that the replacement of an authoritarian government with another is a more frequent outcome than democratization. Hence, Del Panta (2019) examines which non-democratic regimes are more likely to experience these processes of change, what forms of authoritarian rule are more frequently installed as a consequence of them, and the prevailing ways in which authoritarian elites’ turnovers occur.

In the third article of this special issue, Valeria Resta (2019) investigates the role of political parties in Egypt’s failed democratic transition, possibly the most impressive *fiasco* of the so-called Arab Spring, and a poster case for the stubbornness of authoritarianism in the MENA region. Resta (2019) focuses on the causes of the failure of the democratization process in Egypt, highlights the responsibilities of the transitional parties, and clarifies how the structures of the previous regime have influenced party politics during the transition. More specifically, combining historical and quantitative text analysis, Resta (2019) shows that transitional parties’ agency is largely a by-product of the way political competition was structured under Hosni Mubarak. In particular, her analysis points to the uneven structure of opportunity characterizing the previous electoral authoritarian regime and to the strategy of playing opposition parties against each other through identity politics.

The fourth article deals with authoritarian resilience in Myanmar. Stefano Ruzza, Giuseppe Gabusi and Davide Pellegrino (2019) argue that the apparent democratic progress in Myanmar is not evidence of an ongoing process that will lead to full-fledged democracy, but the result of a strategy of the military elite aimed to enshrine elements of authoritarian governance under a democratic guise. Accordingly, they examine authoritarian resilience in Myanmar from a long-term perspective that covers about three decades, that is, from the 1988 pro-democracy uprising to the instalment of the NLD cabinet in 2016. According to the analysis, authoritarian resilience in Myanmar can be explained by the top-down nature of the transition process and its slow pace, which gave the military ruling elite the possibility to progressively adjust its adapt-and-survive strategy.

The final article of this collection examines the international dimension of authoritarian resurgence in the Southern Caucasus. Russia has been often depicted as a ‘black knight’ for democracy in the post-communist region, but most of the literature focuses on Russia’s influence in the so-called ‘new Eastern Europe’ countries. On the contrary, Gabriele Natalizia (2019) investigates how and why the Kremlin has tried to thwart democratization in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia throughout three historical periods, namely, Yeltsin presidency, Putin presidency, and the Medvedev-Putin diarchy. Natalizia (2019) retraces an intentional and nuanced strategy through which Russia has gradually re-gained primacy in the post-Soviet space and recognition of its great power status in the international arena.

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