The limited reach of authoritarian powers

Jason Brownlee

Department of Government, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, USA

ABSTRACT
Authoritarian states often command tremendous resources, but their ability to fundamentally change regimes abroad remains in question. Proponents of an “authoritarian resurgence” have speculated that China and Russia are rolling back democracy around the world, much like fascist powers in the interwar period. By contrast, the introductory article of this special issue theorizes that current authoritarian powers are not catalyzing autocracy far afield. Rather, they are prudentially defending the surrounding political order. The present article applies this framework to make sense of cross-national trends in democracy and authoritarianism. The bulk of evidence supports the notion that authoritarian powers have regionally shored up existing regimes, rather than globally subverting democracy. Evidence from around the world indicates the number of electoral democracies has been growing, democracy has remained tenuous in lower-income countries, and democratic breakdowns have owed more to unfavourable local conditions than predacious external actors.

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Introduction
Students of comparative democratization have vigorously debated whether global powers like Russia and China, and regional heavyweights such as Venezuela and Saudi Arabia, have been “rolling back” democracy and engaging in “authoritarianism promotion”. Policy analysts have expressed particular concern about an “authoritarian resurgence”. In 2016, the success of right-wing populist movements and candidates, from Great Britain to the United States, reinvigorated these speculations. To a great extent, scholars have greeted the most alarming claims of this genre with care and scepticism. Numerous articles have cautioned against exaggerating the impact of autocratic governments on democratization worldwide.

In the present issue of Democratization, social science knowledge about the scope of authoritarianism promotion accumulates further. As Kurt Weyland argues in the introductory article, it is important to distinguish among different historical forms of cooperation among authoritarian regimes. Whereas fascism in the 1930s “stimulated proactive international cooperation and provided a powerful impulse for diffusion,” contemporary authoritarianism has been reactive: Early twenty-first century autocrats...
have been more interested in staying in office than disseminating a rival ideological model to liberal democracy. When authoritarianism has diffused – such as Venezuela exporting a “Bolivarian” template – the impact has been regional, not global. Hence, current students of comparative democratization are not dealing with a coherent, expansive project like the assault on freedom of the interwar period. Quite the contrary. Today an autocratic paragon, such as Russia under Vladimir Putin or China under Xi Jinping, “lacks inherent appeal … concentrates on the interest of political survival, and works hard to secure its immediate perimeter against prodemocratic initiatives”.5

This article applies the framework of the introductory article to assess whether the global empirics of the recent period conform with expectations of authoritarian resurgence, or whether instead the evidence indicates that major authoritarian powers have had limited capacity to push regimes overseas towards authoritarianism. Overall, the article reaches a negative finding on the question of whether authoritarian powers have been undermining democracy abroad. Thus, the article demonstrates the value of the framework proposed by Weyland.6

Any time democracy gives way to authoritarianism there is reason for concern. Fortunately, the major recent examples of such “rollback” appear to be driven more by conventional unfavourable conditions at the domestic level, particularly low levels of economic development, than an assault by authoritarian “black knights”. This finding provides some reassurance that local actors still have tremendous agency (within their country context) at shaping national politics. It also dovetails with other contributions to this special issue. Generally, Russia, China, and other putative authoritarianism promoters have not consequentially pursued an ideological anti-democratic mission. Scholars may therefore benefit from re-focusing on states’ pragmatic aims in foreign affairs, such as economic growth and territorial security.

Before I begin the analysis, a note on measurement is warranted. I conceive the dependent variable in terms of discrete shifts from electoral democracy to electoral or hegemonic authoritarianism.7 In this respect, I focus on the phenomenon of democratic breakdown as classically understood.8 Democratic breakdown involves the interruption or abrogation of the minimum procedures for electoral democracy, including free and fair elections, fundamental civil liberties protections, and constitutional checks on the executive. Democratic breakdowns include outright power grabs, by generals and presidents, but they also encompass more subtle concentrations of power in the executive.

As shown below, my approach to democratic breakdown has advantages in clarity, replicability, and falsifiability over alternative, continuous measures. One arguable drawback is that a focus on dichotomous shifts of regimes misses more nuanced shifts in regime, such as an electoral democracy becoming less liberal or an authoritarian regime becoming more repressive. Naturally, readers who favour such treatments of democratization may make their own judgements about whether the strengths of a dichotomous approach outweigh the limitations. Here, I offer two arguments why it is appropriate and fruitful to consider authoritarianism promotion through categories, rather than continuums.

The two-fold rationale relates to the historical problem and to the contemporary scene. First, the motivating concern of the literature is a reprise of the 1930s, when fascist leaders did not simply constrain freedom in extant republics but curtailed it. The question then and now is what conditions facilitate such drastic, anti-democratic changes and ruptures. Second, it is evident that contemporary politics is replete with
hybrid regimes and gradations of authoritarianism. However, a categorical approach to regime change does not neglect potentially momentous shifts within regime types. Rather, it incorporates such gradations in proportion to their ultimate effect on the overarching problem of shifts from democracy to authoritarianism.

In the following sections, I consider both democratic breakdown and democratic continuity over a span of years, not in a single year or brief snapshot. This medium duration approach allows for qualitative shifts, changes within a regime, to accumulate into discrete changes of regime. For example, if a lurch towards illiberal democracy turns out to be the prologue to democratic breakdown, then the significance of the initial de-liberalization phase will be captured when the country crosses the threshold to electoral or hegemonic authoritarianism. Such phenomena do occur, as in Venezuela, but their frequency should not be overstated. In the bulk of countries (including the sustained democracies considered below), degrees of liberalism and levels of repression fluctuate without changing the basic form of government. In summary, the present approach speaks to theories drawn from the literature on fascism and rapid democratic breakdown while heeding shifts that may, more gradually, produce authoritarian rule.

**Putting authoritarianism promotion to the test**

Work on authoritarianism promotion and democratic rollback is diverse and expanding. The core causal thesis can be distilled as follows:

Democracy expanded worldwide in the 1980s and 1990s, before being turned back, in the 2000s, when a counter-campaign – spearheaded by Russia, China, and other non-democratic states – used international institutions, anti-liberal norms, and dirty tricks to advance authoritarian leaders and regimes.

Such a claim is novel. It assigns significant causal weight to the independent variable of foreign intervention by authoritarian regimes, a factor that has received relatively little attention compared to material and institutional variables.

Political scientists have previously discussed the role of authoritarian black knights at sabotaging specific international sanctions or counteracting Western pressure on particular countries. The implications of the latest generation of literature are broader and potentially more vexing. What is at stake is not a country or two going rogue, but dozens of countries – driven by a small number of autocratic instigators – upending the trend, with the result that authoritarianism proliferates and democracy recedes. Such an ominous scenario underlines the importance of establishing what precisely is happening on the ground and what theoretical tools best explain those developments.

The present analysis integrates the “forest” of aggregate trends worldwide with the “trees” of specific events that constitute the aggregate. Some prior studies of the subject have scanned broadly. Using cross-national datasets, they have provided a bird’s eye view that authoritarianism is (or is not) encroaching on democratization. Other works have looked at how major authoritarian powers affect countries in their spheres of influence. These works have reached conflicting answers. Several authors maintain that Russia, China, and their regional analogues (for example, Saudi Arabia or Iran in the Middle East) have promoted authoritarianism and thwarted democratization. Meanwhile, other scholars aver that these non-democratic states, like all states, have sought to promote their interests and they have not always succeeded in that pragmatic endeavour.
In keeping with the theme of this special issue, I adjudicate among conflicting theoretical claims about democratic rollback. Specifically, I ask: If the premises of authoritarianism promotion and democratic rollback were correct, what empirical developments would we observe? I then extracted four observable implications from leading studies of the subject.

The first implication concerns the state of democracy globally. Simply put, if democracy is being rolled back then the number of electoral democracies will be declining.

Observable implication 1: More electoral democracies breaking down than being established, leading to a net decline in democracies worldwide.

The second set of evidence that would support claims that authoritarianism is making unusual advances would be that non-democratic rule is taking hold in countries where prior existing theory would not have expected democracy to be vulnerable.

Observable implication 2: Democratic breakdown in unexpected places.

Third, if Moscow or Beijing is playing a pivotal role in the decline of democracy, then the hypothesized global trend should be particularly clear in the regions and countries where these authoritarian powers hold sway.

Observable implication 3: Democratic breakdown in Russian and Chinese areas of influence.

Fourth, even though a non-democratic government may rise in the shadow of a black knight, that political turn may have little to do with the stratagems of the external power. What is more important than the correlation of putative authoritarianism promoters and the rise of authoritarianism, is whether the latter actually flows from the former, by displaying the causal mechanisms proposed in the literature.

Observable implication 4: Democratic breakdown through the mechanisms of authoritarianism promotion.

These implications guided the gathering of data at the global, regional, and country level to provide one of the most integrated assessments to date of democratic rollback. The main findings are as follows:

- Democratic breakdowns have been more frequent in the 2000s than in the 1990s, but they have not produced a net decline in democracies worldwide nor anything like the “reverse waves” of democratization of the interwar period and the middle of the Cold War.
- Consistent with prior historical trends, democratic breakdowns during 2000–2015 overwhelmingly occurred in lower-income states, places where Adam Przeworski et al. forecast democracy would be unstable.10
- Democracy mostly broke down in states more economically tied to the Western democracies of the United States and the European Union than to the authoritarian powers of Russia and China.
- When democracy did break down in countries near major authoritarian powers, the process seldom followed the designs of those external actors and it rarely produced leaders favourable to them.

The next four sections report these results, beginning with the overarching issue of democratization and democratic breakdown worldwide.
Assessing democracy globally: is there a reverse wave or decline?

In Freedom House’s ominously titled report “Anxious Dictators, Wavering Democracies: Global Freedom under Pressure,” the organization reported that 2015 marked “the 10th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. The number of countries showing a decline in freedom for the year – 72 – was the largest since the 10-year slide began. Just 43 countries made gains.” These declines, though, included any downward shifts on Freedom House’s 1–7 scales for political rights and civil liberties: 72 countries became less democratic (or more authoritarian) than they were the prior year, while 43 experienced the opposite. Notably, the data did not mean that electoral democracy in 72 countries collapsed while democracy began or resumed in 43 others.

Although these patterns may run counter to expectations and hopes of many observers, they do not exhibit the kinds of crisp backward changes that characterized earlier “reverse waves” of democratization and made them so momentous, for example, Italy 1922, Brazil 1964. Clearly, a Central Asian regime like Kazakhstan, or an Arab state like Egypt, may exhibit more authoritarianism than 10 years ago. Such shifts, on a non-democratic continuum, may also seriously impair local opposition movements. They do not, however, equate to a setback for democracy around the world. The countries that do count are those where a meaningful stretch of freely elected representative government is broken by less-than-democratic rule.

In The Third Wave, Samuel Huntington gave the field a set of historical epochs that are the implicit benchmarks for evaluating contemporary patterns. He dated the first wave of democratization stretching from 1828 to 1926, the second wave spanning 1943–1962, and the third wave beginning in 1974 and continuing through the publication of his book. Each prior wave was followed by a reverse wave, in 1922–1942 and 1958–1975 respectively. Like the Freedom House electoral democracy measure, Huntington’s coding of democracy and democratic breakdown was based on a dichotomous measure, not a continuous scale. Hence, he tallied for each period how many democracies accumulated or how many fell away. In each of the reverse waves, 22 countries moved, in Huntington’s view, from democracy or semi-democracy to outright authoritarianism.

For similar analysis in the early twenty-first century, one can turn to Freedom House’s discrete data on electoral democracy. Scholars have challenged those data, mainly for over counting the number of electoral democracies. Nonetheless, the Freedom House dichotomous coding provides arguably the most comprehensive and most internally valid listing of democracies for cross-national research. They are particularly useful for the present analysis because there is no reason to expect they would be biased against the democratic rollback thesis, an idea that Freedom House’s reports have regularly advanced.

In 1990, the year before The Third Wave appeared, Freedom House counted 76 electoral democracies. The tally shot up to 108 in 1993 and then trended upward with limited period dips, through 120 in 1999 and 123 in 2005. The peak to date, 125 electoral democracies, was reached in 2014, where it remained in 2015. Figure 1 shows the trend, which, over the past 20 years, can be described as an upward slope with shallow valleys.

These data would not encourage authoritarian proselytizers hoping to disseminate anti-democratic ideas. In the years after Benito Mussolini marched on Rome in 1922, a flood of elected officials and military leaders overturned democratic governments
across Europe, Latin America, and East Asia. Even the burst of coups and “emergency rule” that went from Peru in 1962 to India in 1975 encompassed over 20 countries. The most recent decades evince nothing like that kind of anti-democratic sea change. On the contrary, democracy has expanded in the post-Cold War era (the sheer number of electoral democracies has unquestionably grown larger), albeit at a slower pace in recent years than during the early 1990s.

While the global tally of democracies shows a long-term upward trend, observers seeing a democratic rollback via authoritarian intervention may still find cause for concern. Even if authoritarianism is not encroaching tremendously on global democracy, authoritarian powers may still be foiling democracy in specific locales. To consider this scenario, I turn from data on democracies worldwide to the subset of representative governments that recently fell below the threshold of minimal procedural democracy.

**Democratic breakdown: is it happening in unexpected places?**

Democracy is not collapsing across the globe, but authoritarianism promoters may make democracy less stable than expected. During 2000–2015, Larry Diamond counts 25 democratic breakdowns. This substantial number of cases has not reduced the global number of electoral democracies for two reasons. First, these democratic breakdowns have been offset by new (or newly restored) democracies. Second, some collapsed democracies have themselves re-established democracy within a short time. For example, at some point after 2000, the countries of Nepal, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka experienced non-democratic interregnums – breakdown and multiple years below the democratic threshold. However, they were all again considered electoral democracies by 2015.
Of course, even if the events do not constitute a full-blown reverse wave, instances of democratic breakdown may still signal an authoritarian undercurrent pushed by foreign powers.

Authoritarianism promotion may make democracy more difficult to sustain than has been the case historically. Hence, the second observable implication of democratic rollback is that democracy will break down in places where one would expect it to survive. This implication turns attention from the black knights themselves to their putative targets. What types of countries are experiencing democratic breakdown? Does their profile depart from the traits of countries that went from democracy to authoritarianism in prior historical periods?

To answer these questions, I first identify the set of “democratic breakdown” cases. For replicability and transparency, I adopt a parsimonious measure that does not rely on the judgement of a lone coder. Specifically, I operationalize democratic breakdown as at least two years of electoral democracy in the Freedom House data followed by at least two non-democratic years. The two-year benchmarks reduce the likelihood of “false positives” from the miscoding of a particular country-year. In total, I identified 40 cases of democratic breakdown (in 36 countries) during 1990–2015, three-quarters of which occurred during 2000–2015. Having established the set of cases, I then compare outcomes to expectations derived from Przeworski et al.’s well-known theory of “exogenous democratization.”

Before considering the countries that are included, it is worth noting two large sets of states that fall outside this group. In 2015, Freedom House coded 194 countries. Seventy-four countries (38.1%) can be considered “enduring democracies”; during 1989–2015 they were democratic for all or all but one of their country-years. In addition, 51 countries (26.3%) were “enduring autocracies”; they were non-democratic for all or all but one of their country-years. Then there are the 36 countries (18.6%) that experienced democratic breakdown at some point, 16 of which were again electoral democracies for at least two consecutive years in 2015. Finally, 33 countries (17.0%) entered the data as non-democracies, but they established electoral democracy before 2015 and maintained it through that year. Overall, these blocs offer two lessons: During the post-Cold War period the overwhelming majority of countries have been stably democratic or robustly non-democratic. In the middle range, where fluctuations are occurring, the tides of political change appear to be producing more democracies, not more autocracies.

Where, then, has electoral democracy struggled? Do the cases fit a pattern of outside authoritarian involvement? Table 1 provides the 40 occurrences of democratic breakdown in chronological order and allows an overview of recent trends. Democracies are breaking down more frequently in recent years than in the 1990s. There were nine instances during 1991–1999 (an average of one per year), but 21 cases during 2004–2012 (an annual average of 2.33). This latter era coincides with Putin’s tenure since the start of his second presidential term (in March 2004). The disparity could suggest that young democracies are facing new challenges ever since the Russian ruler consolidated power. However, such a claim risks overlooking the historic difficulties of maintaining democracy, difficulties that persist today but appeared long before Putin and other contemporary black knights took office.

Comparativists have accumulated substantial knowledge on the relationship between national levels of wealth and the persistence of democracy. First, scholars observed an elective affinity between material and political conditions: Richer countries
tend to be more democratic; poorer countries tend to be more authoritarian. After extensive debate about whether this relationship was causal, scholars established a nuanced picture. Specifically, the Przeworski team found that no electoral democracy richer than Argentina in 1975 ($6,055/capita) broke down during the period under investigation (1950–1990). By contrast, less affluent democracies tended to collapse at an increasing rate as the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita declined. The likelihood of a transition away from democracy for countries in the $5,000–$6,000 GDP/capita bracket was 0.9%, whereas that probability for countries with less than $1,000 GDP/capita was 12.5%.

Subsequent research has largely upheld the notion that wealth sustains, but does not generate, democracy.

The economic profile of recently defunct or disrupted democracies can help establish whether apparent democratic rollback comes more from domestic circumstances rather than foreign intervention. Of course, there are many possible explanations for why democracy might be subverted in a given country. This study examines national wealth to consider Przeworski et al.’s thesis as a rival hypothesis. Subsequent work could look at other indicators. Here, GDP/capita levels allow a basic view of how much the latest breakdowns conform to historical patterns. The more they depart from the pattern found by Przeworski and co-authors, the more reason there is to believe that other phenomena – such as authoritarianism promotion – are at work. Conversely, if the data look familiar, then there is less cause to ascribe the outcomes to novel variables.

To make these assessments, I collected GDP/capita data for all 36 countries experiencing breakdown. To account for any resource curse effects, I subtracted the share of oil wealth from the GDP/capita. I also adjusted for inflation to standardize the dollar amounts to the 1985 $ purchasing power parity (PPP) used by Przeworski et al. The standardized figures allow for a dollar-to-dollar comparison with the threshold set by Argentina in 1975. Wealth among the 1990–2015 cases averaged far below that threshold: $2046.34. Only three countries experiencing democratic breakdown had non-oil GDP/capita over $6,055: Antigua and Barbuda ($8304.77 in 1992), Russia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Non-democratic years</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Non-democratic years</th>
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Note: Freedom House, author’s dataset.
Rather than pointing towards new variables, these data reinforce the explanatory power of prior theory. Half of the democratic breakdowns during the past quarter of a century occurred in countries with less than $1000 non-oil GDP/capita, the range identified by Przeworski et al. as most hazardous to democracy. In such countries, democracy has an expected lifespan of about eight years. Thus, the trend provides little cause for astonishment or historic alarm. Naturally, one may express regret that these lower-income democracies collapsed so abruptly. What would have been surprising and counterintuitive, though, is if they had beaten the odds and lasted much longer.

Even scholars who argue that democracy has been rolled back acknowledge that democratization remains interwoven with economics. “[T]here is not a single country on the African continent,” notes Diamond, “where democracy is firmly consolidated and secure – the way it is, for example, in such third-wave democracies as South Korea, Poland, and Chile.” Such regional and developmental clusters of regimes, however, are at odds with arguments that authoritarian powers are behind democratic breakdown. Were democratization driven by the interventions of foreign despots, one would expect greater diversity within Africa: democratic breakdown would touch lower-income and wealthy income countries alike. To assess whether authoritarian states are influencing regimes abroad I turn from the global picture of democratization to regional and country-level trends.

**International links: are autocracies subverting democracy where they hold sway?**

So far, the evidence collected has not supported the thesis of a *worldwide* authoritarian resurgence produced by leading autocratic states. Much of the literature in this area,

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**Figure 2.** Economic Development and Democratic Breakdown (1989–2015).

though, focuses on bilateral and regional networks of affiliation. At this level, authoritarianism promotion may have an impact that does not appear in global trends. By examining the areas where Russia, China, and other supposed black knights are expected to be most influential, the remainder of this article provides a broad test of democratic rollback.

The logical starting point on this subject is the regional organizations that Russia and China lead. Scholars consider the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as the premier autocracy clubs. The CIS core membership includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The SCO’s core membership is China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Six of these 10 countries have been non-democratic as long as the organizations have been operating. Armenia and the Kyrgyzstan experienced democratic breakdown in 2003 and 2000, while democracy in Russia is coded as ending in 2004. Moldova has been an electoral democracy since 1995.

If one expects these regional organizations to have an autocratizing effect within their communities, then that effect looks weak or non-existent. Most of the states have not experienced democratic breakdown; they have been authoritarian from the outset. The rise of authoritarianism in Armenia and Kyrgyzstan could be connected to CIS or SCO policies, but area experts have doubted such a prospect. On the flipside, Moldova has remained at least minimally democratic for two decades despite belonging to the CIS. Perhaps even more instructive than what has happened inside these groups is what has not happened outside of them: The CIS and SCO are not producing new autocracies nearby and absorbing them into their ranks. Therefore, just as democratic rollback does not appear to be happening globally, an authoritarian contagion does not seem to be spreading regionally from prominent networks of autocratic cooperation.

What about other regions? Comparativists have written about China’s interest in Africa and Putin’s foreign policy ambitions. Are democratic governments faltering in other parts of the world, which may be geographically remote from Beijing and Moscow, but nonetheless linked to them?

To answer this question I examine whether countries experiencing democratic rollback have been more tied to Russia, China, and other putative authoritarianism promoters than their peers in newly established, sustained democracies. Adapting part of Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way’s measure of “linkage,” I collected the top five commodity export destinations for the countries of breakdown during 2000–2015. “Linkage” is a measure of human and resource traffic among countries. It tends to facilitate diffusion of the “hub” state’s regime type. By contrast, governmental “leverage” over regime type can be mitigated by the “strategic value” of the target state.

In addition to examining the breakdown cases, I assembled the same data for the 33 countries that established electoral democracy during 1989–2015 and have maintained it so far. This longer time period provides a counterfactual to cases that might have gradually de-liberalized before “suddenly” experiencing democratic breakdown. In these cases no such categorical shift occurred.

Table 2 presents the results by listing the top five destination countries in order of their share of exports and putting in bold font any trade ties with a global (Russia, China) or regional (Venezuela, Saudi Arabia) authoritarian power. The final row summarizes the number of countries from each set that was “linked” to an authoritarian power by that non-democratic state placing among the top five export recipients.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recent democratic breakdowns (initial year of non-democracy)</th>
<th>Top five trading partners</th>
<th>Recent sustained democracies (initial year of democracy)</th>
<th>Top five trading partners</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan (2000)</td>
<td>CH, KZ, AE, UZ, RU (9%)</td>
<td>Benin (1991)</td>
<td>GA, EU (14%), CN (10%), IN, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central African Republic (2001, 2008)</td>
<td>EU (59%), CN (18%), AE, TD, CM</td>
<td>Bulgaria (1991)</td>
<td>EU (62%), TR, SG, CN (2%), RU (2%)</td>
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<td>Djibouti (2002)</td>
<td>ET, EU (21%), SO, BR, QA</td>
<td>Mongolia (1991)</td>
<td>CN (88%), EU (9%), RU (1%), CH, JP</td>
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<td>Nepal (2002)</td>
<td>IN, EU (11%), US (8%), CN (2%), BD</td>
<td>São Tomé and Principe (1991)</td>
<td>EU (88%), CH, CM, AO, US (1%)</td>
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<td>Armenia (2003)</td>
<td>EU (29%), RU (20%), CN (12%), CA, US (6%)</td>
<td>Albania (1992)</td>
<td>EU (77%), RS, TR, CN (3%), MK</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fiji (2003)</td>
<td>US (12%), AU, EU (9%), CN (6%), NZ</td>
<td>Guyana (1992)</td>
<td>US (27%), EU (25%), VE (10%), CA, JM</td>
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<td>Guinea-Bissau (2003, 2010)</td>
<td>IN, SG, EU (1%), PA, KP</td>
<td>Romania (1992)</td>
<td>EU (71%), TR, RU (3%), US (2%), MD</td>
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<td>Russia (2004)</td>
<td>EU (46%), CN (7%), JP, KZ, BY</td>
<td>Paraguay (1993)</td>
<td>BR, EU (15%), RU (11%), AR, CL</td>
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<td>Nigeria (2006)</td>
<td>EU (42%), IN, BR, US (9%), ZA</td>
<td>Seychelles (1993)</td>
<td>EU (41%), SA (27%), CH, HK, US (1%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solomon Islands (2006)</td>
<td>CN (56%), EU (13%), AU, PH, MY</td>
<td>Malawi (1994)</td>
<td>EU (32%), CA, ZA, US (6%), CN (6%)</td>
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<td>Thailand (2006)</td>
<td>CN (11%), US (11%), EU (10%), JP, MY</td>
<td>South Africa (1994)</td>
<td>EU (20%), CN (10%), US (7%), JP, BW</td>
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<td>Kenya (2007)</td>
<td>EU (22%), UG, TZ, US (6%), PK</td>
<td>Ukraine (1994)</td>
<td>EU (32%), RU (18%), TR, EG, CN (5%)</td>
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<td>Philippines (2007)</td>
<td>JP, US (14%), CN (13%), EU (11%), HK</td>
<td>Moldova (1995)</td>
<td>EU (53%), RU (18%), BY, UA, TR</td>
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<td>Georgia (2008)</td>
<td>EU (22%), AZ, AM, RU (10%), TR</td>
<td>Ghana (1996)</td>
<td>EU (30%), ZA, AE, CH, BF</td>
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<td>Venezuela (2008)</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>Taiwan (1996)</td>
<td>CN (27%), HK, US (11%), EU (8%), SG</td>
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<td>Honduras (2009)</td>
<td>US (46%), EU (26%), SV, GT, NI</td>
<td>Indonesia (1999)</td>
<td>JP, CN (10%), EU (10%), SG, US (9%)</td>
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<td>Madagascar (2009)</td>
<td>EU (49%), US (7%), CN (7%), KR, JP</td>
<td>Mexico (2000)</td>
<td>US (80%), EU (5%), CA, CN (2%), BR</td>
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<td>Mozambique (2009)</td>
<td>EU (38%), ZA (20%), SG, IN, CN (4%)</td>
<td>Senegal (2000)</td>
<td>ML, EU (17%), CH, AE, GN</td>
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<td>Niger (2009)</td>
<td>EU (39%), BF, NG, US (7%), CN (5%)</td>
<td>Sierra Leone (2000)</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
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<td>Sri Lanka (2010)</td>
<td>EU (31%), US (24%), IN, AE, RU (2%)</td>
<td>Comoros (2004)</td>
<td>EU (56%), SG, US (3%), MU, VN</td>
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<td>Nicaragua (2011)</td>
<td>US (48%), MX, VE (8%), EU (7%), CA</td>
<td>Tanzania (2011)</td>
<td>IN, ZA, CN (12%), EU (11%), KE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mali (2012)</td>
<td>ZA, CH, CN (8%), MY, EU (5%)</td>
<td>Tunisia (2011)</td>
<td>EU (71%), LY, CH, DZ, US (2%), BD</td>
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<td>Libya (2014)</td>
<td>EU (82%), CN (9%), US (3%), IN, EG</td>
<td>Bhutan (2012)</td>
<td>IN, BD, EU (1%), JP, NP</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Kosovo (2014)</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
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An authoritarian power is among the top five export destinations for 17 of 27 countries (63.0%).

An authoritarian power is among top five export destinations for 16 of 28 countries (57.1%).

Notably, trade links overwhelmingly lead back to the democratic powers of the United States and the European Union. Ties with Moscow and Beijing are overall modest, confined mostly to countries in their vicinity, a pattern that is consistent with the regional clustering of linkage in Levitsky and Way’s data.

Claims about authoritarian linkage and democratic collapse imply two patterns. Where democracy is collapsing, we should observe significant material dependence on foreign autocracies. Conversely, democratic countries that are dependent on such regimes will tend to experience democratic breakdown. The data support neither implication. Overall, the two sets of cases exhibit roughly equivalent economic connections to black knights. Between 63% and 57% of each group was linked to an authoritarian power. Further, the 33 linked countries split nearly down the middle: with 17 countries having breakdowns, and 16 sustaining democracy. It is noteworthy that some of the sustained democracies were also among the places most intertwined with formidable authoritarian states. Mongolia sends nearly 90% of its exports to China; Guyana and the Seychelles are significantly tied to Venezuela and Saudi Arabia.

Within this overarching non-relationship between linkage and democratic rollback, there is a slight asymmetry in Africa. Among African countries connected to China, the number of countries with democratic breakdowns (five) exceeds the number of sustained democracies (four). Is China tipping the scales towards authoritarianism? Might one reach a similar conclusion for specific countries linked to Russia? The final empirical section turns to these questions. I shift from correlations across countries to causal processes over time. This attention to mechanisms provides the final test of whether autocrats are foiling democracy.

**Mechanisms of diffusion: are new authoritarian leaders following a foreign script?**

Earlier sections on this article provided global and national-level snapshots of international linkages and domestic conditions. However, the shift from minimal democracy to something less free can take many forms. Hence, it is necessary to look more closely at the most pertinent cases: Did the process in specific countries actually conform to the causal narratives of authoritarianism promotion and democratic rollback?

Scholars have proposed several mechanisms through which authoritarian powers steer regimes away from democratic rule. For example, Nicole Jackson contends Moscow promotes authoritarianism in Central Asia through anti-democratic norms, regional organizations, calibrated military force, and economic and cultural exchanges. Jakob Tolstrup, also looking at Russia’s policies, argues foreign autocrats interfere by bolstering the performance of their preferred candidates in contested elections. Addressing China’s role in Africa, Christine Hackenesch assesses, and ultimately rejects, claims that “substantial volumes of aid, loans, trade and direct investments [from Beijing] to African countries” have counteracted Western efforts at democracy promotion.

Joining this research, I examine the actors and events in a subset of the countries where electoral democracy foundered. From the list of democratic breakdowns, I selected countries that were economically tied to Russia, China, or another major authoritarian patron, that experienced breakdown during 2000–2015 (the putative era of rollback), and that could plausibly have been affected by one of the major political, ideological, or material mechanisms described in prior scholarship. These criteria
pointed to eight countries as likely targets of authoritarianism promotion: two in Russia’s “Near Abroad” (Armenia, Georgia), one in Venezuela’s vicinity (Nicaragua), and five on the African continent with trade connections to China (Central African Republic, Madagascar, Mozambique, Mali, Libya).

While all eight cases shifted from democracy to non-democracy (Central African Republic shifted twice), the changes followed three different paths. The most common route was for an incumbent who had previously been democratically elected to amass advantages over the opposition that abrogated democratic procedural standards (Armenia, Georgia, Nicaragua, Central African Republic, Mozambique). The second most frequent way democracy broke down was through military coup, in which a uniformed figure passed power to an unelected civilian leader (Madagascar) or ruled directly for some period (Mali). Finally, in one instance (Libya) a civil war shifted power from the elected national government to sub-national militias. Table 3 summarizes the cases.

Among many possible channels for gaining authoritarian power, elections are particularly amenable to foreign involvement. The cases identified here, however, show little evidence that foreign autocracies tilted the electoral balance away from democracy. In Georgia, the incumbent, Mikheil Saakashvili, was a staunch critic of Russia and he undermined democracy while Putin was stoking separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Ironically, when Georgians peacefully replaced Saakashvili in 2013 with a mildly pro-Russian successor, that turnover enabled the country to restore electoral democracy. Next door in Armenia, democratic breakdown fit the ambitions of a Moscow favourite: Robert Kocharyan. But Kocharyan’s tenure predated Putin’s and he trounced his challenger without needing guidance or aid from the Kremlin. As Way writes: “While Russian-supported incumbents have consistently won presidential elections since the 1990s, Russia did not play a particularly visible role in these elections … (1996, 1998, 2003, 2008, 2013).” Instead, domestic variables determined the outcomes: “incumbents were bolstered by a strong coercive apparatus that easily suppressed opposition protest”.

### Table 3. Potential black knights and recent democratic breakdowns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential black knight</th>
<th>Country (year of breakdown)</th>
<th>Ruler in non-democratic period (nature of breakdown)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Libya (2014)</td>
<td>No single national authority (civil war)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A largely domestic story can also be found in the African cases of incumbent-led autocratization. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, power in the Central African Republic swung between two men who presided over the rise and fall of democratic institutions. President Ange-Félix Patassé came to office democratically in Africa’s wave of “democratic experiments” but then assumed autocratic powers during his second term. General Francois Bozizé then overthrew Patassé in a military coup before reprising the pattern: democratically-vested presidential tenure capped by autocratic overreach. Although the Central African Republic is economically tied to China, Beijing was not implicated in the feud between Patassé and Bozizé. Indeed the roller coaster of change between the two ill-fated presidents was antithetical to the preference for stability said to guide Chinese foreign policy. Hence, the process and outcome do not support the idea that democracy was unseated by a black knight.

In Mozambique, candidates from the ruling Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) have dominated elections since the country won independence in 1975. During the 1990s, however, multiple parties contested elections, outcomes evinced substantial uncertainty, and scholars viewed Mozambique as an electoral democracy. The decline of pluralism under President Armando Guebuza meant that Mozambique regressed into a form of competitive authoritarianism. Such a shift was consistent with aspects of China’s involvement in Africa described by Julia Bader and her collaborators. Specifically, Mozambique remained politically stable under Guebuza and his successor, also a FRELIMO standard-bearer. Further, as a party state – not a junta or personalist regime – Mozambique displayed the kind of government system that economic cooperation with China tends to reinforce. Much like Kocharyan in Armenia, however, Guebuza ran for re-election with structural advantages over the opposition, advantages that arose not from foreign machinations but a long history of domestic organizing and state control. One can surmise, therefore, that single-party hegemony may have been consistent with Chinese aims, but not caused by Chinese interference.

Among recent cases of incumbent-led autocratization, Nicaragua under President Daniel Ortega shows the greatest signs of foreign involvement scuppering electoral democracy. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez openly supported Ortega as the Nicaraguan leader weakened the rule of law and strengthened his own authority. Before the 2011 presidential, Ortega, the previously term-limited incumbent, manipulated the judiciary to set aside term limits and allow a blatantly unconstitutional bid for extended power. Chavez abetted these manoeuvres. Ortega was able to bolster the Nicaraguan economy through a kickback scheme with Caracas that repatriated half of Managua’s oil payments as “low interest, long-term loans”. With these resources Ortega steamrolled opposition television stations, funded social programmes, and kept energy prices artificially low. In light of Nicaragua’s extended history with electoral democracy from 1990 until Ortega’s presidency, it is reasonable to suspect that Chavez’s backing helped Ortega entrench himself in 2011 for years to come.

In the remaining three cases, all potential targets of China, there is considerably less evidence that one of the leading authoritarian states helped non-democratic leaders advance. In Madagascar in 2009, forces loyal to President Marc Ravalomanana (who won his first five-year term in a disputed but internationally validated election in 2002) violently confronted supporters of Andry Rajoelina, who then served as mayor of Madagascar’s capital and had slammed Ravalomanana for corruption. The crisis gripped the country and ended in a bloodless coup in which Ravalomanana ceded
authority to military officers who promptly installed Rajoelina. In these brawls over executive power, Beijing appeared to favour the last man standing, regardless of the circumstances of that person’s victory. China had recognized Ravalomanana when he bested the prior incumbent in 2002. Once Rajoelina was installed, the Chinese government dealt just as easily with him, expanding its involvement in mining in Madagascar, a source of state revenue that benefited the Rajoelina administration.

Turning to Mali, the country’s northern region fell into internal war in 2012, as Tuareg rebels armed themselves with weapons spilling over from Libya. In response, Captain Amadou Sanogo toppled democratically elected President Amadou Toumani Touré. The coup curtailed one of the world’s least wealthy electoral democracies – but Beijing had little to do with the downturn in Bamako. Indeed, Mali’s plunge into authoritarianism and instability ran counter to China’s established interests in trade and investment. Finally, Libya’s flimsy electoral democracy collapsed completely when militias broke the country into fiefdoms. Chinese leaders neither produced nor celebrated this outcome, which fit a regional pattern of political disarray.

These concise case studies shed light on country-level processes that lie beneath global shifts in electoral democracy. The evidence that democratic breakdown was directed by foreign authoritarian powers is limited. The strongest argument for a black knight promoting authoritarianism can be made in Nicaragua, where Venezuela favoured the incumbent Ortega as he warped institutions to prolong his presidency. Elsewhere, leaders primarily grasped power through domestic manoeuvres. This finding reinforces the lesson of prior sections: Where authoritarianism has recently taken hold, it has mainly emerged from home-grown schemes not foreign conspiracies.

Conclusion

Twenty years ago, scholars and practitioners working on democratization could look back on a decade of phenomenal gains. Recent trends are less miraculous. Nonetheless, they may also be less discouraging than often described. Democratic governments continue to arise, even in a purported age of authoritarian resurgence, and the number of electoral democracies reached a record high in 2014. Most importantly, the structural impediments to democracy may be more and more tractable than some discussions suggest.

If authoritarian powers were reversing democratization nearby and far away, then proponents of democratic change would face a stiff new challenge. All the well-known material and institutional difficulties of establishing democracy in the developing world would be exacerbated by foreign mischief. This article has examined that scenario and reached a largely negative finding on the question of authoritarianism promotion – a finding that reinforces the analytical theme of this special issue. Democracies have faltered, but their stumbles have little to do with autocratic intervention. The overwhelming majority of cases fall well below the established economic threshold for sustained democracy. Furthermore, their international ties and domestic tumult evince few signs that outside powers engineered anti-democratic regime changes. In this respect, local actors remain “in the driver’s seat”.

These lessons support the overarching contribution of this special issue. The weak if not absent impact of China and Russia suggests that even potent autocracies are highly pragmatic. To reformulate the words of John Quincy Adams: They do not go abroad in search of monsters to employ. In the cases considered here, outside of Venezuela, the authoritarian states exuded no missionary impulse. In this respect, their foreign policies
are not simply the mirror image of “democracy promotion”. Viewing the world through the lens of their own power, leaders in Beijing and Russia (perhaps not unlike their counterparts in Washington and Brussels) may be less concerned about general regime types and more interested in the specific policies and leaders (democratically chosen or not) that will benefit their countries.

Notes

1. A touchstone is Larry Diamond’s 2008 Foreign Affairs article, “The Democratic Rollback,” which anchors the burgeoning scholarship on authoritarian cooperation and has over 300 Google Scholar citations to date. See also Gat, “The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers”; Cooley, “The League of Authoritarian Gentlemen”; Vanderhill, Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad.

2. See the essays collected in Diamond, Plattner, and Walker, Authoritarianism Goes Global.

3. See Foa and Mounk, “The Democratic Disconnect,” and their other work.


5. Weyland, “Autocratic Diffusion and Cooperation,” See also Babayan, “The Return of the Empire?”


10. Przeworski et al., Democracy and Development.


17. Przeworski and Limongi, “Modernization”; Przeworski et al., Democracy and Development.


21. The most prominent critics do not dispute that wealth stabilizes democracy. They contend, in addition, that wealth helps produce democracy. See, for example, Boix and Stokes, “Endogenous Democratization.”

22. Ross, The Oil Curse.

23. Even these outliers, which highlight the sizeable set of theory-conforming cases, would not be considered dispositive for Przeworski et al. The authors exclude microstates and they backdate non-democratic periods when no turnover occurs.
26. Although Russia is formally considered a democracy through 2004, the entirety of Putin’s tenure has been the relevant period for analysis of possible authoritarianism promotion by the Kremlin. For the complexities of Russian influence in its near abroad, see Delcour and Wolczuk, “Spoiler or Facilitator of Democratization?”; Tolstrup, “Studying a Negative External Actor.”
29. Levitsky and Way, Competitive Authoritarianism. Extending the data back to 1989 does not alter the findings.
30. Levitsky and Way, Competitive Authoritarianism; cf., Brownlee, Democracy Prevention; Hassan, “Undermining the Transatlantic Democracy Agenda?”
31. The difference is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level.
32. Among this subset, breakdowns occurred in the Gambia, Zambia, Niger, Congo (Brazzaville), Central African Republic, Madagascar, Mozambique, Mali, and Libya, while democracy was established and maintained in Benin, Malawi, South Africa, and Tanzania.
33. Jackson, “The Role of External Factors in Advancing Non-Democratic Forms of Political Rule.”
34. Tolstrup, “Black Knights and Elections in Authoritarian Regimes.”
35. Hackenesch, “Not as Bad as It Seems.”
36. Bunce and Wolchik, Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries.
38. Ibid., 698.
40. Bader, Gravingholt, and Kastner, “Would Autocracies Promote Autocracy?”
42. Bader, Gravingholt, and Kastner, “Would Autocracy Promote Autocracy?”
43. Bader, “Propping Up Dictators?”
44. The Economist, “Nicaragua’s Presidential Election.”
46. J. C., “A Coup in Mali”; J. C., “Mali’s Coup.”
47. Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds, The Arab Spring.
48. Freyburg and Richter, “Local Actors in the Driver’s Seat.”
49. See also Tansey, “The Problem with Autocracy Promotion”; Börzel, “The Noble West and the Dirty Rest?”
50. See Obydenkova and Lipman, “Understanding the Foreign Policy of Autocratic Actors”; Von Soest, “Democracy Prevention.”

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Notes on contributor

Jason Brownlee is a professor of Government and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, where he researches and teaches about authoritarianism and foreign military intervention. His major publications include two books with Cambridge University Press, the co-authored Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform (Oxford University Press), and articles in the American Journal of Political Science, World Politics, and the Journal of Democracy.

Bibliography


