

MODEL

Facing the Challenge of Semi-Authoritarian States

MARINA OTTAWAY

The last decade of the 20th century saw the rise of a great number of regimes that cannot be easily classified as either authoritarian or democratic but display some characteristics of both—in short, they are *semi-authoritarian*. They are ambiguous systems that combine rhetorical acceptance of liberal democracy, the existence of some formal democratic institutions, and respect for a limited sphere of civil and political liberties with essentially illiberal or even authoritarian traits. That ambiguous character, furthermore, is deliberate. Semi-authoritarian systems are not imperfect democracies struggling toward improvement and consolidation but regimes determined to maintain the appearance of democracy without exposing themselves to the political risks that free competition entails.

APPEARANCE OF DEMOCRACY

CIVIL SOCIETY
yes, but
power remains

AAAS
Africa
not AAAS

Political hybrids, semi-authoritarian regimes allow little real competition for power, thus reducing government accountability. However, they leave enough political space for political parties and organizations of civil society to form, for an independent press to function to some extent, and for some political debate to take place. Such regimes abound in the Soviet successor states: In countries like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, for example, former Communist Party bosses have transformed themselves into elected presidents, but in reality remain strongmen whose power is barely checked by weak democratic institutions.

Semi-authoritarian regimes are also numerous in sub-Saharan Africa, where most of the multiparty elections of the 1990s failed to produce working parliaments or other institutions capable of holding the executive even remotely accountable. In the Arab world, tentative political openings in Algeria, Morocco, and Yemen appear to be leading to the modernization of semi-authoritarianism rather than to democracy, in keeping with a pattern first established by Egypt. In the Balkans, the Communist regimes have disappeared, but despite much international support most governments are semi-authoritarian, with only Slovenia and—more recently and tentatively—Croatia moving toward democracy.

Even more worrisome is the case of Latin America, where economic crises and sharply unequal distribution of income create the risk of popular disenchantment with incumbent democratic governments, and even with democratic institutions.

Already in two countries, first Peru and then Venezuela, steady progress toward democracy has been interrupted by the emergence of semi-authoritarian regimes. In Asia, formal democratic processes are accompanied by strong authoritarian features in countries such as Pakistan, Singapore, and Malaysia, putting them in the realm of semi-authoritarianism.

WE HEARD ABOUT

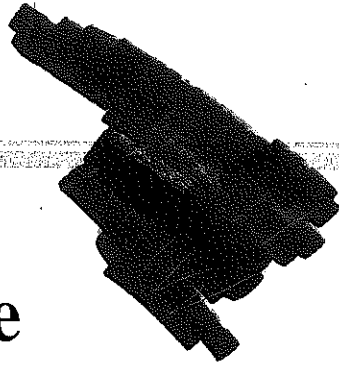
Semi-authoritarianism is not a new phenomenon—many past regimes have paid lip service to democracy while frequently violating its basic tenets. But the number of such regimes was limited because until the end of the cold war many governments, often supported by their countries' leading intellectuals, rejected liberal democracy outright. They did so in the name of people's democracy (that is, socialism), or in the name of communal cultural traditions that precluded the egoistic individualism on which, they claimed, liberal democracy is based. Since the end of the cold war, few governments and even fewer intellectuals are willing to mount an ideological defense of nondemocratic systems of government; most feel they have to at least pretend adherence to the concept of democracy. On the other hand, the number of governments willing to accept the strict limitations on the extent and duration of their power imposed by democratic rule remains small. As a result, semi-authoritarian regimes have become more numerous.

GOVERNMENTS
POST-COLD WAR
WHY?

The number of such regimes is likely to increase even further. In many countries that have experienced a political transition since the early 1990s, unfavorable conditions—including weak democratic institutions and political organizations, persistent authoritarian traditions, major socioeconomic problems, and ethnic and religious conflicts—create formidable obstacles to the establishment and, above all, the consolidation of democracy. Nevertheless, citizens everywhere have shown their disillusionment with authoritarian regimes, and a widespread return to the unabashedly top-down forms of government so common in the past is improbable. These conditions, unfavorable to both genuine democracy and overt authoritarianism, further enhance the prospects for the spread of semi-authoritarianism.

With their combination of positive and negative traits, semi-authoritarian regimes pose a considerable challenge to U.S. policy makers. Such regimes often represent a significant improvement over their predecessors or appear to provide a

WHERE HAVE WE HEARD THAT?



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semi-authoritarian regimes has interrupted democracy's progress

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author + dest.

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Semi-author are problems for policy makers

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Mix between demo. + auth.

Global

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sets up civil societies
 lifts prog → saved war
 Leaders not accountable

More common Post-Cold War
 Weak gov. + bad econ → semi-auth

Can be caused by econ. instability ²⁶