

Violently Repressive Authoritarian Regimes and Legitimacy

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The concept of political legitimacy is frequently considered within the study of Political Science. However, the term is still indistinct. Definitions have ranged from Weber's view of legitimacy as a process in a superior framework[1], to Neo-Marxist ideas that a legitimate system must be defensible in terms of equality, fairness, justice, and freedom[2]; and to the idea that an institution is legitimate if those in the system believe that said institution should be obeyed[3]. Following from these and many other definitions, it is often believed that only democratic systems can be considered legitimate and many definitions contain democratic ideals such as public participation, human rights, and equal say.[4] However, these are largely Western concepts directly related to democracy which could bias results when considering levels of legitimacy in other types of political systems.

Additionally, definitions of legitimacy that do not take into account public opinion will also be inadequate. Proponents of these approaches, adhere to the idea that public opinion is not essential for determining legitimacy.[5] Indeed, Buchanan states that "consent is not necessary for political legitimacy" as the fact that consent to rule has been given does not confirm that someone is obligated to comply with a government's demands.[6] However, while consent to rule does not always necessitate compliance, it makes it more likely that citizens will feel obliged to obey. In addition, it is unlikely that any state could exist with high levels of legitimacy if much of its population does not believe that it should be allowed to rule.

This paper will thus use a broad and bottom-up definition of legitimacy which emphasizes the reciprocal pathways that allow institutions to shape public orientations and takes into consideration how public opinion influences the operation of institutional process[7]. Additionally, this paper will make the important distinction between "governments" and "states" where states are "persisting structures of institutions for the wielding of political power." [8] Governments on the other hand, are the occupants of the roles that exercise power.[9] Regardless, a state or government will be defined as legitimate if its citizens believe that it rightfully holds power to exert influence and demand compliance.[10] For this definition, "rightfully" is subjective and is a relational concept between a citizen and a political institution which can be derived from a number of sources.[11] In this sense, "rightfully holding power" is not restricted to democratic norms or ideals such as equality, justice, and democratic accountability. Therefore, it can be said that any government, even a violently repressive authoritarian one, can be legitimate given that its people believe it to be so. In pursuit of this claim, this paper will first elucidate the nuances of legitimacy both domestically and internationally. Following this, it will elaborate upon the idea that democracy does not equal legitimacy. Finally, it will explore how political systems could affect the legitimacy of an institution which has led to the belief that violently repressive authoritarian regimes cannot be considered legitimate.

Domestic Support and International Legitimacy

Support for political institutions often exists on multiple levels all intrinsically linked to legitimacy as defined above. These include the government, the state, nationally, internationally, and ideologically. While for some authoritarian regimes (when compared to democratic ones) institutional structures render some of the above levels more difficult to

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differentiate, it is still useful to distinguish between them when considering the legitimacy of the institution as they can provide valuable information about the institution's status with its people.

Domestically, it has been useful, due to the separation of the state and the government, to differentiate between two types of support as derived by Easton: diffuse and specific. [12] In this model, diffuse support is that of the state where citizens make evaluations with respect to fundamental norms, values, and institutions of the system.[13] In this sense, diffuse support is often considered a measure of the legitimacy of the political institution[14], as Easton himself proposed, and is stable over time.[15] On the other hand, specific support is that of the government and is related to "what the political authorities do and how they do it" and often fluctuates.[16] This model allows for a better understanding of institutional support and legitimacy as a whole. For democracies, it considers and explains the possibility that while governments may not enjoy public support or high public opinion, many of their citizens do not consider them illegitimate or try to effect change outside the established mechanisms of the political system.

Notwithstanding this, for authoritarian political systems, where the distinction between government and state is largely nonexistent, this model also has some merit. Although a separate state apparatus rarely exists apart from the government or ruling regime, distinctions can be made between regime values and political output in approximately the same way as state and government were separated in the above model. Chen (2004) innovatively applied this method to China where he found that despite lower levels of specific support for the incumbent authorities, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government enjoys high levels of diffuse support, which is closely related to the national government, for overall institutions, values, and norms.[17] This claim is far from unique and it has been found that the CCP and the central government have enjoyed the support of over seventy per cent of its citizens since 1990.[18] While low specific support can reduce diffuse support over a long period of time,[19] situations where low specific support and high diffuse support occur simultaneously frequently arise in democratic societies as well as authoritarian ones. Furthermore, these situations rarely affect the legitimacy and maintenance of a state without a change in diffuse support. In democratic societies, where this situation is understood to mean legitimacy, the fact that similar trends also occur in authoritarian systems, as seen above, challenges the belief that only democracy can herald legitimacy and lends support to the claim that while authoritarian and democratic political systems differ, they can share similar legitimating trends.

While domestically the dynamics between specific and diffuse support can produce valuable insights into institutional legitimacy, it is also important to consider the influence of internal and external forces. The world is full of non-democratic countries that are recognized and included within the international system as well as ones that are excluded. Additionally, powerful states such as the United States often recognize one regime, often ruthless and non-democratic, over another for various reasons.[20] However, while international legitimacy could be considered a product of international recognition, it is not enough to determine the legitimacy of a national institution.

Currently, Afghanistan, with an imposed semi-democratic political system holds a seat in the United Nations and is considered a legitimate government by the United States. However, the Afghan government currently has far less internal support than the People's Republic of China during the 1950s and 1960s when the Republic of China, without control or influence over the majority of the Chinese people, held the UN seat. Throughout history, these imposed or recognized regimes have both failed (as in the case of the ROC on the mainland and South Vietnam) and succeeded (as in the case of Japan). Looking at history, it is therefore important to consider significantly more than top-down factors for the creation of legitimacy. While these factors may be important, bottom-up aspects are more so in the preservation of legitimacy. This can be seen by the continuance of the PRC government.

Likelihood of Regime Legitimacy

Using this paper's working definition of legitimacy, any political institution—democratic or authoritarian; benevolent or violently repressive—can be legitimate. However, it is often assumed that only democratic governments can be so. This is not necessarily the case as can be seen in the Afghanistan example above. Additionally, the idea that democracy equals legitimacy does little to explain why this is the case without reverting to Western-centered

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definitions and ideas. From these definitions, assumptions about the cause of legitimacy resting in the political system are unfounded. Looking at the PRC and the US, where both countries have powerful and stable governments, differences in the effectiveness of government to make laws which are obeyed and to gain revenue are small and most likely favor the authoritarian PRC. It is therefore difficult to say that the US is more legitimate than the PRC without invoking Western values. However, while it cannot be said that a country is illegitimate solely because it has an authoritarian political system, having one type of system over another may increase the likelihood that a political institution will be illegitimate or have less stable legitimacy. This is likely linked to the implementation of good governance and political output which has been shown to be the most important aspect in citizens' judgments of support.[21] These factors will be discussed below.

First, respect for human rights, especially personal integrity rights, are likely to influence support for political institutions. Due to the nature of many authoritarian regimes, oftentimes stemming from the desire to maintain power, respect for human rights is often greatly reduced.[22] This reduces the perception of good governance as well as possibly alienating much of the population and reducing specific support and thus diffuse support over time. This is particularly true for more violently repressive regimes. However, it is important to remember that the lack of support is likely more directly linked to treatment of citizens by the regime rather than the lack of a democratic political system. Thus, while the "most violently repressive authoritarian regime" cannot be considered illegitimate because it is non-democratic or simply because it is a "violently repressive authoritarian regime," it is *less likely* to be legitimate because these regimes will often lack the *support of the people*. However support can be maintained even for the most violently repressive regime by effective propaganda, economic gain, or idolatry. Those regimes managing to maintain this support can still be considered legitimate.

A second factor influencing the likelihood of political institution legitimacy in favor of democracies and away from violently repressive authoritarian regimes might be corruption[23] which is often at high levels in authoritarian regimes due to a lack of accountability and large bureaucracies. The increased corruption will often have a negative effect on the perception of good governance again reducing the specific support for the regime which could lead to reduced diffuse support over time. If corruption is rampant and at a level at which personal integrity rights are violated, support would likely diminish more quickly. In this sense, corruption levels might affect ruthless regimes' legitimacy more strongly.

Despite the factors presented above concerning the likelihood of legitimacy in democratic and authoritarian political systems, it is also important to consider the ability of an institution to create its own legitimating tactics. Among these tactics is economic growth and stability which has been shown to influence legitimacy.[24] However, economic growth is often out of a government's or state's control and is largely dependent upon the world market. The idea that political institutions can at least partially determine legitimating methods must also be considered. A good example of this phenomenon would be the PRC. While it is often believed that the CCP legitimates itself solely by economic growth, this belief has been challenged by China scholars and it has been proposed that top officials will often determine and disseminate legitimating discourses.[25] In China, this has recently meant the overwhelming emergence of nationalism fueled by ethnocentrism where the CCP serves as the vanguard of Chinese people and culture.[26] This has allowed the CCP to maintain high levels of diffuse support despite personal integrity rights violations and a high level of corruption proving that legitimation can be consciously manipulated.

While the issues presented above may increase the likelihood that a "violently repressive authoritarian regime" would be considered illegitimate, the type of political regime can also have an effect on the stability and maintenance of this legitimacy. For democracies, the separation between the state structure and the government in power offers a buffer for the maintenance of stability and legitimacy. Democracies, by their very nature, have mechanisms for political change built into the system—elections. In this sense, citizens unsupportive of the government can change it through state mechanisms without large disruptions such as a civil war or a coup which aim to overthrow the state and often the political system. Authoritarian systems on the other hand do not enjoy this buffer. While regimes such as the CCP have managed to create a separation between local governments and the center in order to maintain overall support for the CCP-led state in a similar way to specific and diffuse support, if overall support for the CCP were to diminish, instability would likely result. This is the case for many authoritarian regimes where the legitimacy of the state is derived from the existence of the regime rather than vice versa. Thus political change is difficult to enact and often

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involves much instability. While this may not necessarily affect the legitimacy of a political institution directly, the maintenance of institutional legitimacy stability over time would be affected and might lead to the perception that democracies have more support and are more legitimate than authoritarian regimes.

Conclusion

Political legitimacy is an often used phrase in the study of Political Science and many believe that only democratic political systems can be legitimate. This paper has posed that this is not the case as legitimacy, while existing on many levels, must ultimately be derived from the support and beliefs of the people. Although tendencies of certain political systems can have an influence on the *likelihood* that an institution will be considered legitimate by its people, it cannot be said that an institution is legitimate or not only by looking at its political system or by using definitions which bias towards Western institutions of democracy. Therefore, as legitimacy is derived from the people, even the most violently repressive authoritarian regimes can be legitimate provided that its people regard it as such.

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[1] Thomas M. Franck, *The Power of Legitimacy among Nations* (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 17.

[2] Franck, *The Power of Legitimacy among Nations*, p. 18.

[3] Ian Hurd, 'Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics', *International Organization*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Spring 1999), 379-408, p. 381.

[4] For a good overview of this argument, see Bo Rothstein, 'Creating Political Legitimacy: Electoral Democracy Versus Quality of Government', *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (2009), 311-330, p. 314-318.

[5] Stephen Weatherford, 'Measuring Political Legitimacy', *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (1992), 149-166, p. 150.

[6] Allen Buchanan, 'Political Legitimacy and Democracy', *Ethics*, Vol. 112, No. 4 (2002), 689-719, p. 702.

[7] Weatherford, 'Measuring Political Legitimacy', pp. 151.

[8] Buchanan, 'Political Legitimacy and Democracy', pp. 691.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Derived from Bruce Gilley, 'The Determinants of State Legitimacy: Results for 72 Countries', *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2006), 47-71, p. 48.

[11] Hurd, 'Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics', pp. 381.

[12] David Easton, 'A re-assessment of the Concept of Political Support', *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 5, No., 4 (1975), 435-457, p. 437.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Easton, 'A re-assessment of the Concept of Political Support', pp. 450-51.

[15] John James Kennedy, 'Maintaining Popular Support for the Chinese communist Party: The Influence of Education and the State-Controlled Media', *Political Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (2009), 517-536, p. 522.

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[16] *Ibid.*

[17] Jie Chen, *Popular Political Support in Urban China* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004), p. 51.

[18] Kennedy, 'Maintaining Popular Support for the Chinese Communist Party', pp. 517.

[19] Chen, *Popular Political Support in Urban China*, p. 10.

[20] Examples of this include Brazil's military authoritarian regime in 1964; Chile's military regime in 1973; and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in 1963.

[21] Gilley, 'The Determinants of State Legitimacy', pp. 58.

[22] Todd Landman, *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics 3rd Edition* (Routledge, 2008), p. 245.

[23] Gilley, 'The Determinants of State Legitimacy', pp. 57.

[24] Gilley, 'The Determinants of State legitimacy', pp. 57.

[25] Vivienne Shue, 'Global Imaginings, the State's Quest for Hegemony, and the Pursuit of Phantom Freedom in China: From Heshang to Falun Gong', in Catarina Kinnvall and Kristina Jonsson, eds., *Globalization and Democratization in Asia: The Construction of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 210-229.

[26] For a surprising and interesting discussion on the extent of Chinese ethno-nationalism, see Barry Sautman, 'Peking Man and the Politics of Paleoanthropological Nationalism in China', *Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 60, No. 1 (Feb. 2001), pp. 95-124.

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