Women's Welfare under Authoritarian Regimes: Consequences for Southeast Asia

Abstract

A resurgence of authoritarianism is emerging across Southeast Asia. In recent years, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines have drawn the world's ire for human rights abuses, oppressive governance tactics and for strangling a free press. However, on account of women's rights, they appear to do well. In this essay, I investigate three key questions – One, what are the incentives that drive authoritarian regimes to advance women's rights? Two, does advancing women's rights lead to improved women's welfare? Three, what will the resurgence of authoritarianism in Southeast Asia mean for women's welfare? I find that there is a positive causality between party-based authoritarian regimes and women's rights, but advancing women's rights alone, does not lead to improved women's welfare. I conclude that the rise of authoritarianism in Southeast Asia is likely to increase pro-women policies but is not likely to lead to a consequential improvement in women's welfare.

"At least 40% of the world's women live in authoritarian regimes" and "approximately 25% of present-day autocracies perform as well or better on respect for women's rights than the average developing democracy" (Donno and Kreft, 720). Women's rights are economic and political rights, but also civil, cultural and social rights. To exercise these rights, women must have access to equal participation in society, without discrimination. To ensure that women and men enjoy their constitutional rights equally requires "a comprehensive understanding of social structures, social norms and stereotyping, and power relations that frame not only laws and politics, but also the economy, social dynamics, family life and community life" ("Women's Rights"). Women's welfare in a state depends on a state's capacity to "reform discriminatory laws and policies"; "transform discriminatory social norms"; "eliminate gender-based violence"; "guarantee sexual and reproductive health rights" and "protect and expand civil space for women" ("Women's Rights"). In this essay, I observe evidence to establish the causality between authoritarian regimes and women's welfare, and respond to three key questions: One, what are the incentives that drive authoritarian regimes to advance women's rights? Two, does advancing women's rights lead to improved women's welfare in authoritarian states? Three, what will the resurgence of authoritarianism in Southeast Asia mean for women's welfare? I conclude this essay by determining if the causality between

authoritarian regimes and women's rights is positive or negative, and what this means for women's welfare, particularly in Southeast Asia.

Positioning women's rights as a priority, is a strategic tool for political survival among authoritarian regimes. Previous research undertaken in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, reveals that "women's rights are used both instrumentally and symbolically to advance the political goals of authoritarian regimes" (Tripp). In the context of Turkey, Arat finds that "governing elites had different needs at different political stages and instrumentalized women's rights to meet those needs" (1). He further points out that democratic backsliding regimes in particular, "manipulate women's rights and the discourse of women's rights in the process of this transformation" (Arat 1). In Uganda, Tripp explains how the ruling party's support for women has translated to women becoming "the staunchest supporters of the NRM" – the National Resistance Movement ("Museveni's Uganda" 106). There are several incentives that drive autocracies to advance women's rights – "advancing women's rights is less politically costly than providing coordination goods such as civil liberties, speech rights or clean elections, which can pose a direct threat to the regime's survival" (Bueno de Mesquita). "Allowing freedom of the press and ensuring civil liberties in particular, reduce the chances that an autocratic government will survive for another year, by about 15 to 20 percent" (Bueno de Mesquita).

In autocratic regimes, "different forms of rights provisions serve different ends" and women's rights in particular serve as a coalition building tool that institutionalized party-based regimes can employ most effectively (Donno and Kreft 722). Party-based regimes, wherein the parties are governed by a set of institutional rules by which to distribute power and patronage within the party, "have mechanisms that can make women's representation, consultation and mobilization more readily available" (Donno and Kreft 721). Such party-based regimes also enjoy stronger coalition support and "extensive linkages to society" where women empowerment becomes a part of a strategic plan "to signal modernity, encourage economic growth and bolster its popular support" (qtd in Donno and Kreft 721). Autocrats have a great degree of agility and flexibility in shaping institutions and political events to their advantage and engage in strategic coordination – "refers to the set of activities that people must engage in to win political power in a given situation – including disseminating information, recruiting and organizing opposition members, choosing leaders and developing a viable strategy to increase the group's power and to influence policy" (Bueno de Mesquita). Using rational choice theory, Valdini argues that it is to strengthen their own hold on power that male elites, include women in politics. Authoritarian regimes benefit from women's organizations as they

become a means for autocrats to co-opt women and draw on their political support when needed (Arat 6). Caprioli and Melander find that "higher degrees of gender equality are demonstrably associated with a decreased risk of internal armed conflict" (161-178; 695-714). Furthermore a positive association has been observed between "the security of women within states and the security of the states" (qtd in Dunno and Kreft 724). The act of extending increased political representation to women is enacted in regime-compatible ways by authoritarian regimes, and does not necessitate increased political openness (Bush and Ottaway). Infact, "investing in women's rights can have a stabilizing effect for authoritarian regimes" as compared to "other available modernizing options like electoral reforms" (Dunno and Kreft 724).

Arat takes a relatively different view of studying the relationship between regime type and gender. He argues that previous literature takes a static view of both regimes and gender rights whereas he observes this as a dynamic process wherein "the governing regime's interests in appropriating women's rights" continues to evolve as the regime types transition from weak liberal democracies to different authoritarian regime types (4). Regimes continue to use women's rights to serve their changing goals, and there is "an affinity between political regime change and gender regime change" (Arat 4). According to Tripp, secular authoritarian political elites in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia strategically leverage women's rights "to counter extremist Islamist regimes and present a modernizing image of their country abroad – although they change their position once in power" (24).

Additionally, adherence to gender equality norms also earns the state the approval of the international community, and the goodwill of international organizations that further influences the flow of foreign aid into the state. Svedberg finds that "international organizations that surveil democratic rights can be more lenient on dictatorships that improve women's rights". Donno et al. further explain that "dictatorships can signal adherence to international norms by demonstrating progress on gender equality, often in a manner that is consistent with the perpetuation of authoritarian rule" (1). It has also been observed that authoritarian regimes often adopt feminist policies without necessarily implementing them" only to gain international legitimacy (Adams 76-97).

Previous literature indicates that authoritarian regimes with institutionalized parties and legislatures are able to provide public goods more effectively, and women's rights fall into a category of global public goods, that would allow authoritarian regimes to achieve preemptive cooptation (Conrad 1167-87; Frantz & Kendall-Taylor 332- 46; Gandhi; Donno and Kreft 725). In such regimes, parties play a crucial role in not only exercising control over the leader but also organizing the distribution of benefits to supporters and thus have a "greater capacity to

control and capitalize politically from the provision of women's rights" (Donno and Kreft 728). Party sponsored women's organizations and women's wings are seen as strategic tools to serve as "transmission belts for the regime and prevent the emergence of more autonomous groups" (Lorch & Bunk 9). Another form of cooptation is gender quotas. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg find that adopting gender quotas is another strategic component of dominant authoritarian states "to maintaining the party's electoral strength" (466). Such institutionalization reduces the propensity of a regime to renege on policy change committed to during elections, and are successfully able to "exchange policy concessions for societal support" (Donno & Kreft 725).

An important caveat here is that party-based women's organizations don't necessarily deliver on women's welfare. They instead become a mouthpiece for the regime's policies and are expected to win the popular support of women for the regime. Women's organizations act as "recruitment pools for loyal women legislators" and quota-elected women legislators are expected to reflect the regime's "official consensus" – a clear result of "the method of recruitment and political socialization" (Hazan & Rahat ; Lorch and Bunk 14-15, 26; Sater 723-42). This sums how institutional incentives and capacities to provide women's rights doesn't necessitate women's welfare. This essentially means that top-down incentives may lead to increased pro-women policies, but are unlikely to deliver on women's welfare in the long run. Greater representation and inclusion of women in governance only strengthens the reputation of autocratic regimes – domestically and internationally, but does not compel the regime to deliver on women's welfare. As for bottom-up demand for action, we know that autocratic regimes remain "insulated from societal pressure" (Donno and Kreft 724).

To arrive at what this could mean for Southeast Asia, the example of Laos would be appropriate. Donno et al. classify Laos as an "entrenched autocracy that co-exists with increasingly progressive laws on women's rights" and explain that "the general political climate continues to remain repressive: a single party state in which dissent is strictly prohibited, associational freedom nonexistent, and elections tightly controlled by the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party" (2). In 2004, the Lao People's Democratic Republic passed the Law on the Development and Protection of Women. The law was issued "to guarantee and promote the roles of women, to define the fundamental contents of, and measures for developing and protecting, the legitimate rights and interests of women, and to define the responsibility of the State, society and family towards women" ("Law"). The Lao Women's Union, that played a role in drafting and implementing this law, is state-sponsored, and is mandated to "mobilize and unite Lao women" to engage in "national protection and development; promote implementation of the gender equality policy; educate women about the

government's policies and laws; and support the customs and traditions of Laos" ("Promotion and Protection"). Despite the passing of this progressive law that guarantees Lao women social, political and economic rights and institutionalizing a women's union, the Lao gender gap has only widened. As compared to men, wages and opportunities for women continue to decline. "Troubling education patterns are often the norm in rural and remote ethnic minority communities in Lao PDR, particularly for girls" and issues of low school enrollment rates, high dropout rates and poor learning outcomes remain persistent (O'Kane). Furthermore, "Laos has the highest rate of young brides in Southeast Asia – 9% of females were married by the age of 15 in Laos, while 35.4% were married by 18 – significantly higher than the global average" ("Not Just Young Brides"). The census report suggests that "21% of adult females have no educational attainment compared with 10% of adult males" and the country has the lowest literacy levels among women living in rural areas (O'Kane). This is further exacerbated by entrenched social norms that believe women and girls to have lesser learning and earning potential. This is evidence that while the autocratic regime in Laos was successful in devising progressive legislature and policy reform to advance women's rights, the policy reforms have not led to improved women's welfare.

In conclusion, I find that there is a positive causality between institutionalized party-based authoritarian regimes and women's rights, as party-based authoritarian regimes have the necessary institutional incentives and capacity to supply the provision of women's rights. However, as the incentives to supply these rights are largely driven by political survival and international validation for foreign aid, an increase in pro-women policies supporting women's rights does not lead to improved women's welfare. Therefore, the causality between party-based authoritarian regimes and women's welfare is negative. This evidence may serve as a point of reference to ascertain what the resurgence of authoritarianism across Southeast Asia may mean for women's welfare. Inferences drawn from the case of Lao PDR, suggest that the surge in authoritarianism in Southeast Asia is likely to increase pro-women policies supporting women's rights in the region, but it may not deliver consequential improvement in women's welfare.

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