EDITORIAL

A Focus on Asian Autocracies

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Well over a year after what has widely become known as the "Arab Spring," it seems apt to take another look at Asia's autocracies. In its 2012 global survey, Freedom House considered 21 percent of the states and territories in Pacific Asia — comprising 41 percent of the region's population — not to be free. The list starts alphabetically with Brunei and ends with Vietnam. A further 38 percent were deemed "partly free" and thus fall into the gray zone of "hybrid regimes" that are neither full-fledged democracies nor genuine autocracies. Taken together, autocracies and hybrid regimes still account for the majority of political regimes in Pacific Asia. If one wanted to take a more positive stance, one might note that among the these three general types of regime, democracies make up the largest group in the region (41 percent, comprising 44 percent of the population) and also that, in sum, there have been steady improvements in the region over the past five years in terms of political rights and civic freedoms. Yet even those observers who are more positive-minded will have to acknowledge the fact that democracy is *not* the norm in Pacific Asia. Moreover, the regional picture gets bleaker if one includes all the dictatorships that exist in Central Asia — arguably the world's most autocratic (sub-)regional cluster. Here, given Central Asia's dismal democratic record, even an authoritarian leader such as Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev can pass as a moderate (in an intra-regional comparison, that is).

Speaking of Nazarbayev, who has ruled his country since its independence in 1991, he is going to turn 72 this July. No successor to Nazarbayev is yet in sight. In fact, there are not even any clear rules in place governing the succession process, which will be unavoidable one day. This may still come to haunt the country. Comparative politics studies clearly indicate that succession issues at the highest level pose existential challenges to autocracies. Succession holds a strong, destabilizing potential, so there are strong incentives to implement orderly takeovers of power. In the absence of precedent-setting, party-based successions, autocrats may try to pass power on to other members of their family. In this modern day and age, however, such "dynastic" successions are the exception to the rule in non-monarchical

autocracies.[1] One of these exceptions is North Korea, which is now in the midst of a second dynastic succession process. While the current succession seems to be running smoothly on the surface, it is still early days yet. China is another Asian autocracy in the midst of a succession process. In an attempt to institutionalize such processes, the Chinese leadership has instituted a number of rules in more recent times. Party congresses at which top-level personnel decisions get ratified now take place once every five years; party leaders over the age of 67 have to bow out; and it is up to the current leadership to pick their successors. Nonetheless, while such rules have increased the predictability of the process as such, they do not constitute a fireproof wall against the vagaries of succession dynamics, as the recent affair surrounding Bo Xilai, who tried to rock the (collective) boat, has made plain again.

To come back to the Arab Spring, are there any lessons to be learned from it regarding the study of Asian autocracies, I wonder? The discussion on the matter in the social sciences provides a number of interesting leads, three of which will be mentioned here. First, the fact that the uprisings in the Arab world were not foreseen by academic specialists — or by intelligence agencies either, for that matter — underlines the limits to predicting such events. This, for one thing, is linked to the importance of what Timur Kuran once called "preference falsification". This simply means that "people may not reveal publicly their private preferences, whether out of fear or shame."[2] Beyond their own immediate social circles, people simply do not know how widely despised dictators really are. Thus the precise distribution of "individual revolutionary thresholds," i.e., the point at which a regime opponent will join an anti-regime movement if sufficient numbers of other like-minded people also do so, cannot be known. A slight shift in this distribution caused by a small event can lead to a bandwagon effect, though, such as a mass uprising.

More broadly speaking, mass uprisings or revolutions are inherently contingent on other factors — as is human behavior in general — and are thus unpredictable. Social scientists and other academics are therefore unable to answer the question of when these events are going to occur. At best, as Jeff Goodwin notes in the just cited paper, they can only observe and analyze changes in relevant parameters that might increase or lower the potential for mass protests. These could be changes in existing kinds of social organization, economic conditions, political contexts, and even cultural and emotional milieus conducive (or not) to movements and uprisings. The takeaway point from this discussion is that even if there are no immediate indications of upcoming mass revolts in, say, China or North Korea, such possibilities can never be ruled out.

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[1]   Cf. Jason Brownlee, "Hereditary Succession in Modern Autocracies", *World Politics* 59 (2007), 4: 595–628.

[2]   Jeff Goodwin, "Why We Were Surprised (Again) by the Arab Spring", *Swiss Political Science Review* (SPSR) 17 (2011), 4: 453, drawing here and in the following on an article by Timur Kuran, published 1991 in the *American Economic Review*.

A second lesson we can learn from the Arab Spring concerns the much-noted role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in these events, and in particular the role of social media. Some commentators have dubbed the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in 2010/11 "Twitter revolutions," seeing them as being in line with similar phenomena that occurred earlier in Moldova and Iran. The role of information technologies in enabling uprisings and other instances of collective action may well be overrated, though. As Mario Dani notes, "technologies do not make collective action. Men and women do."[3] However, as Dani also notes, existing communication technology affects the context and shapes forms of collective action. Human communication gets channeled through networks. The Internet is one such network. But again, caution is warranted here. Internet penetration is not a good proxy for the propensity for mass protests, for example, as Dani points out with reference to the Gulf States, which witnessed fewer social protests than Egypt or Syria in 2010/11 despite the degree of penetration being higher. What ICT and social media did within the context of the Arab Spring was to facilitate the mobilization of protesters and contribute to creating a sense of community among them. Overall, as Clay Shirky argues, far more important, politically, than access to information is access to conversation.[4] And in this respect there are vast differences between Asian autocracies, as even a superficial comparative glance at authoritarian China and (post-)totalitarian North Korea will quickly reveal.

A third and final issue concerns the role of the military. The starting point here is Trotsky's famous dictum that the outcome of revolutions is ultimately determined by the disposition of the armed forces. Contemporary social scientists tend to concur on this. In a recent paper, Sharon Erickson Nepstad quotes research showing that non-violent revolutionary movements are far more likely to succeed if members of the security forces defect. Nepstad herself proposes that "troops may be less reliable and more likely to defect if: they share a common or religious identity with civil resisters but not with regime leaders; they know others who are defecting; if resisters remain non-violent, thereby making repression difficult to justify; and if troops do not derive any direct benefits from the regime."[5] The takeaway point here is that the characteristics and dispositions of the military can matter considerably when the survival of autocracies is at stake. All the more reason to pay closer attention (again) to the military in Asian autocracies. As autocratic rule is, in one way or another, likely to be a fact of life in Asia for some time to come, research in this area will need to take note of the insights provided by comparative studies as well as the manifold lessons to be learned from the Arab Spring.

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[3] Mario Dani, "Networks and Internet into Perspective", SPSR 17 (2011), 4: 469.
[4] Clay Shirky, "The Political Power of Social Media", *Foreign Affairs* 90 (2011), 1: 28–41.
[5] Sharon Erickson Nepstad, 'Nonviolent Resistance in the Arab Spring: The Critical Role of Military-Opposition Alliances', SPSR 17 (2011), 4: 489.