Can non-democratic regimes secure legitimacy?

Political Science

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Midterm Assignment

BSc. in International Business and Politics

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Non-democratic regimes – as well as democratic ones – must maintain and create convincing claims to legitimacy to ensure their stability and durability (von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017). Legitimacy can be defined as "[…] the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society." (Lipset, 1960). It is too costly and unstable for non-democratic regimes to rely solely on coercion. Therefore, non-democratic regimes must seek to establish and strengthen the people's perception of their right to rule (Gerschewski, 2013). *This assignment will argue that non-democratic regimes can secure legitimacy if they can satisfy the people's material needs or base their right to rule on beliefs shared by the people.* First, this assignment will point to non-democratic regimes' efforts to satisfy the people's material needs and thereby gain performance legitimacy. Then follows three points supporting that non-democratic regimes can secure legitimacy through the people's belief in either a charismatic leader, ideology or religion and tradition. Lastly, opposing views to this assignment's line of argument will be presented and refuted.

Non-democratic regimes can secure legitimacy through performance legitimacy where the regime seeks to satisfy the people's material needs by achieving socio-economic goals (Mietzner, 2018). Performance legitimacy thus has an output-based approach, where the support of the regime (legitimacy) is derived from its success in satisfying the needs of the people (Easton, 1975; von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017). The goals that the regime aims to reach can include economic growth, reducing poverty and providing security. An example of a non-democratic regime that relies heavily on performance legitimacy is China. Since 1978, the Chinese economy has had a growth rate of approximately 9.7% per year (Yang & Zhao, 2015). This enormous economic development has resulted in millions of Chinese people being pulled out of poverty and into a continuously growing middle class, thus improving the living standards of the people (Morreale et al., 2018). Another example is the United Arab Emirates (UAE); an authoritarian confederation consisting of oil-rich emirates in the Persian Gulf. The UAE delivers extensive welfare and social security system to its citizens. The federal government provides benefits such as low taxes, lucrative pension plans and free universal health care and education (Fasano, 2002). Non-democratic regimes' delivery of improved living standards, as seen in China and the UAE, contribute to a positive evaluation of the regimes among their citizens, thus strengthening their legitimacy and political stability (Easton, 1975).

Non-democratic regimes can also secure legitimacy through the people's belief in the right of the ruler to rule based on his/her personality traits. This source of legitimacy is described by Weber as charismatic authority (legitimacy) in which extraordinary character and leadership skills are attributed to a leader (von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017). The people's belief in the charisma of a leader and ability to fulfil a certain mission is what gives them the will to subordinate themselves to him/her, thus giving the leader the highest authority (Lepsius, 2016). A regime based on charismatic legitimacy is characterized by personalization where previous procedures are abandoned (Weber, 2009). A clear example of a non-democratic regime based on charismatic legitimacy is the emergence of Nazi Germany under the rule of Adolf Hitler from 1933 to the end of the second world war. Hitler successfully convinced the German people that the existing government was unable to deal with the crisis the country was in and that only he, as the charismatic leader, could ensure Germany's survival and world domination through the construction of a new regime (Lepsius, 2016). Though Hitler's autocratic regime was defeated at the end of the second world war, he managed to make the people believe in his extraordinary ability to fulfill the mission of making Germany rise again, thus securing charismatic legitimacy of the regime.

Another way for non-democratic regimes to secure legitimacy is by using ideology and propaganda that promotes a discourse upholding the righteousness of a given political order, thus establishing public belief in the political order. These ideological narratives can refer to nationalism, communism and other societal models (von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017). Non-democratic post-independence regimes tend to rely on nationalism to secure legitimacy. They emphasize the sovereignty of the country and legitimatize the regime by portraying it as the main source of sovereignty and stability (Yakouchyk, 2019). Through discursive power – portrayed in nationalist propaganda – the regimes strive to shape the perception, preferences and beliefs of the people in their favor (Göbel, 2011). Since the early 2000's the Belarusian president has amplified nationalist discourse and policies that emphasize Belarusian sovereignty. The regime has invested many resources in propaganda that is focused on strengthening the nationalist sentiment of the people. This is for instance evident in the education sector where "The Fundamentals of Belarusian State Ideology" is a compulsory course at all universities (Yakouchyk, 2019). During the wave of the so-called "color revolutions" where existing regimes in post-soviet countries were challenged, Belarus was mostly unaffected by protests up until 2020 (Yakouchyk, 2019). This period of relative political stability indicates that the Belarusian regime's ideology-based approach to legitimacy was effective.

Lastly, non-democratic regimes can use tradition and religion when securing legitimacy by drawing on the people's religious beliefs and traditional values to justify their rule. These sources of legitimacy can be understood through Weber's term traditional authority (legitimacy). Traditional authority entails that the legitimacy of a regime is based on continuity and traditional customs and values. As religion is a common traditional value, traditional authorities have historically been legitimized through "the divine right to rule" (Ferdinand et al., 2018). The legitimizing role of religion and tradition is exemplified by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia where the Saud family has ruled since the late 1700s with a close relationship to the Wahhabi clergy (Islamic religious leaders). The long-term acceptance of the Saudi Arabian kings gives the Saudi regime traditional legitimacy. Additionally, the clergy provides the regime religious legitimacy. This was evident in 1991 when the Saudi regime feared invasion from Saddam Hussein and American troops was deployed on Saudi soil. This decision had to be justified through a religious statement from the clergy. Before the clergy's statement, the credibility of the Saudi regime was threatened as they were supposed to be protectors of the sacred sites, Medina and Mecca, located in Saudi Arabia (Schlumberger, 2010).

So far, this assignment has argued that non-democratic regimes can secure legitimacy if they can satisfy the people's material needs or base their right to rule on beliefs shared by the people. Critics of this line of argument would say that non-democratic regimes cannot secure legitimacy by only satisfying the people's material needs, because economic development and the rise of a middle-class act as catalysts for democratization. Lipset has argued that the emergence of a middle-class in a non-democratic regime will cause the same middle-class to demand a say in national affairs, thus challenging the existing regime and setting sail for democratization (Ferdinand et al., 2018). Following this perspective, a non-democratic regime based solely on performance legitimacy is unstable in the long run, as the continuous economic development eventually will fulfil the citizen's material needs whereafter they will demand democratic rights. This theoretical claim is however not unambiguously proven empirically. In 2000 Preworski et al. conducted a study exploring the relationship between economic development and democratization and concluded that there is no evidence that economic development causes democratization (Ferdinand et al., 2018; Przeworski, 2000). Furthermore, factors such as businesses being dependent on the state to a high degree – as in the case of China – might keep the middle-class from political mobilization out of fear of repercussions (Ferdinand et al., 2018).

Another criticism to this assignment's line of argument would state that the strongest way for a regime to secure legitimacy is through the shared belief in liberal democracy and its values and practices. The democratic process is, from a normative theoretical perspective, the ultimate source of legitimacy. For example, Habermas sees the people's participation in deliberative democracy as necessary for legitimacy (Fabienne, 2010). This is because the liberal values and practices associated with democracy dictate that regular competitive elections will hold politicians accountable, and thus ensuring the political consensus of the people (Netelenbos, 2016). However, it is important to note that this concept of political legitimacy holds an inherent normative quality and is highly loaded with western liberal democratic ideals (Ferdinand et al., 2018). Due to this normativity, the democratic ideal of legitimacy is not necessarily translatable and applicable everywhere. Therefore, the argument that democracy is the highest source of legitimacy cannot be a universal truth. As this assignment has depicted, several variables can contribute to a regime's perceived legitimacy despite its disregard of a democratic foundation, i.e., economic development, ideology or religion.

In conclusion, this assignment has argued that non-democratic regimes can secure legitimacy if they can satisfy the people's material needs or base their right to rule on beliefs shared by the people. It has pointed to non-democratic regimes' ability to secure performance legitimacy by improving the living standards of the people. It has also pointed that non-democratic regimes can secure legitimacy by drawing on the people's belief in the charisma of a leader, their belief in ideology and lastly their belief in religion and traditional values. Furthermore, two opposing views to this assignment's line of argument has been presented. The first states that the validity of performance legitimacy eventually weakens, as economic development and the rise of a middle class cause a demand for democratization. This is countered as the causality between economic development and democratization cannot be empirically proven and other factors than economic development and the rise of a middle class should be considered when assessing the likelihood of democratization. The second opposing view suggests that the best way for a regime to secure legitimacy is through the shared belief in liberal democracy. This view is countered as it can be seen as normative and loaded with western democratic ideals. Therefore, liberal democratic legitimacy is not necessarily applicable everywhere and other sources of legitimacy might well also be perceived as legitimate.

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