

**Electoral Authoritarianism in the Third Wave of Democratization:  
Concepts and Regime Trajectories**

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## *Abstract*

During the past decade, scholars have plunged back into the issue of authoritarian politics, proposing new concepts such as hybrid regimes, electoral authoritarianism, competitive authoritarianism, and dominant party authoritarian regimes, to demonstrate how authoritarianism can function via ostensibly democratic institutions.

This article will review four academic works in order to solve the following questions: Why has the focus of literature shifted from democratization to authoritarian studies? What new concepts have scholars established? What are the similarities and differences across each new concept? What is the boundary between new concepts and the more traditional concepts of democracy and authoritarianism? Why do some electoral authoritarian regimes persist while others collapse? What crucial factors have scholars presented in this regard?

This paper yields three findings. Firstly, the trend towards studies of authoritarianism is a reflection upon existing literature on the third wave of democratization. Many regimes have adopted democratic institutions but incumbents continue to employ authoritarian methods to tilt elections in their favor. These regimes should be classified as neither democratic nor conventionally authoritarian, but can instead be considered electoral authoritarianism. Secondly, electoral authoritarianism and hybrid regimes are two interchangeable concepts which overarch competitive authoritarianism. The dominant party authoritarian regime type is relatively narrower in scope. Finally, three factors which may account for regime trajectories have been receiving great attention in academia: (1) international factors (Western leverage and linkage); (2) the authoritarian state/party's characteristics (organizational cohesion, economic control, repression capacity); and (3) the opposition's coalition and strategy.

*Key Terms:* hybrid regimes, electoral authoritarianism, competitive authoritarianism, dominant party authoritarian regimes, democracy, authoritarianism

## Introduction

From the beginning of 2011, a series of astounding people's uprisings, labeled the Jasmine Revolution, occurred in Middle East and North Africa. These revolutions would propel scholars to focus on authoritarian breakdown and the pending democratization of the near future. Nevertheless, in the past decade, the attention of academics in the field of transition politics has been focused more on authoritarianism within democratic institutions, that is, on electoral authoritarianism. Extensive literature on electoral authoritarian regimes began to appear more or less after the April 2002 *Journal of Democracy*. Within this literature, scholars proposed new concepts to supplement the understanding of electoral authoritarian regimes, such as hybrid regimes (Diamond 2002), electoral authoritarianism (Schedler 2002), competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2002), and dominant party authoritarian regimes (Greene 2007). Moreover, they also attempted to explain why some electoral authoritarian regimes survive while others collapse.

This paper will review works by Andreas Schedler ed. (2006), Kenneth Greene (2007), Jason Brownlee (2007), and Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2010) in order to address the following questions: Why has the focus of literature shifted from democratization to authoritarian studies? What new concepts have scholars established? What is the relationship between new concepts – are similarities and differences present? What is the boundary between new concepts and the concepts of democracy and authoritarianism? Why do some electoral authoritarian regimes persist while others collapse? What crucial factors scholars have presented to explain this? What are the divergences in each scholar's perspective?

Although this article is not a general research paper, it still has research value. A growing number of new concepts have been created since the academic world began to focus once again on studies of authoritarianism. This phenomenon caused conceptual confusion as scholars were confronted with numerous similar concepts with very slight differences. This paper aims to meet the goal of concept clarification, not only as a way to resolve confusion but also as a preparatory step for further theorizing of studies into authoritarianism.. It is thus necessary to compare and contrast related academic work of the past decade.

This article draws three conclusions. Firstly, the trend of a return to authoritarian studies is a reflection upon existing literature on the third wave of democratization. Gradually, the academic world stopped classifying authoritarian regimes which adopted multi-party elections but do not yet reach the requirement of democracy as 'in transition to democracy' or 'failed democracy'. Instead, such regimes are considered to be electoral authoritarian regimes in which incumbents employ authoritarian methods to decrease the

chances that their opposition will win elections. This regime type is thus in the midrange, being neither true democracy nor conventional authoritarianism.

Secondly, according to recent academic developments, electoral authoritarianism has detached from conventional authoritarianism to be a new independent regime type. Electoral authoritarianism and hybrid regimes are two interchangeable concepts that overarch competitive authoritarianism and hegemonic electoral authoritarianism, two subtypes of electoral authoritarianism. Dominant party authoritarian regimes are relatively narrow in scale, falling under the umbrella of competitive authoritarianism. Hegemonic electoral authoritarianism can be considered furthest away from democracy and closest to conventional authoritarianism, whereas competitive authoritarianism is the opposite.

Thirdly, although different scholars have diverging perspectives, this article concludes that three key factors have received great attention in academia. They are international factors (Western leverage and linkage), the characteristics of the authoritarian state/party (organizational cohesion, economic control, repression capacity), and the coalition and strategy of the opposition.

Before going any further, the selection of texts for review must be explained. All four books investigate electoral authoritarianism, but present different concepts and explanations, which is conducive to carrying out effective comparisons between academic conceptualizations. Furthermore, the research design in the texts includes a single case study, small N analysis, and cross-regional comparative studies. These mixed methodologies facilitate the identification of different representative perspectives.

This paper is divided into four main sections. Section one provides some background information concerning the return of academia to studies on authoritarianism and the common questions discussed. Section two introduces new concepts and investigates the relationship between them as well as the boundary between new concepts and the traditional concepts of authoritarianism and democracy. Section three addresses the reasons why, according to scholars, some electoral authoritarian regimes survive whilst others collapse. Section four presents the conclusion as well as possible future agenda for related studies.

## **1. Bring Authoritarian Studies Back In**

The third wave of democratization and the collapse of the Soviet Union led to great optimism about global democratization in academic circles. (Plattner 1999; Rustow 1990) However, this optimism soon dimmed following subsequent political developments. Scholars began to view most emerging democracies, especially in the third world, as flawed, imperfect, or in stagnant transition, providing numerous “diminished subtypes of

democracy” (Collier and Levitsky 1997) to describe those incomplete democratic regimes.

However, whether these incomplete democracies were truly in transition to complete democracies is open to question. As these regimes maintained stability, scholars began to question the “transition paradigm”, the assumption of which emphasizes the relationship between elections and democratization (Carother 2002). That is to say, once authoritarian regimes hold elections, the autocrat’s power would weaken and eventually crumble, thus increasing the opportunities for democratization. In reality, however, this scenario is not inevitable. Some authoritarian regimes adopted elections but retained stability for a long period of time without democratization, such as Mexico, Taiwan, and Malaysia. A handful of authoritarian regimes, including Russia and Belarus, even slid backwards into far more authoritarian rule. This overemphasis on the relationship between elections and democratization is known as “the fallacy of electoralism” (Karl 1995), which overlooks other important aspects of democracy.

In response, academia gradually began to re-classify regimes which hold multiparty elections but do not meet the requirements of democracy. Rather than incomplete, diminished democracies, these regimes were now categorized as electoral authoritarian regimes. Additionally, the primary question of much research also changed from “why do some emerging democracies undergo imperfect transition?” to “why can some authoritarian regimes survive despite the adoption of elections?”. Clearly, the focus of literature has shifted from failed democracy to enhanced authoritarianism (Armony and Schanmis 2005).

Scholars have provided various explanations as to why different regime trajectories appear. These can be broken down into (1) international factors, (2) characteristics of the authoritarian state or party, such as organizational cohesion, economic control and repression capacity, and (3) the coalition and strategy of the opposition. This article will explain these factors in more detail in section three.

Moreover, in order to highlight the authoritarian features present in these regimes, scholars proposed new concepts such as electoral authoritarianism, competitive authoritarianism, and dominant party authoritarian regimes. Even though these “authoritarianism with adjective” terms do precisely capture the hybrid characteristics of these regimes, the creation of so many new concepts has raised certain problems. The boundary between each new concept is not clear-cut, resulting in inevitable conceptual confusion. This paper strives to go some way to providing conceptual clarification to resolve this confusion.

## **2. Concept Clarification**

Although these new concepts help us capture the features of electoral authoritarian regimes, they also lead to conceptual confusion, which hinders knowledge accumulation, communication and further theorizing of studies on authoritarianism. This section therefore attempts to reveal the similarities and differences between each new concept, and clarify the boundary between new concepts and traditional ones.

### 1. The Definition of Democracy and Authoritarianism

To specify the boundary between new concepts and traditional ones, we must firstly grasp the definition of democracy and conventional authoritarianism. In principle, democracy can be divided into liberal democracy and electoral democracy. Although both meet the minimum standard of democracy (competition and participation), the civic liberties available in the former type are almost fully protected while the latter still has room for improvement in this respect.

Following conclusions by Schumpeter (1942) and Dahl (1971) the well-accepted definition of democracy includes (1) free, fair, and competitive election; (2) universal suffrage; (3) protected civic liberties; and (4) the authority of the elected government is unrestricted by “reserved domains”. According to Diamond (1999), reaching the standard of liberal democracy is far from easy, and some countries are termed as democratic merely because they hold free, fair, and competitive elections and practice universal suffrage. These countries are more specifically electoral democracies as opposed to liberal democracies because civic liberties are not systematically protected.

The conventional definition of authoritarianism is drawn from Juan Linz’s studies of Spain under the rule of Franco. (Hereafter, this definition will be referred to in this paper as conventional authoritarianism). Authoritarianism is a type of political regime, which is neither democratic nor totalitarian. This political regime involves limited, not responsible, political pluralism; no elaborate and guiding ideology but instead distinctive mentalities; neither intensive nor extensive political mobilization; and a leader who exercises power within formally ill-defined but fairly predictable limits (1970, 255).

In the past, although some authoritarian regimes that fit Linz’s definition held elections and allowed opposition parties, scholars – intentionally or unintentionally – paid little attention to these democratic institutions as they had such a marginal effect on the internal dynamics of authoritarian rule. For the most part, conventional authoritarian regimes either do not hold multiparty elections or enable incumbents to tamper with or even arbitrarily annul the result of elections that threatens the regime’s survival. Moreover, opposition parties either do not exist or are excluded from competing in elections, or undergo severe repression that pushes them underground, into prison, or even into exile (Levitsky and Way 2010, 365). In cases of limited pluralism in conventional authoritarian regimes, Linz dubbed opposition parties ‘semi-opposition’

and ‘pseudo-opposition’ (2000). This kind of opposition party is “willing to participate in power but without fundamentally challenging the regime” (p. 168). Additionally, although opposition parties sometimes engage in criticism of the ruling authority, they are “in absence of institutional channels for political participation and for the opposition to reach the mass of the population” (p. 170). This demonstrates the clear distinction between authoritarian and democratic regimes.

## 2. Electoral Authoritarianism: A New Type of Non-Democratic Regime

This article argues that electoral authoritarianism is a new regime type that is independent from both democracy and conventional authoritarianism. The noun ‘electoral authoritarianism’ first appeared in Linz’s revised edition of *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (2000). He claimed that most regimes considered to be failed transitions to democracy do not really meet the minimal standard of democracy; instead, they can be seen as electoral authoritarian regimes where a democratic façade conceals authoritarian rule (2000, 34). Schedler (2002) may be the first to have considered electoral authoritarianism a regime type independent from electoral democracy, liberal democracy, and closed authoritarianism.<sup>1</sup> After systematically categorizing all countries into four regime types, Schedler went on to conclude that electoral authoritarianism is the most common regime type amongst contemporary non-democratic regimes (2002, 46-47). Diamond (2002) further divided electoral authoritarianism into competitive authoritarianism and hegemonic electoral authoritarianism on the grounds of the degree of electoral competition. In 2006, Schedler subsequently edited a book, “Electoral Authoritarianism”, in which scholars comprehensively and systematically analyzed this regime type via different aspects and cases. Since then, academics have not only paid greater attention to the effect of elections on authoritarian rule, but have also attempted to explain the relationship between elections and regime trajectories, arguing that the scenario in which the opposition topples the autocracy by way of elections is a new mode of democratization (Lindberg 2009).

Electoral authoritarianism is a new form of authoritarianism which combines electoral procedures and authoritarian qualities (Schedler 2006). This hybrid feature makes electoral authoritarianism neither conventional authoritarianism nor democracy. The most significant difference between electoral authoritarianism and conventional authoritarianism is that the former exhibits a certain degree of political openness while

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<sup>1</sup> Most scholars who investigate hybrid regimes now choose to refer to non-democratic regimes (with the exception of electoral authoritarian regimes), as closed authoritarianism to highlight their politically closed. However, this method may be inappropriate as it ignores their different internal characteristics, considering them as residual categorisations. This paper accepts the classification by Linz and Stepan (1996) which divides politically closed non-democratic regimes into totalitarian, post-totalitarian, authoritarian, and sultan regimes, to emphasize their respective differences. This paper thus terms Linz’s definition of authoritarianism as conventional authoritarianism, and sees totalitarian, post-totalitarian, authoritarian, and sultan regimes as closed regimes.

the latter is relatively closed politically. Electoral authoritarian regimes hold regular national multi-party elections, exercise universal suffrage, and allow opposition to compete with incumbents to gain power publicly and legally. Nevertheless, ruling authorities may manipulate the elections, using the “incumbency advantage” (Greene 2007) to create an uneven playing field. Thus, despite the fact that these regimes hold elections, “electoral contests are subject to state manipulation so severe, widespread, and systematic that they do not qualify as democratic” (Schedler 2006, 3). Under this definition of electoral authoritarianism, this article treats hybrid regimes and electoral authoritarianism as two interchangeable concepts, though the latter attempts to highlight the authoritarian features of the hybrid regime.

Moreover, we can identify the boundary between electoral authoritarianism and conventional authoritarianism much more clearly by retracing the shift of academic development in non-democratic studies. Schedler (2006, 6) claimed that the overarching criterion that past scholars used to classify non-democratic regimes is the “exercise of power”. Linz and Stepan (1996) offer an example here. They categorized non-democratic regimes into totalitarianism, post-totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and sultanism in terms of the differences of political pluralism, ideology, leadership, and mobilization. Gradually, this criterion has shifted to “access of power”, referring mainly to elections. As electoral authoritarian regimes hold elections – sometimes even quite competitively – scholars therefore investigate electoral factors and their effect on authoritarian survival and collapse. In contrast, in conventional authoritarian regimes elections either do not exist or are haphazardly manipulated by incumbents; scholars were thus more likely to focus on non-electoral factors.

Diamond divided electoral authoritarianism into hegemonic electoral authoritarianism and competitive authoritarianism in terms of the degree of electoral competition (2002, 25). This paper will here discuss the former only (competitive authoritarianism will be touched upon further in the following section). Hegemonic electoral authoritarian regimes hold elections, but “there is never any uncertainty in the outcome of national elections” (Roessler and Howard 2009, 108). Diamond used three criteria to measure the degree of election competition: (1) the percentage of legislative seats held by the ruling party; (2) the percentage of the vote won by the ruling party presidential candidate; and (3) the years the incumbent rulers has continuously been in power (2002, 31-32). Using these criteria, we can consider the example of Egypt’s National Democratic Party, which won almost all the seats in the 2000 parliamentary election, resulting in virtually no parliamentary opposition. Furthermore, before the fall of Hosni Mubarak, he had not only been ruling Egypt for thirty years but was also re-elected with over 90% of the vote. This empirical evidence reveals that hegemonic electoral authoritarianism is not conventional authoritarianism as its elections are not



irrelevant, but instead perform the function of legitimizing the rule through democratic institutions. These elections are, however, not truly competitive or meaningful, and are no more than a formal procedure. These features make hegemonic electoral authoritarianism furthest from democracy and closest to conventional authoritarianism.

### 3. Competitive Authoritarianism: A Subtype of Electoral Authoritarianism

In addition to hegemonic electoral authoritarianism, there is another subtype of electoral authoritarianism: competitive authoritarianism. This concept was created by Levitsky and Way (2002), who later discussed the concept in more detail in a book published in 2010. The concept has received wide attention from many scholars in the field of regime transition such as Bunce and Wolchik (2010).

Although both competitive authoritarianism and hegemonic electoral authoritarianism utilize democratic institutions, they still can be differentiated on the grounds of the degree of electoral competition. Simply put, the degree of electoral competition in competitive authoritarian regimes is higher than under hegemonic electoral authoritarianism. According to Levitsky and Way's definition (2010), competitive authoritarian regimes are "civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents' abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents" (p. 5); namely, "competition is real but unfair" (p. 12). The statement "competition is real" means that elections demonstrate enough uncertainty that they can be meaningful, rather than simply nominal. "Competition is unfair", however, refers to incumbents employing authoritarian methods, such as election fraud, institutional manipulation, violent repression or indirect harassment, and patronage distribution to create an uneven playing field upon which opposition parties have less opportunity than incumbents to win elections. For instance, before Mexico's Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party) lost the presidential election in 2000, Mexico had held elections for both the executive and legislative branches many times. However, as the PRI held the "incumbency advantage", tilting elections in its own favor, it was able to overwhelmingly win all elections before the late 1980s (Greene 2007). In this regard, Levitsky and Way suggested that a more precise definition of democracy must include another crucial factor: "the existence of a reasonable level playing field between incumbents and opposition" (2010, 6).

Unfair competition differentiates competitive authoritarianism from democracy, conventional authoritarianism, and hegemonic electoral authoritarianism. Firstly, in democracies, election is the major way of gaining power. Although the ruling party has some advantages in competition, it does not severely undermine the fairness of elections and the playing arena is virtually even. In conventional authoritarian and hegemonic

electoral authoritarian regimes, in contrast, elections either do not exist or lack competitiveness. The most important function of elections in these regimes types is not to gain power but to serve other purposes such as acquiring legitimacy of rule and distributing patronage to name a few (Brownlee 2011). Lastly, in competitive authoritarian regimes, incumbents also hold competitive elections as the vehicle to gaining power, but elections are so unfair as a result of manipulation that these regimes cannot be classified as democratic. Further to this, in democracies opposition parties in are on an even keel to compete with those in power. Conversely, the capacity of opposition parties to compete with incumbents in conventional authoritarian and hegemonic electoral authoritarian regimes is almost entirely void. In competitive authoritarian regimes, although opposition parties are in a disadvantaged position, they are at least allowed to challenge incumbents publicly and legally and sometimes even beat them at the polls. Finally, “democracy is a system in which parties lose elections” (Przeworski 1991, 10); that is to say, one of the defining features of democracy is that the outcome of elections is so uncertain that turnover of the leadership is highly possible. In contrast, elections in conventional authoritarian and hegemonic electoral authoritarian regimes are far from uncertain. In competitive authoritarian regimes, the degree of uncertainty is lower than in democracies but higher than in hegemonic electoral authoritarian regimes.

#### 4. Dominant Party Authoritarian Regimes: A Common Type of Competitive Authoritarianism

The concept of dominant party authoritarian regimes was created by Kenneth Greene (2007). He attempted to account for Mexico’s PRI maintaining its dominance for nearly 71 years despite the existence of competitive elections, as well as explaining why the PRI began to lose its dominance in the 1980s. Beatriz Magaloni’s research (2006) bears similarities to Greene’s work, as she labels the same period as a “hegemonic party autocratic regime”. Within Greene’s definition of dominant party authoritarian regimes, Mexico from 1929-1997, Taiwan from 1987-2000, Singapore after 1981, and Malaysia after 1974 all belong to this regime type (2007, 16).

Dominant party authoritarianism refers to a hybrid regime that combines meaningful electoral competition with continuous executive and legislative rule by a single party for at least twenty years or at least four consecutive elections (Greene 2007, 12). A dominant party system holds competitive elections which diverges from conventional authoritarianism; however, it is also different from both the single party system, which does not allow the establishment of opposition parties, and also the hegemonic party system, which is a type of noncompetitive arrangement that “neither allow[s] for a formal nor a de facto competition for power” (Sartori 1976, 230) though

opposition parties are permitted to exist. Though competitive elections exist in the dominant party authoritarian regime, incumbents obtain certain resource advantages that affect the fairness of competition to the extent that the regime cannot be classified as democratic. According to the above definition, it can be seen that there is a great similarity between the concepts of competitive authoritarianism and dominant party authoritarian regimes. Indeed, Greene claimed that “all DPARs are competitive authoritarian regimes but not all competitive authoritarian regimes have dominant parties” (2007, 15). In this regard, this paper argues that the dominant party authoritarian regime is a common type of competitive authoritarianism.

##### 5. Appraising the Similarities and Differences between Concepts

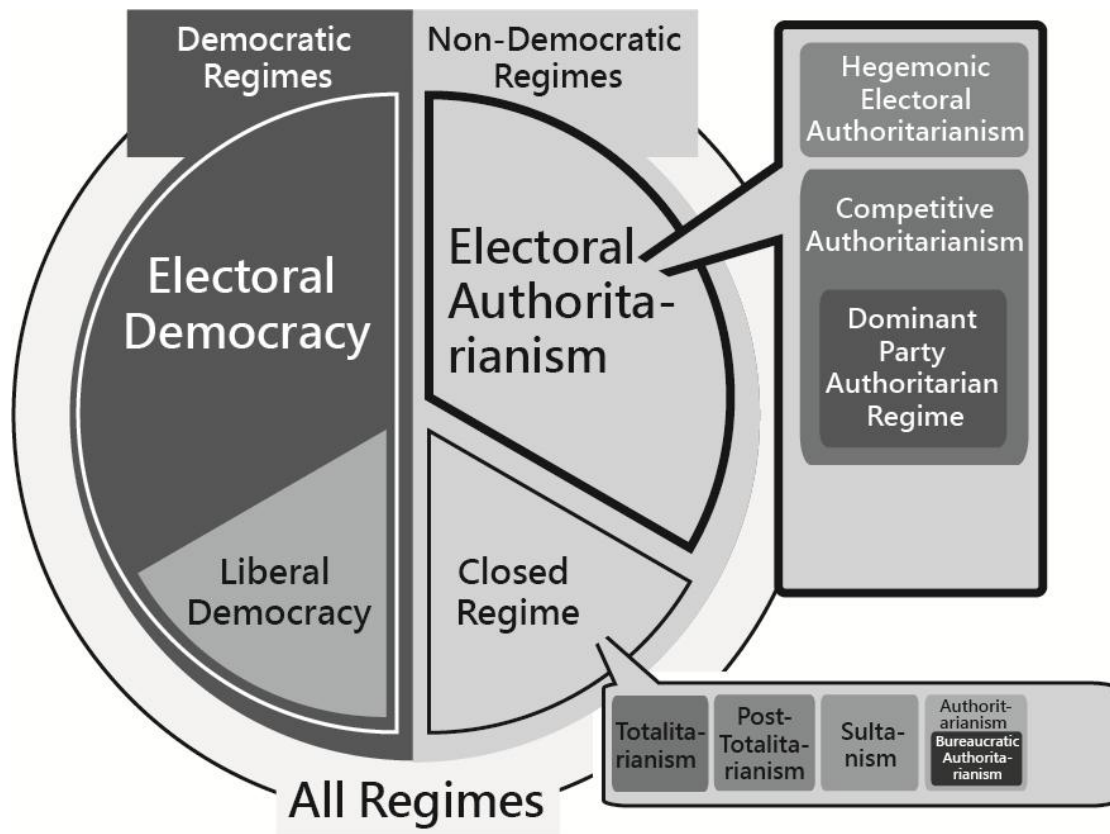
To conclude the above discussion, this paper clarifies both the relationship across each new concept and also the boundary between new concepts and traditional ones (See Diagram 1). According to recent academic developments, electoral authoritarianism has detached from conventional authoritarianism to become a new independent regime type. It is not only distanced from other electoral regimes like electoral and liberal democracies, but has become one of five recognized non-democratic regime types along with totalitarianism, post-totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and sultanism. It merits noting again, this paper labels totalitarianism, post-totalitarianism, conventional authoritarianism, and sultanism as “closed regimes” as, compared with electoral authoritarianism, the degree of political openness in this regime types is relatively low.

Even though both electoral authoritarianism and conventional authoritarianism share authoritarian characteristics, electoral authoritarianism possesses democratic institutions, such as multi-party elections, universal suffrage, and the existence of opposition parties, and provides varying degrees of electoral competition as a means to gaining power. Democratic institutions in conventional authoritarian regimes either do not have ‘room to breathe’ or exist to assist incumbents in maintaining power.

Regarding the scope of these concepts, the most extensive is electoral authoritarianism, which covers both competitive authoritarianism and hegemonic electoral authoritarianism. The most substantial difference between competitive authoritarianism and hegemonic electoral authoritarianism is the degree of electoral competition. Specifically, competitive authoritarian regimes hold competitive elections, which is the primary means for gaining power though elections may be unfair. In contrast, hegemonic electoral authoritarian regimes hold multi-party elections, but these elections are neither competitive nor meaningful. For these reasons, this paper suggests that hegemonic electoral authoritarianism is closest to conventional authoritarianism and furthest from electoral democracy. Conversely, competitive authoritarianism is closest to electoral democracy and furthest from conventional authoritarianism.

Competitive authoritarianism’s scope includes a common subtype: dominant party authoritarian regimes. When an incumbent maintains rule for more than twenty years or wins at least four consecutive executive and legislative elections, this regime is a dominant party authoritarian regime; on the contrary, if this criterion is not reached, it may be classified as a non-dominant party authoritarian regime. Scholars have not yet provided specific concepts to describe this kind of regime; however, it is largely meaningless to divide competitive authoritarianism into dominant party authoritarian regimes and non-dominant party authoritarian regimes simply in terms of the length of time in which an incumbent has ruled or the number of successive elections the incumbent has won. This is because this criterion gives precious little information about the relative stability of this type of competitive authoritarian regime; furthermore, it also cannot reveal whether this type of competitive authoritarian regime has relatively more authoritarian or democratic elements.

**Diagram 1: The Relationship between New and Traditional Concepts**



In fact, the phenomenon of “authoritarianism with adjectives” has appeared in 1980s under such names as “soft authoritarianism” and “liberalized authoritarianism” to name but a few. Winckler (1984) argued that Taiwan in the 1980s had gradually transformed from hard authoritarianism into soft authoritarianism in which electoral

competition soared, the frequency of violent repression waned, and the rule of law was established. However, the ruling party still manipulated elections and limited the leeway for opposition parties to campaign. Additionally, O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) labeled some authoritarian regimes that underwent liberalization without democratization as liberalized authoritarianism in which incumbents tolerate liberalization “by opening up certain spaces for individual and group action” (p. 9) to relieve pressure from society. However, incumbents still attempt to prevent the adoption of fair and competitive elections. Clearly, these concepts share quite similar features with the new concepts reviewed in this article. Both seek to depict regimes with hybrid characteristics.

Since these similar concepts were proposed nearly 30 years ago, people may suspect that new concepts of authoritarianism established during the past decade are merely ‘old wine in a new bottle’. Collating recent studies on authoritarianism with those written earlier, this article concludes that there are two reasons to contest this. On the one hand, most past concepts were drawn from single case studies while recent scholars have brought in comparative studies, integrating comparative logic into their research design. Levitsky and Way (2010), for example, compared 35 cases throughout the Americas, Eastern Europe, Asia, the former Soviet Union, and Africa to elaborate their idea. Brownlee’s work (2007) also includes four cases of comparison that span the Middle East, North Africa and Asia. Although Greene primarily focuses on Mexico, he extends his argument to explain Malaysia and Taiwan. On the other hand, most past conceptualizations usually aimed to describe a specific situation and lacked clear causal explanations. Recent scholars not only endeavor to describe regime development but also strive to offer causal explanations, which will be introduced in the following section.

### **3. Causal Explanations: How Can Different Regime Trajectories Be Explained?**

Why do some electoral authoritarian regimes persist while others collapse? Through review of four academic works this article has discovered that, though different scholars take diverse perspectives on this issue, three factors have nevertheless received relatively more attention. This section will first outline the explanations offered by scholars, and then put forward a comparative summary of the different approaches.

#### The Explanation in Schedler (ed.)

*Electoral Authoritarianism: the Dynamics of Unfree Competition*, a book edited by Schedler, covers many aspects of electoral authoritarianism such as concept and measurement, the coalition and rupture of ruling parties and opposition parties, the battle between incumbents and the opposition in elections, the interaction between regimes and

institutions, international factors, state strength, and so forth. Although this book comprehensively discusses a range of topics, it is still difficult to identify any common or systematic account explaining why electoral authoritarian regimes result in different outcomes; this is perhaps because the different writers featured in the book focus on one specific issue only, without coming together to present a synthesized explanation. Yet, in principle, the most important factors offered in this book seem to be the strategic calculations and political choices of the elite.

When the ruling coalition confronts conflict along with an increase in electoral competition, minority elites re-calculate cost-benefit ratios. If minority elites consider that the benefits from competing outside the regime prevail over the payoff of maintaining the regime, they are likely to defect to opposition parties, consequently weakening the strength of the ruling party. This is not the only factor to explain authoritarian breakdown, but it can sometimes be an important triggering mechanism (Langston 2006, 58). For example, Taiwan's transition from electoral authoritarianism to democracy resulted from splits within the KMT (Kuomintang) on two occasions. Likewise, before the Mexican PRI lost the presidential election in 2000, the minority elite had defected from the ruling party in local elections. The elite defection was initiated by the existence of electoral institutions alongside rising levels of competition in elections (Langston 2006, 60).

Opposition coalescence is another key factor identified which may explain breakdowns in electoral authoritarianism. Nicolas van de Walle (2006) claimed that when the opposition perceives greater opportunities to defeat the ruling authorities at the polls, they may coalesce, that is, transform from fragmented into coherent opposition. Their collectively strategic calculation creates a "tipping game" (p. 82-88), which indicates that the breakdown of the electoral authoritarian may be imminent. By reviewing the explanation put forward by Langston and van de Walle, it is clear that both arguments rely on the "process approach", though the focal point is different.

#### Levitsky and Way's Explanation

Levitsky and Way aimed to "explain the diverging competitive authoritarian regimes paths during the post-Cold War period" (p. 37). They classify regime trajectories into three categories: (1) democratization, in which autocrats fall and their successors govern democratically; (2) stable authoritarianism, in which autocrats or chosen successors have ruled for at least three terms; and (3) unstable authoritarianism, in which autocrats fall from power but their successors do not govern democratically (2010, 37).

Their explanation combines international and domestic factors. They divide international factors into Western leverage and linkage to the West. Western leverage refers to a government's vulnerability to external democratizing pressure, in particular a

regime's bargaining power vis-à-vis the West and its capacity to endure the potential negative impacts of Western punitive action (2010, 40-41). Leverage does indeed raise the cost of maintaining authoritarian stability; however, though it may be sufficient to compel the transition from conventional to competitive authoritarianism, it is rarely sufficient to induce democratization (2010, 43). This is because Western pressure usually wanes after elections are adopted, but, as some cases have shown, the introduction of elections do not guarantee that democratization is inevitable.

Linkage to the West means the density of ties (eg. economic, political, societal, or diplomatic) and cross-broader flows of capital, goods and services, people, and information between particular countries and Western countries or Western-dominated multilateral institutions (2010, 43). Where linkage is high, there is more likelihood of "international reverberation triggered by government abuse", which puts pressure on the West to respond (2010, 45-46). This raises the cost of abuse, lowers the possibility for manipulation of elections, and dramatically increases the chance of democratization. Moreover, high linkage creates favorable domestic conditions for democratic behavior and may level out the playing field by altering the previously skewed balance of power and resources between the autocrat and the opposition (2010, 47-50).

The domestic factors put forward by Levitsky and Way center on organizational power. Incumbents in competitive authoritarian regimes must confront far more complex challenges from sources as varied as opposition parties, the media, and NGOs than conventional authoritarian regimes. Incumbents therefore endeavor to thwart the threat of opposition through strong organizations, which is another key factor affecting regime outcomes.

Levitsky and Way divide organizational power into state coercive capacity and party strength. The former enhances the ruling power's capacity to suppress opposition via repression, surveillance, harassment, and deprivation of economic resources. The latter contributes to regime stability by encouraging elite cooperation, solving elite conflict, mobilizing support, stealing elections, controlling legislature, and stabilizing political succession (2010, 56-64). These elements help incumbents maintain strength, therefore increasing their opportunity to win elections. The strength of organizational power is based on organizational cohesion, which influences incumbents' ability to prevent elite defection.

Additionally, Levitsky and Way claim that extensive control over the economy can act as a substitute for organizational power. "Where state economic power is extensive, it may be so costly for elites to defect and so difficult for opposition forces to mobilize resources that incumbents go largely unchallenged, [even] in the absence of strong state and party organization" (p. 67).

Levitsky and Way synthesize international and domestic factors and provide a

three-step argument (2010, 70-72):

- Linkage to the West is the primary factor to be taken into consideration. Where linkage is high, democratization is more likely even where organizational power is high enough to resist external democratizing pressure, stifle opposition, and maintain intra-elite cohesion.
- Where linkage is low, regime outcomes are driven mainly by domestic factors, i.e. organizational power. High levels of organizational power result in authoritarian stability even in the context of high leverage and strong challenges from opposition.
- When both organizational power and linkage are low, Western leverage may be the decisive factor influencing regime outcomes. Where leverage is low, stable authoritarianism is likely even where organizational power is low. Conversely, where leverage is high, incumbents lose the room to maneuver, and change in leadership is more likely. Yet, as leverage alone is not sufficient to trigger democratization, successors are more likely to govern undemocratically, resulting in leadership turnover without regime transition.

It is difficult to settle debate about whether international factors matter more than domestic factors, or even how much international factors matter. However, Levitsky and Way posit that geographic proximity may be a key criterion. In states with extensive ties to the West, such as in East Europe and Latin America, international factors play a far more crucial role in regime outcomes; in contrast, in regions with rare ties to the West, such as Africa and the former Soviet Union, domestic factors weigh in more heavily. Simply put, “their relative causal weight varies across countries and regions” (p. 38).

#### Brownlee’s Explanation

Brownlee sought to explain why Egypt and Malaysia were able to maintain authoritarian stability while Iran and the Philippines could not. He argues that the cohesion of the ruling party is the crucial factor, determined by the extent to which ruling parties resolve core conflicts among elites and establish a structure of collective agenda setting to provide elites with security during the period of early regime formation. Collective security is a necessary element to prevent elite defection and maintain a sturdy coalition to facilitate regime stability (2007, 16-17).

According to Brownlee, a regime is the product of a series of conflicts and struggles between elites and factions. The emergence of the ruling authority is “a consequence of would-be rulers’ desire for mobilizing mass support and for the security that accompanies the triumph of one faction over others” (p. 35). Hence, “regime formation entailed party formation” (p. 33). If the ruling party is able to successfully settle core conflicts among elites during the period of regime formation and develop institutional



arrangements for power-sharing and conflict resolution, it is more likely that a coherent coalition will exist in the future. This institutional legacy propels elites to maintain support of the ruling party even when conflict of interests occur across factions, as party members innately understand that “no faction will indefinitely trump the others” (p. 39); in short, as long as elites remain in the coalition they will benefit in the long run. Collective security thus allows the ruling party to resolve conflicts much more easily, decreases the chances of elite defection, and ultimately helps maintain regime stability.

On the contrary, if the ruling party does not resolve fundamental conflicts amongst elites during regime formation, this may increase the possibility that minority factions will defect to opposition parties when they perceive threat. This is because they lack security, fearing that predominant factions will monopolize interests; thus, “in reaction to perceived threats from rivals within the organization, leaders then opt to disband the party” (p. 40).

At this moment, “opportunities for democratization” appear (p. 24). This does not presuppose that transition to democracy is inevitable, but instead that the calculations of the opposition may have a significant impact on regime outcomes. In Brownlee’s words, “the confrontation of different elites groups and mass movement determines whether the system will resettle in an authoritarian or democratic form” (p. 41). For example, although both the Philippines and Iran obtained similar opportunities, the former moved toward democracy due to social “People Power” while the latter gave up the chance as Iranian reformists feared a second occurrence of the 1979 revolutions (2007, 14).

#### Greene’s Explanation

Greene (2007) claimed that it is “primarily with the state’s control over economy” (p. 33), that endows dominant parties with “incumbency advantages” and determines which dominant party authoritarian regimes are sustained and which falter. Incumbency advantages not only starve opposition parties but enable the ruling party to “buy electoral support by distributing public resources” (p. 39). This unfair competition explains why opposition parties in Mexico were unable to beat the PRI at the polls despite regular national multi-party elections. It was not until the late 1990s that opposition parties finally overturned the PRI’s majority, potentially as a residual result of the 1982 debt crisis which dramatically undermined the ruling party’s incumbency advantage.

In dominant party authoritarian regimes, the ruling party possesses two types of advantages: (1) resource advantages through state control of the economy and (2) the ability to raise the costs of opposition participation through coercive state repression (2007, 5-6). By controlling public finances and maintaining a high degree of state ownership over the economy, the ruling party can easily divert public funds for partisan use, especially in the context of non-existent third-party oversight, politicized public

bureaucracy, or an independent electoral management body. Resource advantage provides the ruling party with abundant resources to gain electoral support through a system of patronage. Additionally, it also increases the difficulty for opposition parties to recruit party elites (2007, 60), because career politicians hoping to win office are fully aware that the only path to success is by joining the ruling party. In a nutshell, ruling parties in dominant party authoritarian regimes create resource asymmetries between the incumbents and the opposition through extensive state control over the economy, thereby winning “through unfair advantages before election day” (p. 7). Moreover, the ruling party is able to employ election fraud and violent repression to further increase the costs of opposition participation.

With regard these two types of incumbency advantage, Green argues that resource advantages prevails in importance over fraud and repression. If ruling parties possess resource advantages, this is sufficient to win elections even without authoritarian tools. Incumbents may turn to fraud when their resource advantages decline. However, committing fraud successfully also requires ample resources; thus, whether a ruling party with diminished resource advantages can accomplish fraud is questionable in itself (2007, 43). What’s more, in this type of regime, not only is repression less frequent, but it is also less exhaustive, and is instead targeted. As a result, it is not clear-cut that there is a causal relationship between repression and election victory (2007, 44-45).

Opposition parties cannot threaten a ruling party with a firm incumbency advantage. When ruling parties obtain hyper-incumbency advantage, only those who strongly disagree with the status quo would choose to form opposition parties to challenge their rule (2007, 7). However, because of their extreme character, such opposition parties would be simply niche parties that are unable to gain sufficient votes to win elections and are less likely to coordinate with other parties to intimidate the incumbent leadership (2007, 5-7). As a result, “they remain too small to beat the dominant party” (p. 6). In other words, opposition parties cannot defeat the ruling party unless they transform from niche organizations into more widely appealing, ‘catch-all’ parties. This transformation is unlikely unless the ruling party loses its resource advantages (2007, 38).

The Mexican PRI began to lose its resource advantages from the 1982 debt crisis onwards. To stem the crisis, the PRI drew up economic liberalization reforms that undermined the primary channels which provided the ruling party with resources. As the patronage system dried up, opposition parties gradually gained the opportunity to recruit moderate politicians, and to transform into catch-all parties (2007, 35). These factors gradually evened out the playing field, which can be considered the main reason why opposition parties were able to win legislative and presidential elections in 1998 and 2000 respectively.

### Comparison of Explanations

The explanations that these four texts offer include both international and domestic factors (see Table 1). Yet, with the exception of Levitsky and Way (2010), the literature unequivocally placed greater emphasis on domestic factors. Though there is general agreement that domestic factors affect regime trajectories, opinions differ as to precisely which domestic variables matter the most. This paper divides domestic factors into two aspects for discussion: ruling coalition and opposition. The former refers to organizational cohesion, economic control, and the capacity for repression; the latter discusses how and why fragmented opposition becomes more coherent and collective. For the most part, scholars rarely pay close attention to opposition factors, because the strength of the opposition in electoral authoritarian regimes is too weak to affect regime trajectories. In fact, the opposition alone cannot voluntarily influence regime outcomes even in competitive authoritarian regimes, which is closest to democracy, let alone within other types of electoral authoritarian regime.

Levitsky and Way (2010)'s explanation is the most comprehensive, combining both international and domestic dimensions. This includes Western leverage and linkage to the West internationally, and the organizational power (including organizational cohesion and capacity for repression) of the regime domestically. Additionally, authoritarian regimes' extensive control over the economy can substitute for organizational power as the foundation of regime stability. Levitsky and Way synthesize each factor into a comprehensive explanation presented in a three-step argument; the primary factor is linkage to the West, followed by organizational power, and finally Western leverage. The opposition plays a largely inconsequential role in affecting regime outcomes in competitive authoritarian regimes. Even where mass protest plays a vital role in toppling the autocrat in some competitive authoritarian regimes, transitions were not facilitated by the strength of the opposition but instead by the weakness of the incumbent. In other words: "protesters knocked down a rotten door" (p. 69).

Compared with Levitsky and Way (2010), Schedler ed. (2006), Brownlee (2007), and Greene (2007) lay far less emphasis on international factors. International factors either are not mentioned at all (Greene), or at best play a secondary role (Brownlee). In Schedler (2006), Langston and van de Walle focus upon the strategic calculation of the elite in the ruling party and the opposition during elections, both ignoring any international effects on regime outcomes. Langston argues that ruptures within the elite explain electoral authoritarian breakdown, whereas van de Walle claims that the coalescence of the opposition is a key factor. However, neither author provides sufficient information to conclude whether this is because (1) the opposition perceives that they have more chance of winning elections due to the rupture of the elite, or because (2) coalescence in the opposition encourages the minority elite in the ruling coalition to

defect.

Brownlee (2007) also argues that the cohesion of the ruling coalition has a significant effect on authoritarian stability, and that the strength of this cohesion is determined in large part during the period of early regime formation. Though strategic calculation by the opposition may well affect regime outcomes, the prerequisite of a split within the ruling coalition must first occur. In other words, whilst the ruling coalition remains united, the opposition will not be able to wield influence over regime outcomes. Brownlee’s explanation does not touch upon the effects of economic power and capacity for repression mentioned by Greene (2007) and Levitsky and Way (2010).

Greene (2007) connects incumbency advantages with the survival of dominant party authoritarian regimes. He divides incumbency advantages into resources advantages and the capacity for repression, with considerably more stress on the former. Resource advantages not only strengthen the cohesion of the ruling coalition, but also attract participation by other elites. Although Greene considers the transformation of the opposition from niche parties into catch-all parties and coordination between opposition parties as two necessary elements for the defeat of the dominant party, this can still only be possible when the dominant party loses its incumbency advantage. In other words, the role of opposition parties is relatively passive.

**Table 1: Comparison of Causal Explanations**

			Shedler ed. (2006)	Levitsky and Way (2010)	Brownlee (2007)	Greene (2007)
International Factors	Western Leverage			○	X	
	Linkage to the West			○	X	
Domestic Factors	Ruling Coalition	Economic Power		○		○
		Organization Cohesion	○	○	○	
		Repression Capacity		○		X
	Opposition		○	X	△	△

Key: ○= key factor; X= inconsequential or secondary factor; △= an important factor only when specific condition (i.e. ○) appears; Blank = no mention of the factor.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article yields three findings. Firstly, the trend towards studies of authoritarianism is a reflection upon existing literature on the third wave of democratization. Many regimes have adopted elections but incumbents have continued to use authoritarian tools to create an uneven playing field for competition. Scholars have

begun to classify these regimes as electoral authoritarianism, which can be contrasted with conventional authoritarianism and electoral democracy. Secondly, electoral authoritarianism has detached from conventional authoritarianism as a new independent regime type. Electoral authoritarianism and hybrid regimes are two interchangeable concepts that overarch the two subtypes of competitive authoritarianism and hegemonic electoral authoritarianism. A further subtype of competitive authoritarianism, the dominant party authoritarian regime, is the narrowest in conceptual scope. Thirdly, although respective scholars present different explanatory accounts to determine regime outcomes, this paper concludes that three factors have received more attention: (1) international factors (Western leverage and linkage); the characteristics of the authoritarian state or party (organizational cohesion, economic control, and repression), and the coalition and strategy of the opposition.

This paper also puts forward three agenda for future research. Firstly, although scholars have returned to studies on authoritarianism, their primary focus is authoritarianism with democratic façade, rather than “closed regimes” (totalitarian, post-totalitarian, authoritarian, and sultan). In fact, academia lacks literature on closed regimes, which merits scholars paying greater attention to them (Crystal 1994; Geddes 2002; Snyder 2006). To fill this gap, this paper argues, scholars should re-examine related concepts, in order to identify conceptual boundaries more clearly. Linz and Stepan (1996)’s typology of non-democratic regimes is thus still hugely influential. As China and Vietnam are demonstrating outstanding economic development whilst continuing to maintain Communist systems, understanding their regime type and its transitions via established conceptualizations is meaningful valuable research direction. Secondly, literature on electoral authoritarianism has to date laid little stress on international factors. As a result, this paper argues that scholars should extend the research scope even beyond that of Levitsky and Way, encompassing competitive authoritarian regimes and electoral authoritarian regimes, to comprehensively discuss the international effects of electoral authoritarianism, and compare electoral authoritarianism with conventional authoritarianism to identify international influence on regime outcomes. Thirdly, scholars should consider whether regional difference can explain the diversity of regime outcomes. Most academics in the field of democratization agree that different regions and countries encompass diverse factors and modes democratic transition. For example, democratization in Latin America is typically termed “pacted transition” (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986); in Sub-Saharan Africa democratization is often triggered by mass protest (Bratton and van de Walle 1997); and in post-Communist countries the interaction between the elite and the masses plays a key role in democratization (Bunce 1995). Although regional differences mean that studies of democratization can rarely be truly generalized (Geddes 1999), if we can broaden our research into other regions in a

comparative manner, we may find new factors that can not only challenge but also modify previous perspectives. This paper argues that comparative authoritarian studies can and should achieve this goal too. Future academics should take regional differences into consideration when offering causal explanations, as well as attempting to communicate with other scholars researching different regions. Only through achieving this goal can theorizing in studies of authoritarianism be improved significantly in the future.

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