

The Government They Deserve: Why Unelected Governments Have No Reason to Be Responsive

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Abstract

This paper intends to differentiate between two major political terms, ruling and governing, that were largely confused when analyzing political behaviors of nondemocratic governments in the developing south. Its purpose is to draw the line between the two terms when used as analytical tools. The paper argues that ruling is about staying in power and governing is about implementing rational policies that promote common good. Because these two terms have very distinct meaning and implications, applying governing tools to analyze authoritarian regimes, which aim to rule, can lead to misconception and faulty analysis. The paper ultimately calls for a paradigm shift in how the terms governance and accountability are used in understanding the political behaviors of nondemocratic regimes. This can be done by focusing on the motives of the ruling elites and applying tools that are relevant to their context rather than the universal assumption that every government is about promoting the common good.

1. Introduction

There is a common assumption in the mind of the public and experts that the sole responsibility of governments is to serve the public through providing public goods and services. In this regard, even autocratic governments tend to have some degree of responsiveness to selective constituents. In theory, this responsiveness can be explained by the fact that autocratic governments have to secure some form and degree of social legitimacy in order to be able to maintain order, whatever that means. Research has shown that social legitimacy can be as important as political legitimacy (Chomsky 1967). In *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media*, Herman & Chomsky (2002) discussed in length the key elements of modern mass media that power elite utilizes to maintain existing power structure. In democratic societies, elections change leaders from within the same power elite, but they maintain power structures that reproduce the balance. One of the tools the power elite uses to manufacture consent is propaganda. The author contended that propaganda is to democracy what violence is to a dictatorship. In nondemocratic societies, propaganda and violence are both used by the ruling elite in manufacturing consent as a form and source of social legitimacy. To a large extent, the overlap between social and political legitimacy contributes to the perpetuation of misconception regarding the role of government in societies. Hence, in nondemocratic societies, there seem to be confusion between ruling and governing.

Simply put, ruling means mastering ways to stay in power, including violent ones. Governing means devising policies—in consultation with the public—and implementing them to meet broad public interests. In many languages, at least in Arabic, ontologically and functionally ruling and governing are used to mean the same thing (both referred to as Alhukm).

To this end, the purpose of this paper is to clarify some of the confusion between the terms ruling and governing as well as to conceptualize failed policies in nondemocratic societies as a deliberate choice of the ruling elite. The paper is theoretical nature, aiming at contributing to the debate on governance, accountability and policy organizationally; this paper is divided into four sections. The following section provides brief background on the role of unelected government in society a ruler not a governor. The third section gives brief literature on political and social legitimacy and how these concepts are employed by authoritarian regimes. The fourth section closes with concluding remarks.

Ruling or Governing: Background

Unelected governments rule and not govern and when they provide any types of public services, these services are usually conceived and constructed as a form of social bribery and favors not because of an established legal or constitutional mandates. As such, it might be useful to the political discourse in the developing world to frame governments' failures in this context. Furthermore, it is not only necessary, but also imperative to frame and conceptualize the failed government thesis as a choice of ruling autocrats rather than accidental strikes of bad luck and troubled histories.

Additionally, the link between authoritarianism and failed states has been well documented by scholars (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Way, 2005). When we think of failed policies as a choice, we are likely to move beyond the discourse on accountability occupying the experts' panels in international circles and civil society groups to truly understand that the motives of the ruling elite in authoritarian societies. The primary political motive of the ruling elite is to remain in power not lifting people out of poverty or educating the young. However, if improving living standards occurs as a byproduct of an authoritarian policy, the ruling elite will take the credit, claim success, and use those improvements to further manufacture consent and silence opponents.

One of the major shortcomings of emphasis on accountability is the assumption that the ruling elite is governing or treats it as such. Then, activists, opposition groups, and human development experts rush to gather data about what the country is doing each for its own purpose. Activists take to the social media with scandalous results as evidence of the regime failure. The opposition groups highlight the failure to register points and further legitimize its position. Human development index experts compile their reports and offer academic advice to the ruling elite as if the ruling elite care. What is missing in these events is the understanding that when authoritarian rulers implement social policies, the least of their concern is how these policies might impact the lives of their constituents or subjects for that matter, because the principle of citizenship is almost nonexistent in the technical debates surrounding good governance in the developing south. What the ruling elite is really after is the social legitimacy. In this context, accountability—based on technicalities of good governance and political legitimacy—has little to no effect on the regime's behavior.

Authoritarian Social Policies: bribery in quest for legitimacy

Political legitimacy is the acceptance of an authority—usually a governing law or a regime—to make decisions. The core of acceptance is whether the authority has a right to impose decisions. While authority refers to specific position in an established government, legitimacy refers to a system of governance. No political system can exist or survive without some form of legitimacy, not necessarily legal and constitutional. The stability and functioning of a political regime, be it democratic or authoritarian, depends largely on the capacity of the regime to use coercion and the development of political legitimacy (Canovan, 2005). If political legitimacy stems from people's recognition and acceptance of the validity of the rules of their entire political system and the decisions of their rulers, then how authoritarian regimes continuously obtain legitimacy and validity?

In stable democracies, election is the mechanism for legitimizing authority and the use of coercive power is confined within the law and legal mandates. Even those who lose in election are guaranteed the right to free speech and protection of the law to dissent. Authoritarian regimes rely mostly on social means and coercive tools. Even in established and mature democracies, there remains the question of democratic legitimacy. The relationship between political legitimacy and democracy has been in the center of the attention among contemporary political theorists. It is common knowledge by now that a political system with a functional level of political legitimacy must be able to: 1) survive periods of crisis, and 2) formulate and implement policies in effective ways, i.e. the system's leaders are able to make decisions and commit resources without resorting to coercion or obtaining approval of the polity for every decision (Dalton, 2004).

Nonetheless, the matter of political legitimacy remains as one of the issues of utmost importance in politics and political analysis. Largely, because the relationship between democracy and political legitimacy is very complex, not as straightforward as one is inclined to assume. The essential foundation of a democratic system is the principle of recognizing all citizens as political equals and the right of the citizens to self-rule mainly through the election of their leaders. In this context, democratic legitimacy is frequently thought of as citizens' orientations toward the main principles of the political regime or the entire political system (Dryzek, 1996). The heart of this matter is acknowledgement that exchange of power and authority can only be achieved through democratic means, and democracy is the only game in town.

Yet, one setback with such conceptualization of democratic legitimacy is its assumption that private interests have equal powers and all will play ethically. Empirical research on participatory democracy clarified the confusion surrounding democratic legitimacy by pointing to other dimensions. Five dimensions of political legitimacy are relevant for the stability and effectiveness of democratic regimes, these are: (1) support for the political community; (2) support for the core regime principles, norms, and procedures; (3) assessment of the regime performance; (4) support for the regime institutions; and (5) support for the authorities (Aragon, 2015).

If elected governments in mature democracies are in constant struggle to extend their democratic legitimacy as a means to consolidate political legitimacy, one can imagine that authoritarian regimes will do even more to establish political legitimacy. However, this is not actually always the case. On one hand, many authoritarian regimes conduct general elections so as to appear legitimate. On the other hand, coercion—not social policies—has always been the policy of choice for authoritarian governments. Unsurprisingly, the countries with the worst human rights records are the countries that score the highest in authoritarianism index. But if that were the case, why would nondemocratic regimes trouble themselves by holding public elections?

Holding election can serve multiple purposes for an authoritarian regime. First, contested legitimacy is better than outright dictatorship. Second, election can be an effective tool for dragging the dissident voice out of the woods and providing the legal justification for oppressing them. Third, elections send a message about the regime's political legitimacy for concerned international organizations such as IMF and World Bank. Fourth, elections provide materials for political consumption and distraction from the regime's failed social policies and programs. In theory, elections are a democratic tool for peaceful exchange of power, but more importantly, elections serve as a democratic tool for public accountability. In a mature democracy, when a governing party implements unpopular public policies, the electorate will punish the party in the following elections by electing opposition parties. In this context, the real challenge then becomes what accountability purpose do elections serve in nondemocratic societies? Moreover, does holding an election make a regime democratic? Of course, scholars have developed sophisticated measures of meaningful and true democratic practice. Yet, determining how democratic a regime is remains a controversial matter at least in political circles.

In reality, it is not a secret that public elections can serve the purpose of political immediacy—image of legitimacy and distraction—in nondemocratic regimes. However, as for accountability what is more important is that elections do not change the leaders nor do they prompt the regime to change or alter its social policies. Mubarak ruled Egypt for almost 30 years while holding elections. Robert Mugabe has been in power since 1987 when he was first elected president and remains in power through election. Omar al-Bashir of Sudan came to power through a coup in 1989 and remains in power through election. There is no need to present statistics about policy failures in Egypt, Zimbabwe or Sudan. Poverty rates, per capita income and life expectancy in these countries make the case in a point. Yet, elections did not fail to peacefully replace the ruling elite nor did they produce change of policies. How do we explain the commitment of ruling elites to implementing failed policies while seemingly not willing to learn anything from these failures at all? Is it the lack of organizational memory, which leads to adoption of ad hoc policies and random changes? An explanation might lie in the fact that social policies enacted by ruling elite in nondemocratic societies were not deployed to solve social problems consistent with theories of rational and public choice. They are, in the best-case scenario, arbitrarily formulated and haphazardly implemented. Furthermore, policies adopted by nondemocratic regimes can be reactionary tools for social engineering and political maneuvering. They are a form of social bribery; their ultimate objective is to solidify the ruling elite's grip of power. They are intended to prolong the regime's life while serving as a medium and tool for silencing opponents and manufacturing consent of groups that perceived as a threat to the ruling elite. In ethnically divided societies—as in the majority of African countries—social policies are often used to buy allegiance of certain ethnic groups as a way to create a balance of power (Paul, Wirtz, & Fortmann, 2004) or measured weakness that can keep ruling elite in power. In some occasions, social policies can be used to create a ruling coalition by rewarding ethnic members for their allegiance and loyalty. In places where civil society has shown a level of maturity—measured by the degree of independence from the state—social policies can be very effective in buying temporary allegiance. One example is President Mubarak's tactics of enticing and professional associations. All what it takes is for the government to announce that teachers, doctors or engineers will have the support of the government to buy apartments or home appliances. In the developing world, given what we know about the relationship between elections and accountability, which is dubious to say the least?

If this is the case, why are we wasting time and energy in applying rational measures in attempt to hold the ruling elite accountable for what experts deem failed policies? A better question yet is what purpose would the discourse on accountability serve beyond talking points? The point here is that failed policies are not a function of poor governance as widely conceived and popularized by the panels of experts who are educated and trained as rational policy analysis. Rather failed policies are mechanisms for political maneuvering and social engineering with the ultimate goal of subjugating opponents and buying allegiance both of which are crucial for staying in power.

The difference between the two approaches is that failed policies implemented by nondemocratic regimes should only be expected not the other way around. This is not to suggest that we should not hold ruling elite accountable for the atrocities and human rights violations, but rather to conceptualize a path that takes us beyond the talking points. Authoritarian regimes have to commit atrocities and violate human rights to stay in power, this should not be a surprise nor should it be our only focus. Intellectually, we are likely to open doors for new possibilities when we understand that ruling, unlike governing, is not about formulating successful public policies that lift millions out of poverty or improve the lives citizens.

Rather, ruling is about implementing policies that either build a sustainable coalition or strike a balance of weakness to keep the ruling elite in power. Of course, there are authoritarian regimes that implement sound policies and improve the lives of their citizens. This argument has been used and exhausted the modernity theorists to suggest that democracy is likely to be sustainable in economically stable nations, therefore, developing authoritarian regimes should be given a chance to build a solid economic foundation because it is inevitable that people will demand political freedom when they realize economic freedom. Asian tigers—South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia—are highlighted to explain the logic of this argument. This argument is not only morally problematic, but also can absolve authoritarianism and justify its irrational actions while waiting for the miracle of economic development to occur. Some nations have endured authoritarianism for decades and have not seen a light of development and still occupy the bottom rung of global societies. It is logical to wonder whether a ruling elite would implement policies that will not maximize its social legitimacy even if that means resorting to policies that impoverish large groups of people.

The need for a paradigm shift is paramount, for accountability discourse not only limits the horizon, but also has become a prison of vision. The way for such shift will only begin when we do not equate governing with ruling. Governing connotes rationality and logical design of policies that intend to promote the common good, primarily reflected in competing interests of various groups in society. Ruling only reflects the dynamics of bargain among the ruling elite and barely lends itself to rational policy analysis tools and mechanisms. When we apply governing tools (policy analysis) to ruling, we are not only missing the big picture, but it is likely that our efforts cease to create impacts. Take for example the discussion about corruption in Sudan, Zimbabwe, Cameroon or Niger. What new knowledge are we producing when we say water is H₂O. Corruption is nothing but a logical outcome in the absence of true accountability mediated through meaningful democratic practice.

Conclusion

Authoritarian regimes are not stranger to the creation of an engagement in political drama for the sake of distraction and consumption. The focus on accountability based on rational measures play right in the hand of nondemocratic regimes. They hold elections not for achieving peaceful power exchange or referenda on public policies, but rather to give the appearance of political legitimacy while benefiting from the likely ensuing controversy as to whether elections were free. In the meantime, the ruling elite remains in power and the regime's policies continue to be random and arbitrary if analyzed from the good governance point of view. Conceptualizing failed policies adopted by authoritarian regimes in this way allows us to scrutinize the motives of the ruling elite in new light with sharper tools that are more contextually relevant.

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