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Topic Paper

‘Effective’ Developmental States: Does Authoritarianism Matter?

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Highlights

- Developmental states can work well only under strict historical and institutional conditions. The model is **not** a panacea for economic catching up.
- Institutional mimicking of, or learning from, democratic systems is a crucial explanatory factor for more 'resilient' authoritarian regimes.
- The effective control of local states, capital and labour is a highly complex and challenging task, which would fail most 'state-led' developmentalist ambition.
- Developmental states generally face tremendous challenges when reaching mid-income status, as the societies become highly diversified.
- The resilience and endurability of the regimes depend on how actual developmental challenges are resolved (innovatively), not on adopting a specific development model.
- Information and communications technology (AI, big data, social media) is likely to further polarise authoritarian regimes between those who can and those who cannot access or process data for economic and political control.

1 Introduction

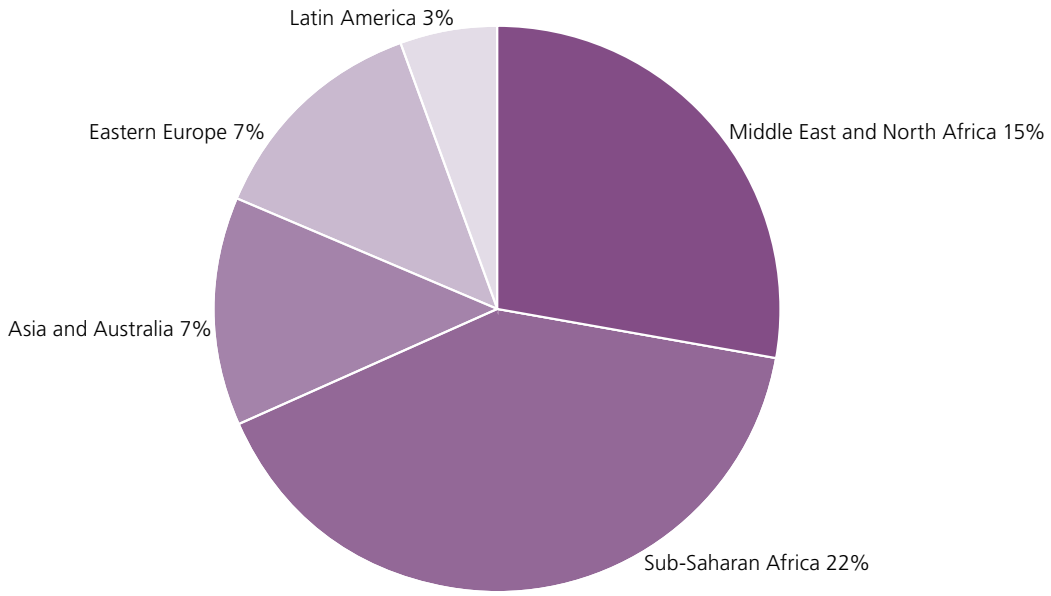
Authoritarianism is on the rise. According to the Democracy Index published by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU 2020), the number of authoritarian regimes increased from 51 to 54 between 2016 and 2019. They are distributed in nearly all regions around the globe (Figure 1). Although these authoritarian regimes have some common features such as rejection of political plurality, advocating strong centralised state power, and deterrence against the rule of law, power sharing and democratic voting, in past decades some of them have delivered impressive outcomes in achieving various development goals, particularly around economic growth, industrial catch-up, and poverty alleviation (Morgenbesser 2020).

The rising number of authoritarian regimes and their dubious impacts on development has sparked off another round of intensive debate among academics and practitioners (Thompson 2019), which can be viewed as the recurrence of a long haunting and never settled dispute since the 1980s regarding why and how developmentalist, interventionist, and sometimes oppressive states work. These early empirical studies of the so-called Asian Tigers (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong) aimed to explain their rise in the 1960s and 1970s, but gradually receded since most of these countries eventually adopted more liberal democratic political and market systems. As the mystery of how these countries achieved high-income country status under a combination of authoritarian rule and developmentalist strategy remains unsolved, today's rising authoritarian powers such as China, Vietnam and (to a lesser degree) regimes like Ethiopia require a nuanced understanding with regard to the relation between authoritarianism and economic development.

This paper revisits the literature and debates, and tries to understand the similarities and differences between the Asian Tigers of decades ago and 'new' authoritarian regimes. The focus is on power-sharing mechanisms holding the most essential differences between liberal and developmentalist approaches. The paper explores in what way developmentalist regimes retain their influence and control within and outside the state, and to what degree power is shared with the opposition political factions, private sectors, local governments and civil societies. It argues that these power-sharing mechanisms are crucial determinants of developmental states' effectiveness in promoting economic growth, social stability, and welfare.

At the heart of the analysis are two core questions to be answered. **First, we need a reconceptualisation of relations between transparency, inclusiveness and accountability based on these unique power-sharing mechanisms in authoritarian developmentalist regimes.** A better understanding is required regarding which actors are involved in the decision-making processes and how such involvement is co-related to accountability (defined as whether wrongdoings can be timely spotted and corrected). Our traditional understanding is that enhancing transparency and inclusivity would inevitably lead to accountability, which has been increasingly challenged by the empirical studies when measures to increase transparency failed to achieve a higher degree of accountability in many authoritarian regimes (Seligsohn *et al.* 2018), yet rather enclosed political systems like that of China have exhibited surprising resilience and flexible policy approaches in both experimenting with new policies (Heilmann 2008) and in identifying, correcting and replacing outdated practices (Ang 2016).

Figure 1: Distribution of authoritarian regimes around the world



Source: Author's own. Created using data from EIU (2020).

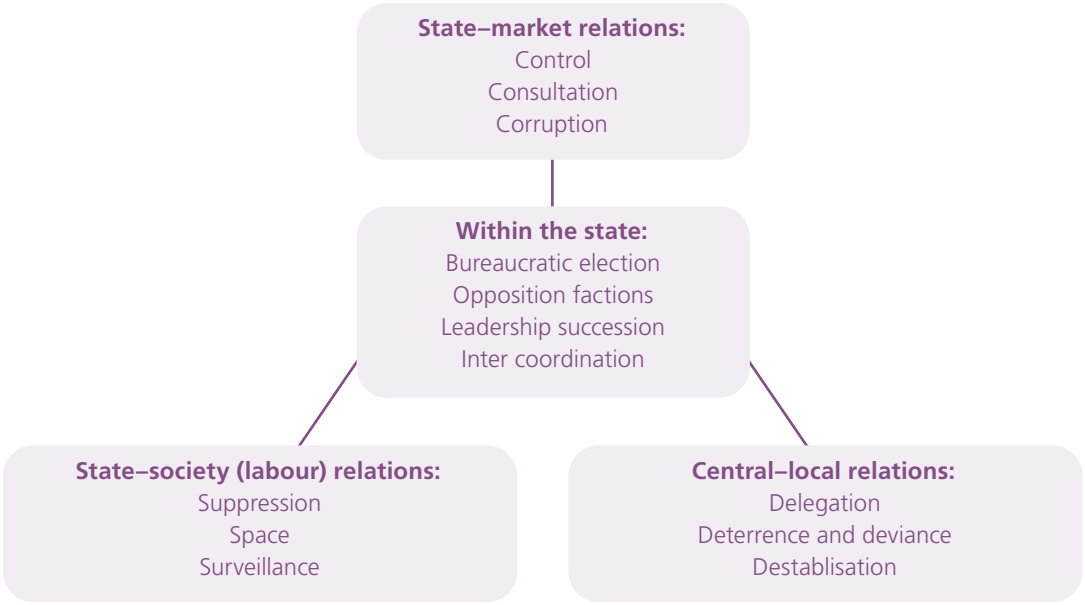
The other related question is whether these unique power-sharing mechanisms are largely rooted in the unique culture and tradition shared by these countries. The answer to that question may shape our expectation regarding how likely these institutions are to change. Previous studies on developmental states, particularly the Asian Tigers, attribute their development miracle largely to historical and cultural factors, such as the meritocracy traditions and Confucius thinking in North and South East Asia (Johnson 1999; Haggard 2018). Fukuyama (2016) also pointed out that China is governed by its ancient dynasty model, particularly since the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. In contrast to this school of thinking is that the endurability of authoritarian regimes is precisely due to their capability in borrowing and mimicking political, economic and social practices from liberal democratic societies, such as a constitution, stock exchange and/or public hearing session; hence, these regimes have become increasingly sophisticated (Morgenbesser 2020). The former (often called historical institutionalists) believed that most authoritarian regimes will remain fundamentally unchanged in the foreseeable future (Jacques 2012; Mahbubani 2020). Yet for the latter school, the prospect is far from certain.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 focuses on the endogenous power structure within authoritarian developmental states, the main features of their bureaucratic systems and decision-making processes. It examines how power is shared and transferred among political factions. Special focus is given to institutions like leadership succession, bureaucrat elections, political parties and legislature systems, as these are the key features that define the effectiveness of authoritarian governance (Morgenbesser 2020). Section 2 also provides a historical review and compares Max Weber's concept of modern states to the Confucian states in North and South East Asia, to understand in what way and to what extent current authoritarian systems are inherited from this tradition. In Sections 3, 4 and 5 the analytical focus shifts to exogenous mechanisms of power sharing, namely with the capital (or market actors), labour (or civil society and citizens), and local governments. These networks and interactions around the central government not only determine the overall quality and resilience of the authoritarian regimes, but also affect performance on different developmental goals (with economic growth as the paramount one for these regimes). More specifically, state–capital relations affect economic growth and industrial catching up (as the majority of authoritarian regimes are developing countries), state–citizen relations are relevant to social stability and welfare, whereas central–local relations affect information dissemination and policy implementation. Aggregately, these relations determine the accountability and effectiveness of the regime as a whole.

This paper therefore echoes Chalmers Johnson's famous analogue of comparing states with spiders, as both the spider and the web around it require careful investigation to understand how it really functions (Johnson 1999). Section 6 concludes with discussions on what we can learn from these debates and the implications for engaging fast-changing and highly diversified authoritarian developmentalist regimes. Given the highly diversified contexts and features of authoritarian regimes (just like equally diversified democratic regimes as illustrated by 'variety of capitalism' literature) and the limited space of this paper, some particular root causes of

authoritarian developmentalist approaches are less discussed, such as the colonist influence in African and Latin American cases, and the role of geopolitics (such as the relations with the US) and strategic resources (oil or gas) in the Middle East and Russia, which can be explored in future studies.[1]

Figure 2: An analytical framework of power-sharing mechanisms among authoritarian regimes



Source: Author's own.

2 Revisiting 'modern' authoritarian states: New wine in old bottles?

Max Weber defines 'states' as structured institutions with a monopoly on legitimate violence or domination within a defined territory and administered by some form of rational bureaucracy (Fukuyama 2016). Weber also established an ideotype of a bureaucratic system with the following features:

- Unambiguous jurisdiction and regulatory boundaries among different state departments;
- Clear hierarchical order among different levels of bureaucrats;
- Division between public and private life of state officers;
- Strictly following the rules and protocols;
- Stringent selection criteria based on merits and capability;
- Stable and decent salary based on hierarchy; and
- High social respect and job security compared to working in the private sector.

According to Max Weber, such a bureaucratic system is well developed in Western societies and is a key driver for modernisation in the West. However, many developmentalism scholars believe that Asia's bureaucratic systems, especially in Japan, Korea, Singapore and China, have a high resemblance to Weber's ideotype. They all have an administrative meritocracy that includes a stringent civil service examination and selection process that dates back to ancient China and Confucian tradition (Elman 2013; Tucker 2009). It helps cultivate highly skilful and capable bureaucratic managers in key government agencies, who are well respected by their country's society. Examples include the former Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) of Japan,

1 In almost all cases of 'effective' authoritarian developmentalist regimes, the exogenous factors, such as natural resources (particularly oil) and diplomatic relations (particularly the US), play an at least equally important role as the endogenous factors, which should be investigated separately.

the former Economic Planning Board of Korea, and the current National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) of China. In these countries, entering the bureaucratic system is highly competitive as being a public servant is an honourable career. For example, the civil service entrance examination is the most popular and competitive recruitment system in China: the millions of applicants are mainly graduates of top Chinese universities and success rates are less than 2 per cent. However, many scholars challenge the notion that the screening systems in these countries are based purely on meritocracy values, particularly at the higher level of hierarchy. Studies illustrate that patronage, corruption and factionalism all affect the promotion path of junior government officers (Aspinall 2014; Serrato *et al.* 2019). Another tendency in authoritarian states is that the top leader of a bureaucratic unit often has absolute power and only bows to the superior officials: the whole system can be described as **'upward accountability'**, with little incentive for officers to answer requests from below.

In an upward accountability system, the leaders of each bureaucratic unit answer to no one apart from their superior. As for the top leader of the country, since most of them desire to stay in power for as long as politically possible, **the leadership succession is often the biggest test of the endurability of an authoritarian regime** (Morgenbesser 2020). In the past few decades, many authoritarian regimes experienced peaceful transitions of power within the ruling coalitions, including Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore and China, which certainly boosted the survival of and provided some stability to these regimes (Frantz and Stein 2016; Konrad and Mui 2017; Bell and Sudduth 2017). Nowadays, authoritarian leaders in Asia are normally determined through hereditary succession or competitive elections within the ruling coalitions, which is arguably a mimic of repetitive electoral democracy. These institutionalised arrangements also reduce the conflicts between the current leaders and their oppositional factions, although the credibility of these institutions varied from country to country. For example, both the randomness and competitiveness of the elections and the autonomy of the electoral administration varied significantly (Birch 2011), which has led to highly unexpected election outcomes, such as the spectacular defeat of Malaysia's National Front in 2018 and of Myanmar's Union Solidarity and Development Party in 2015 (Morgenbesser 2020). Some authoritarian regimes also have a legislature directly or indirectly elected by citizens, such as Malaysia and Singapore, providing a controlled arena for political bargaining among elite factions. In most Asian authoritarian countries (with North Korea as the exception), the methods for repressing opposition leaders are increasingly non-violent and civilised, avoiding the murders, house arrests or travel bans often seen in the 1970s or 1980s; instead, civil lawsuits or anti-corruption campaigns are used as the routes to defame or deter opposition leaders (*ibid.*). As a result of these changes, there is a notable increase in pluralism among most authoritarian regimes in Asia: both multi-party and single-party legislatures are somehow providing formal or informal opportunities for the opposition factions or parties to pursue their policy agendas. However, the progress is not linear. For example, in China there has been retrograde progress since 2013 when Xi Jinping came into power and who now essentially undermines the CCP's core principle of 'collective leadership and decision making' (by all the Standing Committee Members of the CCP Politburo) set out by his predecessors following marketisation reform in the 1980s.

Yet, allowing more space for political opposition does not necessarily lead to much-needed coordination between different segments of the bureaucratic system. In increasingly complex modern societies, cross units and sectoral governance are often required for various policy challenges, such as climate change, international trade, and social inequalities, etc. Cooperation among different government ministries or departments, or between different localities, is particularly difficult and rare in a top-down governance system, which is often known as horizontal or vertical fragmentation of the authoritarian governance (Mertha 2009; Brødsgaard 2016). Vertical fragmentation will be further explored in Section 4 on central–local relations; here, the focus is mainly on horizontal fragmentation, mainly due to the upward accountability arrangement explained earlier. **There is generally very little incentive for state officers at various levels to coordinate with officers from other units unless they are ordered to do so from above.** In addition, clear segregation between different government units can create unnecessary political struggles: these units are often found as buck passing for unwelcome and challenging tasks or scrambling for plum jobs.

The usual solution to coordinating crossdepartmental or ministerial collaboration is therefore a top-down arrangement, by developing an independent and supra institutional arrangement on top of the existing hierarchy. Such supra agencies are usually led by top national leaders or their closest confidant and focus on a specific policy challenge. An early example is the anti-corruption agencies established in Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea and Thailand (Quah 2010). China has also established several special committees or leading groups directly led by Xi that focus on tasks at the top of his political agenda, such as poverty alleviation, environmental governance, the Belt and Road Initiative, and an anti-corruption campaign (Wasserstrom 2019). Although these *ad hoc* arrangements help facilitate more effective coordination among different bureaucratic units, such an approach has notable side effects as the power will be further concentrated into the hands of the authoritarian leaders and their confidants,

and it may further incite opposition among political elites and jeopardise political stability. Another common strategy to enhance coordination is to restructure a current bureaucratic system to break the stalemate by creating, merging or dissolving existing bureaucratic units. A typical example is the restructuring of China's environment ministry in 2018, when some key functions, such as climate change and marine governance, were transferred from previous very powerful agencies like the NDRC to an augmented Ministry of Ecology and Environment. Such institutional change is usually more endurable than an *ad hoc* top-down arrangement, yet it bears the risk of more conflict between the empowered and weakened units.

To summarise, the endogenous features of authoritarian regimes certainly inherited the political traditions and culture that share some resemblance to Max Weber's ideotype bureaucratic system. **The state capacity in most Asian authoritarian regimes is hence distinctly stronger in comparison to authoritarian regimes elsewhere.** Many believe there is an authoritarian nostalgia in this region that makes democratic transition particularly difficult (Chang *et al.* 2007). Therefore, it is not surprising to note that during Japan's rise during the Meiji Restoration, Singapore's rise in the 1960s and the current rise of China, all of these countries reaffirmed their Confucian culture or 'Asian values' to bolster their legitimacy (Thompson 2019). However, since governing modern societies requires not just strong states but other pillars like rule of law or democratic accountability (Fukuyama 2016), **many authoritarian regimes have been mimicking institutional arrangements from democratic countries, mostly in a highly instrumental fashion.** These mimicking instruments helped to enhance the endurability of these regimes by providing relatively peaceful leadership succession and more pluralist political space in the past few decades. The combination of historical political values and mimic institutions also provide a subtle balance between radical progression towards democratisation or orthodox dogmatism. It is not yet clear whether such a complex and blended governance model could evolve, nor can we be uncertain of its prospect in an age of unprecedented uncertainty.

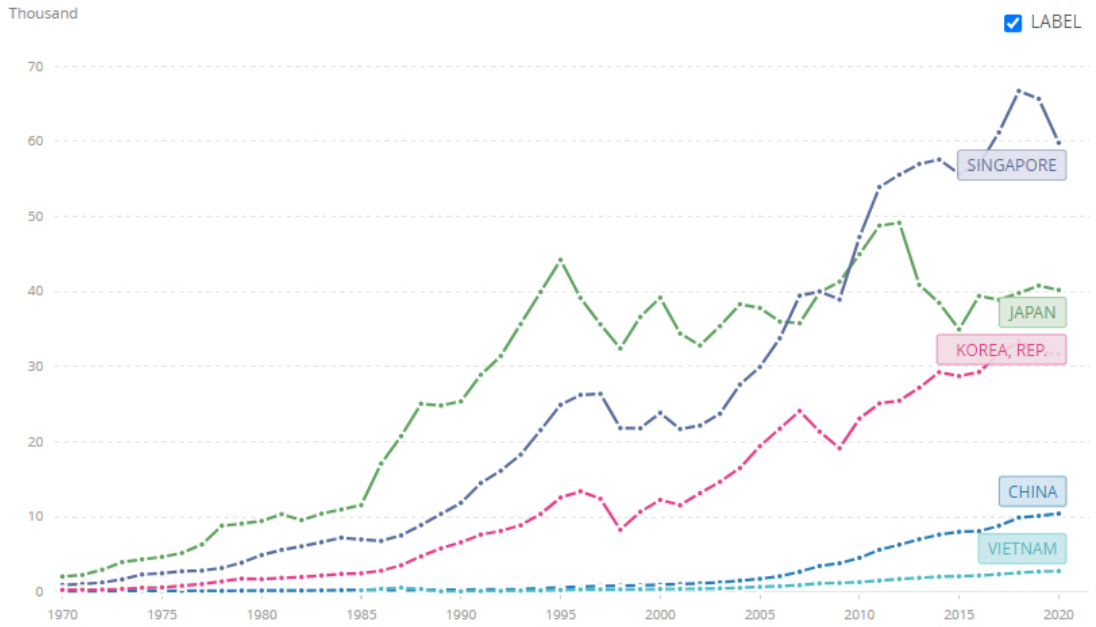
3 State–capital relations: Developmental states or crony capitalism?

The purpose of maintaining a blended system that combines political traditions and mimics institutions is to provide a certain level of legitimacy to the authoritarian regime (Thompson 2019; Morgenbesser 2020). **The single most critical source of legitimacy for authoritarian regimes is to promote economic growth and catching up economically with the industrialised countries;** hence, authoritarianism is often coupled with developmentalism. Most of these regimes use various government policies to manage marketisation transitions to promote economic growth and industrial upgrade, which are often called developmental states (Johnson 1999), that include unique ideas, strategies, organisations and policies. This academic school believes that having strong and capable state officers, particularly in the economic and trade policy domain, is a significant explanatory factor in achieving economic miracles among the Asian Tigers since the late 1960s and in China and Vietnam today (see works by Alice Amsden, Ha-Joon Chang, Peter Evans, Chalmers Johnson, Robert Wade, Linda Weiss and many more). Some have even argued that Germany, Russia and even the US all once adopted such a strategy when they were catching up with the first industrialised countries dating back to the late eighteenth century. These governments have the following characteristics:

- State leaders and officers have a strong dedication to economic growth, making it the single biggest objective of the entire nation.
- State can distance itself from the lobbying and interest groups and employ capable and professional bureaucrats to make a conceivable development strategy.
- Cooperative state–market relations allow state officers to carefully craft out appropriate and realistic policies to support certain industries.
- Government has the capability to mobilise economic resources (such as financial credit) to alter the effectiveness of resource allocation to support specific policy goals.

On the surface, such a state-led strategy can help concentrate limited resources to focus on strategically important sectors, such as ship building, the automobile industry, electrical appliance

Figure 3: GDP per capita of China, Japan, Korea, Singapore and Vietnam between 1970 and 2019



Source: World Bank (2021). Reproduced under CC BY 4.0.

manufacturing, telecommunications, etc., and hence to 'cut the corner' in economic catching up. For developmental states to work well, governments need to maintain effective control over large corporations and, in particular, the financial sector. The governments of Korea, Japan, China, Singapore and Vietnam all have tight control over their banks, chaebols, and state-owned enterprises. However, the development strategy should be based on very **frank and constructive communications between the state and industrial actors** to make sure that all policies are based on sufficient information exchange, which is fundamental for realistic planning. This imposes a significant challenge for both state capacity and autonomy. Can states make wise strategic decisions in guiding industrial upgrade and can state officers be insulated from growing rent-seeking opportunities accrued from industrial planning, subsidy design or tax schemes? Rodrik (2009) highlighted the principles of appropriate and effective state intervention: embeddedness (constructive and consultative state–market relations), discipline (no collusion or cheating from both the state and the market actors), and accountability (policies to be transparent and scrutinised by the public).

For non-democratic regimes, these requirements represent **a bizarre paradox of strengthening state control over the economy while upholding discipline and accountability.** However, some countries have established alternative accountability mechanisms. In South Korea, both bureaucrats and their economic targets during the 1960s and 1970s were closely monitored by the most senior officials, including president Park Chung Hee himself. In Singapore, well-paid and highly professional officialdom prevents corruption and power abuse. In China, despite rampant corruption, inter-locality competition for investment and fiscal revenue compels local officials to remain business-friendly (Ang 2016; Rodrik 2009; see Section 4). Ang (2020) also argues that not all corruption is harmful for economic growth. For example, elite exchanges of power and profit is a form of 'money access' corruption that can stimulate investment and growth in the short run, even though such behaviour can cause serious risks for the credibility of the economy and political system in the long run.

Understandably, attributing Asian economic miracles to strong states' active intervention approach is a significant challenge to mainstream economic theories highlighting the role of market forces and property rights, and has been constantly criticised since its inception even among leading Japanese and Chinese researchers. They believe that many developmentalist policies in Asian countries are not really enhancing economic productivity; some even created notable negative impacts or disasters. Another strand of criticism focuses on the uniqueness of Asian success, pointing out that the **preconditions for developmental states to work well are too high, so the success is not sustainable and replicable** when modern economies are getting more sophisticated or where state capacities are not as strong as those

Box 1: Practical implications

- **The analysis of state-led development programmes should not just focus on the policy goals or targets, but also on how they are implemented.** It is important to evaluate whether government policies are facilitating rather than deterring market growth, or whether competitions are encouraged rather than suppressed.

- It is also **important to evaluate whether government interventions are more likely to be executed in a command-and-control manner** without extensive consultation with the private sector, **or in a more negotiated fashion** when state officers are positioned to provide services.

- **It is crucial to examine if there is a clear policy evaluation and accountability system around the government intervention**, particularly for cheap state loans, subsidies, tax cuts or other preferential treatment, to make sure that unnecessary or erroneous state support can be adjusted or stopped. In a corrupted system, this principle is particularly difficult to execute.

of Asian countries. As a result, **failed cases are far more rampant than successful ones**. Indonesia's efforts in promoting the automobile, aeroplane and timber industries, Malaysia's efforts in promoting the petrochemical, paper pulp and construction materials industries, and other strategic interventions from Thailand and the Philippines, all ended up with appalling results. A further criticism of developmental states is that strong state support via cheap loans or subsidies to certain industries will create new monsters. Close relationships between state and protected industries will eventually create new interest groups and lead to crony capitalism or corporatism relations. Therefore, **it is very difficult to quit state support even if the protected industries are already fully grown and competitive**.

To summarise the argument both for and against developmental states: a strong state-led developmentalism approach can promote notable economic success, but usually in a given historical and national context. **Success of developmentalism is neither guaranteed nor irreversible, and state interventionism is not a permanent and sustainable panacea for the economy.** As the economy becomes more advanced and sophisticated, the marginal benefits of state intervention and top-down strategy, or the so-called 'visible hands', will be inevitably waning, until its overall effect becomes negligible or even detrimental. A developmentalist approach should be adopted with caution, as it is at least a double-edged sword that can sometimes help to nurture new championship industries, but in the meantime protect less competitive ones if mis-used or mismanaged. In addition, although highly motivated and honest state officers do exist within a particular generation (such as post-war Japan or Korea, newly independent Singapore, or post-Cultural Revolution China), **the integrity level of the bureaucratic systems is unlikely to last long without a bottom-up accountability system to check their power**, particularly given the tremendous rent-seeking opportunities held among state officers. This can be the Achilles' heel, particularly among the authoritarian systems.

States need to decide which sector to intervene and support. First, researchers believe that the sectors involving notable externalities are more likely to need proper state support. Two particular examples are innovation activities and environmental industries (see Stiglitz 1998 and Rodrik 2009). Second, governments can contribute to information collection and distribution, both of which are viewed as a public good, and cannot be supplied effectively by the market. This is particularly acute for exploring overseas markets when information channels are more diversified within state departments, which can explain why many developmentalist countries have a strong interventionist tradition in the trade and investment policy domains. The third and related aspect is about market nurturing and creation. New products like electric vehicles or renewable energies, etc. require sufficient market to sustain their growth, and states can help to create these market spaces by identifying and incentivising potential consumers. **In general, the effectiveness of a developmentalist country on promoting economies depends on its capacity to encourage innovation, provide knowledge and information to the market, and develop new markets (domestic or internal).** It requires coordination between industrial policy, trade and investment policy, and fiscal and financial policy, plus a proper intellectual property protection system, and weighting towards industries with more social and environmental benefits on employment, environmental protection and equality (Rodrik 2009). In this regard, key concepts in international development practices such as inclusiveness or green growth are not necessarily incompatible with an authoritarian developmentalist approach, as many would argue, but these ideas need to be carefully institutionalised in the distinctive political contexts among these countries.

4 Central–local relations: Between centralisation and delegation

The central–local relations among authoritarian developmentalist countries are less studied compared to state–market relations. However, local authorities are crucial for at least two reasons. First, as mentioned earlier, most of the national development strategies have to be implemented at the local level, and **local officers' attitudes and preferences have a strong impact regarding the outcome of central commands or policies**. Second, in nearly all authoritarian developmentalist regimes, social stability is usually the highest priority as social unrest and disturbance are deemed as tremendous threats not only to the ruling coalition but also to economic strategies. **Local authorities therefore play a crucial role to detect and deter emergent social discontent**, particularly when these discontents are intertwined with ethnic conflicts and separatist doctrines. Hence, the effective control of the local authorities is crucial for both economic and political reasons. In this section, the focus is mainly on local authorities' role in governing economic and industrial activities as part of the effective developmentalist strategy in authoritarian regimes.

In the past few decades, one of the main notable changes among most authoritarian regimes is their increasingly decentralised approach in governing at the local level, rendering more economic and political autonomy to the provincial, city, township-level authorities (Hadiz 2010). However, this trend is by no means linear and comes with multifaceted impacts. Some countries experienced cyclical alterations between decentralisation and recentralisation, leading to notable variance regarding local autonomy across authoritarian developmentalist regimes today. Decentralisation is not necessarily driven by the pressure from international or local communities (Toaldo 2016). Instead, the root cause is often the difficulties in managing increasingly sophisticated economic and political situations from the top down, as a highly centralised system cannot possibly monitor and control all economic and political activities across the country. However, power delegation has consequences, which will be discussed later in this section.

For developmentalist countries, the most urgent task apart from upholding the ruling coalition is economic growth. Such a rather monolithic agenda urges local officers to attract investment and create a favourable business environment. Yet unlike a socialist/Leninist system that aims to control every single production unit, **authoritarian regimes often only set out visionary goals and specific targets for local authorities to meet**. China and Vietnam's five-year plans are typical examples of these top-down planning systems. However, local authorities are given considerable autonomy in searching for implementation pathways to achieve these targets, by granting more generous subsidies to tax schemes, facilitating investment deals and settling land disputes, etc. to make sure GDP-related targets can be achieved. On the one hand, such an arrangement sparks off tremendous innovative capacities at the local level to achieve economic growth and various policy experiments or practices are initiated, which is believed to be the major cause for rapid economic progress in many Asian economies, but particularly in the case of China (Ang 2016; Heilmann 2008). On the other hand, **power delegation for promoting economic activities tends to nurture corporatism and protectionism when local enterprises**, as the significant sources for tax revenue, employment, and rent-seeking opportunities, are deeply patronised by the local government officers (Oi 1992).

One of the manifestations of such local patronage is that local governments normally have a strong incentive to intervene in the management of local enterprises (Unger and Chan 1995). Village or township officers would actively lobby higher-level officers at either provincial or central level for more favourable policies and support, and the family members or other relatives of senior local officers are often found being employed in the most profitable local enterprises. In addition, these local officers would also tend to use coercive power to resolve land, environmental or other disputes between local communities and local enterprises under their protection. As a result, such **patronage relations involve intense resource exchange among local elites and corruption is often rampant at the local level compared to the bureaucratic units at central level** (Oi 1992). These complex relations will particularly affect the local elections among many hybrid authoritarian regimes, notably in China, Taiwan and Malaysia. The Chinese government initiated an experiment on village-level elections, which was generally deemed a failure due to widespread fraud and bribery under the local corporatism arrangement. Besides rent-seeking opportunities, another incentive for local government officers to sincerely embrace central developmentalist policies is the promotion opportunities associated with fast-growing investment and economy. Although empirical studies present contrasting evidence with regard to the co-relations between cadre promotion and local economic performance (Gao 2017), many

believe GDP is still one of the most important KPIs to evaluate local government officers.

The unassailable importance of pursuing impressive economic performance among local officials has clear side effects. At the outset, other central policies that are not directly relevant for economic growth will be either ignored or implemented deceitfully. This is often known as the principal agent problem or authoritarian fragmentation, which impedes successful policy implementation (Mertha 2009). For example, environmental regulations are often the most studied policy domains that cannot be sincerely implemented in China, particularly when protected enterprises are involved. It also affects the power configurations among different bureaucratic units, when units regulating economic affairs are normally far more powerful than other units. In extreme cases, local officials will intentionally implement unfavourable policies recklessly to deter central pressure. For example, in 2017 Chinese local officers intentionally shut down heating systems in the winter to meet energy-saving targets set by the central government, and people froze to death. Such tactics eventually forced Beijing to relax its tough air-pollution and energy-saving targets the following winter.

The other clear side effect of the local developmentalist agenda is the protectionist approach and highly intensive competition between different localities. Although competition in attracting investment or policy innovation helped to boost economic growth initially, in the long run it impedes cross-locality coordination and cooperation (Pan *et al*. 2017). Protectionism also leads to homogeneous investment and production, particularly among adjacent localities when successful business is very quickly mimicked. Such **inefficient competition leads to notable problems such as lacking economies of scale and overcapacity**. Among most developmentalist countries using top-down governance and planning instruments, containing the impulse of reckless investment among local governments is the biggest challenge. The cement, steel, automobile, property and, increasingly, green industries, are among the industries that are prone to overcapacity problems, particularly in fast-industrialising developmentalist countries like China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. It should be noted that in post-Covid-19 lockdown, overcapacity problems can impose an even more daunting challenge as the global, regional and national economies slow down.

In general, local government in authoritarian developmentalist countries can play a crucial role in contributing to rapid economic development when the central policies are in line with their interests. However, **once central policies no longer provide economic or career incentives, local officers would likely become far less enthusiastic or even counterproductive**. In this regard, local governments under a developmentalist/authoritarian system are neither simply operational arms of the central governments, nor completely autonomous actors despite decentralisation progress. **The relationship of local government with central government is increasingly subtle, surreptitious and complex.** As local government officers will tend to focus on short-term benefits confined to their political purview, it is unlikely for them to become equally ambitious and visionary as central developmentalist officers. The gap between central priority and local interest in many areas is therefore inevitable (Kostka and Hobbs 2012) and difficult to reconcile completely under an authoritarian system. This is particularly problematic when countries reached mid-income level as the singular objective of economic growth would be inevitably replaced by more diversified development goals to address a wide range of social and environmental problems (Ang 2016).

Some central governments respond to this challenge by further strengthening their supervision and inspection of local bureaucratic units, creating **a bizarre mix of decentralisation and recentralisation simultaneously**. Authoritarian regimes have a long tradition of relying on the mass public to tip off corrupt local officers (Jiang 2020), which is increasingly used to reveal slack performance on implementing central policies due to the local corporatism and protectionism (Shen and Jiang 2021). Another notable trend is applying newly emerged surveillance technologies to monitor the performance of local authorities. For example, the Chinese government applied remote sensing and big data technology to monitor local pollution and energy consumption status, and consequently prevented data manipulation or fraud at the local level, something that had plagued environmental reporting for decades. In this regard, one interesting phenomenon is that central government is increasingly working with other non-state actors, such as technology companies or even civil society groups, to contain and rein in local governments as a unique form of 'collaborative governance' (Jing 2015).

5 State–labour relations

Authoritarian regimes face several challenges to govern their people when promoting developmentalist strategies. First, for export-oriented regimes that focus on expanding international trade and attracting foreign investment, the rising cost of labour and wages along with fast economic growth are often intentionally contained to make sure the exports remain competitive in the global market (Chang 2006). **Labour unions in these countries are either absent or weak, with little negotiation powers against local corporatist nexuses** – as mentioned earlier (Fishwick 2019). Conflicts arise between the (both domestic and international) capitalists' demand for a protectionist government and labour's demand for a welfare state, which is believed to be the major cause of the demise of countries' authoritarian and developmentalist systems, like Korea in the 1980s (Kim 1993; Minns 2001). The containment is not just for workers but for consumers too, to meet the state's need to curb the growth of urban labour force and farmer consumption, to free up more resources for state-led investment. This explains why many of these economies have a much higher investment level than domestic consumption as the major driver of economic growth. As a consequence, **political repression and marginalisation of the working class is part of the model**, to keep down labour costs, prevent consumption demand, and keep the state–business vision of future transformation on track (Deyo *et al.* 1987; Kohli 2004; Wade 2018). Wade (2018: 18) even argues that developmental states in the East Asia region built up their industrial base before the 'global political awakening' that led to widespread demand for political participation in national politics.

Besides labour cost and wage repression, authoritarian governments intervene directly in land and resource-related disputes between investors and the local residents by using coercive power to arrange mass relocation and land appropriation, or by welcoming highly polluting industries despite local discontent and protest. At the initial stage of development, people to some extent tolerate these developmentalist policies that aim to boost local investment and economic growth. However, in the long run these practices inevitably nurture social discontent and unrest, particularly when corruption is exposed in association with these interventionist approaches, or when the investment failed to deliver the promised local benefits. In China, dramatic suicide incidents and organised protests against land appropriation, unpaid wages and polluting facilities have increased sharply since the 1990s.

Developmentalist states also face the conflict between a one-dimensional policy agenda that prioritises economic growth and suppresses social or environmental appeals, and an increasingly diversified society where people are no longer satisfied with growing wealth or profit but instead demand equality, good environmental standards and better health. In this regard, the continuous success of developmentalism under authoritarian regimes is not only about creating economic opportunities for capitalists, but also how the economic benefits reaped from these developmentalist policies can be equally distributed among the majority of the population, while making sure that some communities are not adversely affected. To this end, **in recent years many authoritarian regimes have mimicked institutions to enhance transparency** by, for example, introducing public hearings and consultation programmes for key public investment decisions, opening up policy archives and databases, and even welcoming public comments on draft policies. Many scholars believe these changes enhance the resilience of authoritarian regimes (Morgenbesser 2020), but others believe these changes are rather superficial and do not really address the fundamental issue of accountability (Seligsohn *et al.* 2018).

Several concerns are particularly relevant here:

- **It is noted that people are given voice but not the choice:** their concerns are listened to but then ignored or shelved during the decision-making process. It is obviously not realistic to assume that every single request from local people will be satisfied, but the final decision-making process is often obscure to the stakeholders who are most affected.

- **Some of the mimic institutions are clearly ornamental and manipulated**; for example, when there is no meaningful engagement with actual local concerns and when the most vulnerable groups are excluded for such reasons as lacking access to the internet, or being unaware of opportunities for their voice to be heard.

- **The government may use social welfare programmes to consolidate its rules**, such as the public housing system in Singapore (Eng and Kong 1997), i.e. greater public social welfare is provided contingent on political support (Miller 2015). Since 2014, the Chinese government has been experimenting with a highly controversial 'social credit system' that rewards 'good citizens' with a high 'commercial and ethical' reputation (Chorzempa *et al.* 2018; Liang *et al.* 2018).

One of the implications of China's 'social credit system' experiment that is most relevant to this

paper is the role of new technologies, namely the internet, artificial intelligence (AI) and big data, in sustaining authoritarian regimes. These technologies are helping to solve another big challenge that has haunted all authoritarian regimes: **information deficit, known as 'dictator's dilemma'**. Previously, it was impossible for authoritarian regimes to know how the ruling parties or coalitions were viewed by the people, and consequently, dissatisfaction was underestimated and the destabilising risks of these regimes were not recognised. Therefore, various institutions were installed to gather information about people's views and ideas, such as via tip-offs from the public or informants working for the secret police. The information channels need to be diversified as informants may also be subject to surveillance; for example, local governments can be an important source of information for the central government, but at the same time the employees are closely monitored by other institutions. Countries like Singapore, Brunei, Cambodia, China and Vietnam have strong local information units, which help to address the information deficit. Countries without these units, such as Myanmar and Lao, are more likely to have mass dissatisfaction or discontent undetected.

Although increasingly limited voice is allowed to individuals or small community groups who are particularly affected by local corruption or misconduct (mainly as a tool to restrict local officers), mass mobilisation that can threaten regime stability is always taboo for authoritarian regimes. Modern information and communications technology impose both new challenges and new opportunities for the ruling parties. Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Singapore and China all have some institutions that can stifle certain narratives online. But to **completely muffle people's online expression will simply exacerbate the problem of 'dictator's dilemma', as some of these opinions are crucial information on public views needed by the ruling parties**. A delicate balance must be maintained regarding the extent of online censorship, which is nearly a mission impossible (Márquez 2017). Another challenge is how to maintain the trade-off between monopoly power and credibility of state-controlled media in this information age, as the more monopolised they are the less they are trusted in the long run.

However, digital technologies may significantly empower authoritarian states when personal, organisational and industrial data and information can be collected and processed on an unprecedented scale (Zeng 2016). Although there is notable variance among these countries regarding the potential of being data-driven authoritarianist/developmentalist regimes due to their different capacity, control of powers and policies, the trend has becoming increasingly clear that information deficit has been rapidly shrinking in recent years in some countries, for example China. Algorithms are helping central governments in crafting long-term planning, making industrial policies, and monitoring economic and civil activities like 'Big Brother 2.0' (*ibid.*), which were unimaginable only a decade ago (Lee 2018). **The embrace of digital technology also reconfigured state–market, state–local and state–labour/society relations**, as mentioned earlier. Due to the former information deficit, central governments from time to time still rely on some civil society and NGO groups to provide information needed for central policymaking, but such need is waning. As a result, government-organised NGOs (GONGOs) and policy think tanks are on the rise to promote pro-government experts. Cambodia and Vietnam were among the first countries to apply this approach in constraining civil society groups, then in 2017 China changed its laws on NGO registration and state affiliation. Nowadays, fewer authoritarian regimes completely forbid civil society groups but constraints are increasingly severe, particularly on non-developmental issues. Meanwhile, the increasing reliance on digital technology has led to a very close and subtle relationship between authoritarian governments and big technology firms, and there are many instances of state digital infrastructure being implemented in private–public–partnerships (PPPs). China's establishment of large digital centres in Hongzhou and Guizhou with the help of big tech companies and the recent crack-down on the Alibaba Group are two examples of **the novel but fragile state–techno coalitions** that are evolving.

6 Conclusion and policy implications

The combination of developmentalism and authoritarianism provides an interesting case to understand the effectiveness or resilience of non-democratic governance, particularly in driving economic growth and maintaining social stability. From a historical institutionalist perspective, the strength of such a combination is partially due to the lingering tradition of a highly capable bureaucratic system, particularly noted in some North and South East Asian countries, as explained by developmental state theorists. However, attributing solely to historical or cultural traditions provides limited insights to explain the notable variances of economic performance and social realities among these regimes in the past few decades. The introduction of hybrid or sophisticated authoritarian concepts instead argue that borrowing major attributes of democratic institutions to exert effective control on different corners of society, including opposition parties, capitalists, labour and local states, are the key to the endurability of these regimes. Morgenbesser (2020) believes there is a need to differentiate retrograde (backward) or sophisticated (advanced) authoritarianism.

This paper argues that such differentiation should be based on the understanding of these regimes' internal institutions and their networks with other key social actors. Within the regime, indicators like constitutional power, leadership terms, succession rules, election processes, and legislative independence are the key indicators to understand the likelihood of having an effective regime. For a developmentalist strategy to work, authoritarian regimes need to make proper state intervention schemes, and **the key criteria for success would include state capacity for proper economic planning, low level of corruption, stable revenue and rational spending, and an accountable policy feedback and adjustment system**. For highly centralised developmental states, managing fragmented interests among local states is another big challenge, when local officers may either deter central policies or capture them to serve their own corporatist interests. Designing effective incentive and discipline mechanisms and **allowing both top-down inspection and bottom-up policy feedback is crucial**. Lastly, a state-led economic strategy would almost inevitably involve certain forms of labour cost suppression, as all industrial policies are essentially tools to set the price wrong (Amsden 1992), which include the cost of labour. In this regard, **promoting fairer distribution and proper compensation to those who lose out during economic catch-up is the key**. It is rare for an authoritarian country to be capable of managing all the above criteria well, and therefore we see more failed rather than successful cases of developmentalism in the world.

Three further policy insights can be drawn from this review. First, the developmentalist approach, even when successfully implemented in a given period, will impose **significant challenges as the countries reach mid-income level**, when peoples' economic and political demands become increasingly diversified. The suppression of labour, environmental and social costs is after all a temporary strategy for the catching-up stage only. Eventually, authoritarian regimes pursuing a developmentalist approach need to shift the focus from growth to a wider array of policy goals, including a major turnaround from supporting capital accumulation to capital distribution. An appreciation of the various developmental stages among these authoritarian regimes is crucial. For those at the initial stage of catching up, the state agenda in promoting growth is unlikely to be shaken significantly. However, the authoritarian regimes which surpass the initial catch-up stage will face the even more risky task of transforming the developmentalist strategy, which may touch the core interests of business and political elites who benefited from the existing state-led model of development.

Therefore, the effectiveness of developmental states should be evaluated on how the following are carried out: **exiting unnecessary government subsidies or other supportive instruments, reforming state-controlled sectors, nurturing market competitions, increasing the transparency and accountability of economic policies, eliminating local protectionism and corporatism, and addressing inequalities among different localities and social groups**. One typical example is: when the Trump administration initiated a trade war against China starting in 2019 and pressed China to reform its heavily subsidised state-owned enterprises, some leading Chinese scholars suggested it was a good opportunity to revitalise China's marketisation reforms, which had been caught in stalemate for a long time. However, these voices soon receded as geopolitical tension continued to rise.

Second, it is crucial to **identify potential coalition groups** among multi-layered and multi-directional power struggles within these complex regimes, and there is no standard recipe for who to ally with to press for change. Researchers tend to focus on certain types of relations and dynamics, such as the state–market, central–local or state–society dimensions, or on a given policy subsystem such as the environment, human rights, or trade or FDI, yet in reality they all overlap and are fast evolving. It is important to have a holistic understanding of the level of sophistication in a given authoritarian regime and a deeper grasp of the unique political features of a given policy issue, such as who is the most

dominant player and who needs to be empowered to challenge the status quo. For retrograde regimes, the focus should be on how to enable the mimicking in various areas. For sophisticated regimes, the focus should be on improving the performance of these mimicked institutions, consolidating the support around practices, and preventing backward restoration of old systems as seen in Myanmar today.

The last insight is about **information control**. For developmentalist/authoritarian regimes, information is paramount in both the economic and the political sense. Economically, state interventionist policies to promote economic growth are based on the assumption of prevalent market failures, among which the information asymmetry is the most common one (Stiglitz 1998). Hence, most developmentalist policies depend on strong central states to address information gaps via coordination and long-term planning. The effectiveness of developmentalist policies is essentially determined by the state capacity to address information gaps to serve long-term development goals. Politically, information collection and control are fundamental to authoritarian regimes, and these are often implemented by various apparatus.

Managing massive market and political data traditionally is impossible, but the advent of information and communications technology makes it feasible and in the future, effective authoritarian regimes will inevitably become increasingly data and information driven. For those regimes with no such digital capacity, their control of information and society would be fundamentally shaken during domestic insurgencies, as evidenced in countries like Myanmar and Ethiopia when governments have no choice but to de-plug the internet. Lacking control of information causes them to slip back into retrograde regimes, whereas China is gradually transforming itself into a digital leviathan and is becoming more and more confident in long-term economic planning, resource distribution and social mobilisation, as well as strengthening surveillance of local states, businesses and citizens. We are therefore witnessing an increasingly polarised world of authoritarian regimes in terms of controlling economic and political spheres.

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