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10/9/13

Senior Seminar: State Formation and State-Building

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Research Paper Proposal

Authoritarianism is a form of governance described most simply as a highly centralized political power that has little to no regard for the people of the state. Throughout history, the rise and fall of authoritarianism has been prevalent amongst various states across the globe. With regards to the 20th century in particular, authoritarianism lost its stranglehold on a number of states due to various historical events and circumstances. Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler, Argentina under Juan Peron and the USSR under Joseph Stalin are all examples of failed authoritarian states in the past century.

The authoritarian state has lost much of its appeal as well as its ability to govern due to a reformed global political climate since the mid-20th century. Guided predominantly by the global West, state-formation and state-building has been primarily focused on the liberalization of states in accordance with the structures and institutions that resemble that of their own. The justification for this campaign is that the liberal political regimes, which range in various structures and degrees from country to country throughout the West, have been the causal factor in the rise of the West as the most powerful community of states in the world today.

With the guidance of the West, whether it is through force or compliance, the advantages of liberalized governance have proven to do things such as facilitate economic growth through the implementation of capitalist free markets, and government approval amongst populations through the employment of civil rights. Perhaps the best example of this western influence is seen in the case of Japan. As a result of the guidance by the United States in the state-building process post-World War II, Japan has since been thrust into a vertical ascent toward the top ranks of the worlds most powerful countries.

Yet, despite the ongoing and stubborn efforts of countries like the United States and others throughout the West, the light of authoritarianism still shines bright in a handful of cases. Specifically, the authoritarian state as exhibited by North Korea and China has proven to be stalwart, despite this ongoing trend of influence from the global West. Governed by the same family since its formal establishment in 1948, North Korea has not only detached itself completely from the global community, it has effectively quarantined its people from the outside world for decades under what is regarded as the strictest authoritarian state that exists in the world today. Similarly, China has refused to change or recognize itself in any other way than an authoritative state, and has been effectively governed by the Chinese Communist Party for nearly a century.

With respect to a diverse abundance of major achievements that North Korea and China have enjoyed in the past half-century, it is evidently clear that each nation's employment of authoritative rule cannot be regarded as failures. However, despite the various successes under authoritarianism, the pressure and influence of the global West to move away from this form of governance remains strong, and is only getting stronger. North Korea and China's endurance through time, and against considerable opposition and influence have been nothing short of impressive, but as recent history has shown us, authoritarianism may in fact be a dying political regime. The influences of the global West may be too strong to oppose for much longer, or it may just simply be impossible to coordinate with these foreign powers in the ways necessary to facilitate national agendas without a political change.

In recent years, North Korea and China have both shown signs of malleability in terms of re-sculpting their strict ideals of authoritarianism. This willingness to re-shape and re-adjust their respective authoritative governments is the result of each nations attempt to fit the current and changing conditions of the world today, while maintaining an authoritarian identity. In my research paper, I will explore what North Korea and China have done in order to resist change over the past half-century, and analyze how modern conditions are affecting the major factors that facilitate the operation of their governments, ultimately coming to a conclusion on which state will be more successful in maintaining its authoritative rule going forward.

Considering that I intend to measure which authoritarian state will be more stable in the upcoming years, my dependent variable in my research will be: authoritarian survival. In order to measure authoritarian survival, I will control this measurement using the four major factors that have contributed to the survival of authoritarian regimes in North Korea and China to date, and which will undoubtedly reflect their survival in the future. The four independent variables for this study will be: legitimacy, economic performance, party organization (party strength) and coercion.

My research design will begin by first introducing the major theories of stability in states. With an understanding of what it means for a state to be stable, I will move on to conduct my comparative study of North Korea and China using the Method of Difference. By using this method, I will measure authoritarian survival against legitimacy, economic performance, party organization (party strength) and coercion over a timeline of 50 years. The logic of this methodology is that since both North Korea and China are very similar in their attributes as authoritarian states, they will produce dissimilar outcomes. By carefully tracing how legitimacy, economic performance, party organization (party strength) and coercion have changed and been affected over the past 50 years in North Korea and China, I will ultimately be able to distinguish how each independent variable has affected the survival of their authoritarian regimes, and how it will affect them going forward.

Researching how legitimacy, economic performance, party organization (party strength) and coercion affect authoritarian survival in North Korea and China in the past 50 years is an important topic due to the major impact that both countries and their regime type have had on history thus far. Additionally, understanding the relationship between these independent variables and the dependent variable will help us gain insight into what the world will look like and how it will operate going forward. This topic is also important in terms of its relevance to many of the major themes that are discussed throughout this seminar. The prospect of a political regime change in North Korea and/or China is directly connected to the major theme of this

course: state formation. My topic also incorporates and discusses other major themes regarding state formation that have been relevant throughout this seminar such as legitimacy, economic growth, party organization, coercion and stability theories. These themes are also important to this seminar in their relevance to the theme of state-building. By exploring how factors like legitimacy and coercion affect the state, this will help explain successes and failures of state-building in cases across time and space.

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