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CHAPTER

Contentious Politics under Authoritarianism: State-Mobilized Movements

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Abstract

Classic theories of authoritarianism assume limited popular contention due to weak associational ties within society and harsh repression of incipient unrest. If ordinary people take to the streets, they are typically said to do so in the form of carefully scripted and controlled displays of state mobilization. Societal contention that takes place beyond these parameters is treated either as epiphenomenal to regime change or, if widespread and persistent, as a harbinger of regime-challenging revolution. This chapter, by contrast, draws attention to an important but understudied variety of contentious politics: state-mobilized movements, that is, movements that are actively promoted, overtly or covertly, by elements of the state itself. Specifically, it focuses on pro-regime contention in contemporary China and the Arab world. Though relatively unexplored and unexplained in the existing secondary literature, state-mobilized movements are arguably the most common form of contentious politics in contemporary authoritarian contexts, and critical to understanding authoritarian inception, regeneration, decay, and collapse.

Keywords: [state-mobilized movements](#), [contentious politics](#), [authoritarianism](#), [contention](#), [revolution](#), [China](#), [Arab Uprising](#), [democratization](#), [democratic backsliding](#), [mobilization](#)

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Introduction

State-mobilized movements present a challenge to prevailing theories of authoritarianism and contention, both of which focus on popular mobilization in opposition to governing authorities. Contentious politics theory subsumes disparate forms of contention within a single, comprehensive framework by identifying a common set of mobilization mechanisms for what were once understood as fundamentally dissimilar phenomena: rebellions, revolutions, strikes, social movements, and more (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Earlier explanations of rebellions and revolutions had highlighted the role of declining classes, especially peasants, in challenging premodern autocratic states weakened by war and bureaucratic decay (Moore 1966; Migdal 1974; Scott 1976; Skocpol 1979). Strikes and social movements had been seen as the product of a demanding labor force and middle class brought forth on the rising tides of industrialization and democratization (Shorter and Tilly 1974; Morris and Mueller 1992). The capacious category of contentious politics was introduced not only to encompass diverse forms of societal unrest, but also to cover the full range of regime types. To date, however, contentious politics theory, like the resource mobilization and political process theories from which it developed, has offered greater insight with respect to contention in liberal democracies than in contemporary authoritarian regimes.

While theorists of contentious politics argue that the same basic mechanisms of popular mobilization can be observed in otherwise quite dissimilar contexts, they also acknowledge the formative impact of the larger sociopolitical setting. In particular, studies of contention in the contemporary world have highlighted the generative influence of an autonomous civil society (with robust trade unions, labor parties, religious institutions, and other voluntary associations) of the sort most commonly found in liberal democracies. Mass marches and demonstrations—much like the act of voting—are analyzed as routine and influential varieties of political participation through which concerned citizens make claims on the state. Whether driven primarily by interests, ideologies, or identities, these activities are understood to be organized and resourced through dense associational networks and framed in terms of culturally resonant appeals. When the political opportunity structure allows, due to friction or fractures within the state apparatus, ongoing contestation can prove politically consequential (Tarrow 2022; Meyer 2007; McCarthy and Zald 1997; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Whereas organized protest is recognized as a normal feature of liberal democracies, classic theories of authoritarianism have generally assumed an absence of such contention due to weak associational ties within society and harsh state repression directed toward any signs of incipient unrest (Linz 2000; Reny 2021). In these accounts of authoritarianism, depoliticization of the public arena is typically seen as the *sine qua non* of regime stability. Although spontaneous protests may occasionally erupt, they are not easily sustained due to the paucity of dense and stable civil society connections. And if ordinary people take to the streets they do so only in the form of carefully scripted and controlled displays of state mobilization such as military parades or patriotic rallies on national days. Contention that takes place beyond these prescribed parameters tends to be treated either as infrequent and inconsequential or, if pervasive and persistent, as a harbinger of regime-threatening resistance and revolution.

This chapter draws attention to a remarkably frequent variety of contentious politics under authoritarian regimes that to date has not been central either to theories of contention or to theories of authoritarianism: state-mobilized movements (SMMs), that is, social movements that are actively promoted, whether overtly or covertly, by elements of the state itself. Straddling the boundary between top-down rallies and bottom-up social movements, SMMs often express genuine societal concerns and exert significant political influence, yet they are not the spontaneous product either of oppressed classes or of an autonomous civil society, as theories of contentious politics would suggest. SMMs can also be found in democracies, but for the most part they occur as a common form—in fact the most common form—of contentious politics in contemporary authoritarian contexts. And while they may escalate in scale and ambition, and on occasion

even eventuate in regime change, contrary to prevailing theories of authoritarianism they are more often a sign of regime power than of regime peril. Far from being epiphenomenal to political stability, SMMs are critical to understanding a variety of processes, from authoritarian inception and regeneration to regime decay and collapse.

Contentious Politics under Authoritarianism: The China Puzzle

In recent years, perhaps no case has contributed more to our understanding of contentious politics under authoritarianism than contemporary China. The dramatic Tiananmen Uprising in 1989 attracted global attention, with seasoned China scholars at the time predicting the imminent demise of Communist rule (MacFarquhar 1989; Nathan 2003, 6). Despite the harsh military suppression of protesters in Beijing that spring, the fall of the Berlin Wall later in the year rekindled expectations for regime change in China as well. Although the sudden implosion of Communist systems across Eastern Europe had been a surprise (Kuran 1991), informed observers soon offered a range of plausible explanations for the apparent exhaustion and anticipated extinction of the Communist model: from the failings of socialist institutions and resultant scourge of official corruption to the emergence of a robust civil society and attendant moral outrage on the part of an awakened public (Ash 1990; Chirot 1991; Bunce 1999).

Scholars of China were quick to identify comparable institutional and societal features, strengthening expectations of imminent regime change (Walder 1995; Brook and Frolic 1997). Yet while Communist systems had toppled like dominoes from Bucharest to Budapest, in Beijing the Communist Party remained firmly in command. Equally puzzling, the years following the bloody June 4 massacre of Tiananmen student demonstrators saw an unprecedented outpouring of contentious politics across a wide spectrum of Chinese society: farmers railed against oppressive tax burdens, workers at state-owned enterprises pressed for payment of back wages, homeowners complained about industrial and noise pollution, migrant workers clamored for educational opportunities for their children, veterans demanded better jobs and medical care, retirees appealed for higher pensions, and so on (O'Brien 2008; Wright 2018).

The explosion of contention in post-Tiananmen China sparked debate about the causes and consequences of popular protest under authoritarianism. Initially many scholars interpreted the widespread discord as indicative of a rising “rights consciousness” on the part of a concerned citizenry that might in time create conditions for major political transformation along the lines of what had recently taken place in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (Goldman 1995; O'Brien 1996). When it became clear, however, that China’s “contentious authoritarianism” was proving more conducive to regime resilience than to regime change, skeptics of the “rights consciousness” argument countered that protesters might better be seen to reflect a savvy “rules consciousness” that reinforced state authority by adopting officially authorized rhetoric and acting according to officially prescribed modes of engagement (Perry 2007, 2008, 2009; Chen 2011). Protesters who “played by the rules” in SMMs were a source of valuable information about grassroots grievances for the authoritarian state, allowing it to respond selectively and strategically in ways that could redound to its own benefit as well as to that of the protesters (Perry 2010; Lorentzen 2013; Heurlin 2016). Subsequent studies tended to opt for some synthesis of “rights consciousness” and “rules consciousness,” while avoiding teleological assumptions about the potentially destabilizing or democratizing effects of popular protest on authoritarian rule (Gallagher 2017; Li 2018; Zhuang 2020).

In 2012, Xi Jinping’s rocky road to the commanding heights of power, dramatized by the scandal-ridden downfall of his flamboyant rival Bo Xilai, renewed speculation that China’s vaunted “authoritarian resilience” might be approaching its last legs (Li 2012; Nathan 2013). A decade later, however, despite challenges on multiple fronts, Xi’s regime betrayed few signs of impending collapse. Mortgage boycotts and demonstrations against draconian Covid restrictions notwithstanding, disruptive citizen contention

appeared to have been largely contained due to an aggressive and relentless “stability maintenance” strategy on the part of the Chinese state (Wang and Tzeng 2021).

Stability maintenance entails more than repressing dangerous expressions of popular protest and participation, however. It also involves encouraging and channeling social movements in directions congruent with state designs. The Chinese environmental movement, for example, has been actively promoted by state institutions for many years (Zhao 2010, 465–466; Kostka and Eaton, this volume). More recently, Xi Jinping’s declaration in 2020 of a “People’s War against Covid” reflected a longstanding pattern of mobilizing mass participation for the state’s own ends (Perry 2021).

Social scientists are inclined to compare patterns of contentious politics and state response in various authoritarian countries in search of clues to regime continuity or collapse, but such comparative analysis is of course made considerably more complicated by the fact that the cases we study are not independent of one another. Authoritarian regimes themselves scrutinize the successes and failures of their counterparts and attempt to adjust operations accordingly. China has been an especially assiduous observer, paying close attention to the experiences of other authoritarian states in general and the former Soviet Union in particular (Dimitrov et al. 2023). Indeed, most of Xi Jinping’s signature initiatives—anti-corruption campaign, party-building program, ideological rectification, crackdown on ethnic minorities, reorganization of the military, and so on—are designed as prophylactics against precisely the kind of regime-threatening popular unrest that beset the USSR. With the People’s Republic of China having already outlasted the lifespan of the Soviet Union by some years, its success in containing anti-regime contention through the promotion of SMMs will surely be of growing interest to other authoritarian leaders in the years ahead.

Contentious Politics in the Arab World

Since the collapse of the USSR, no event has triggered more interest in contentious politics than the 2010–2011 Arab Uprising, with scholars studying patterns of diffusion, protest coalitions, and the role of social media in inciting people to take to the streets (Cottle 2011; Magee and Massoud 2022; Wolf, this volume). The Arab Uprising was a rare example of a sudden outburst of mass revolts instigating widespread political change, well beyond the borders of the country where they began. The popular mobilization caught most observers completely off guard, having presumed the region to be particularly resistant to democratization (Gause 2011).

Impactful as it was, the Arab Uprising was an exceptional event which was followed by a wave of authoritarian resurgence and reinforcement in the region. Contentious politics in the Middle East mainly occurs in relatively stable authoritarian contexts. Similar to the Chinese case, social movements in the Arab world have tended to strengthen political stability by offering incumbents valuable information about the grassroots and dividing the opposition (Lust 2005; King 2009). Even during times of regime stability, however, scholarship has focused primarily on opposition movements, scrutinizing when, why, and how they challenge regimes. Much less research has been conducted on SMMs, their diverse strategies and goals, actors, and coalitions, and intended and unintended consequences.

Yet SMMs are a key element in the political fabric of many Arab countries where independence movements were incorporated into the state infrastructure, including ruling parties and the military, and in some cases extending even to labor unions and women’s organizations. As comparativists have argued, the vigor of struggles against colonialism—itsself a form of authoritarian rule (Lawrence, this volume)—helps to explain authoritarian resilience in the region (Slater 2010; Levitsky and Way 2015); following independence, SMMs served to prop up new regimes. Ever since, many of the region’s most powerful opposition movements, such

as Egypt's Free Officers Movement—along with transnational ones, such as the Baath movement and pan-Arabism—gave rise not to democratic politics but rather to new forms of authoritarian rule.

Alongside regime change, SMMs have played a significant role in attempts at what Steven Heydemann (2007) identified as “authoritarian upgrading” in the 1990s and 2000s. These processes of authoritarian regeneration involved a variety of ostensibly liberalizing processes, including a surge in SMMs. Among other manifestations, civil society organizations mushroomed throughout the region, enjoying substantial mobilization power yet still subject to tight state control. These SMMs performed important legitimization functions, both domestically and abroad. For example, in the 2000s as presidents in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen were grooming successors, SMMs helped to bestow legitimacy on their chosen heirs (Sassoon 2016). SMMs also helped create a façade of liberalization for the benefit of Western allies, an important consideration given the latter's development aid and democracy-promotion efforts (Donno, this volume).

Scholars generally assume that popular support for authoritarian regimes stems either from ideological or instrumental concerns or out of fear, yet multiple factors can be at play simultaneously. In her seminal work on Syria, Lisa Wedeen (1998) shows how a variety of symbols and rhetoric celebrating President Hafez al-Assad worked in concert to generate popular compliance with the regime. Although regime compliance is often manifested in participation in SMMs, few studies have analyzed SMMs in the Arab world systematically or comparatively. The one notable exception is state-supported women's organizations. Scholars have revealed the important mobilization and legitimization functions of these groups, alongside their role in marginalizing female opposition activists who do not embrace their brand of feminism (Wolf 2017, 83–86; Antonakis 2019; Tripp 2019; Tripp, this volume).

The relative dearth of detailed studies of SMMs in the Middle East reflects the fact that scholars generally have not considered them central to authoritarian politics in the region. But SMMs do play a critical role—not only in the processes of regime change and authoritarian regeneration, but also during periods of decay and collapse. For example, in the 2000s some people joined ruling parties in Egypt and Tunisia in response to localized materialistic concerns, as opposed to ideological conviction. When the Arab Uprising erupted, incumbents struggled to mobilize this constituency, indicating that changes in the motivations for SMM participation carry important political consequences. Wolf (2018, 2023) shows how in Tunisia contention erupted within the regime's own camp, destabilizing it internally, with some ruling party activists even participating in the protests, though not necessarily because they favored regime transition.

Contestation within single-party authoritarian regimes has had political ramifications in other parts of the world as well. In the protests leading up to the collapse of the USSR, ruling party followers were visible among the crowds, exposing internal frictions and discontent (Beissinger 2002, 97). An absence of SMMs can also be politically salient, especially in times of crisis. During the Arab Uprising, many regimes failed to mobilize supporters, thereby empowering the opposition (Stacher 2012, 158; Wolf 2023, 223–225).

State-Mobilized Movements

The Tiananmen Uprising and Eastern Europe's revolutions of 1989, followed by the Color Revolutions at the start of the twenty-first century and the Arab Uprising just a decade later, directed scholarly attention to the causes and consequences of anti-regime contention. Subsequently, however, the simultaneous rise of nationalist populism and state-controlled cybersecurity administrations appeared to have given authoritarian regimes a new lease on life. In the Arab world, counterrevolutionary movements—most famously, the Tamarod (“rebellion”) movement in Egypt—put an end to democratic politics. In China, the “patriotic education” campaign initiated in the wake of the Tiananmen Uprising helped stoke waves of nationalistic protests that the regime leveraged both domestically and internationally (Weiss 2014).

The term state-mobilized movement (SMM) is “an umbrella concept that encompasses an array of collective social and political actions instigated or encouraged by state agents for the purpose of advancing state interests,” however diverse these interests may be (Ekiert and Perry 2020, 5). In some cases, such as pro-government rallies openly organized by state agencies, the movements function simply as public demonstrations of mass backing for the regime (Hellmeier and Weidmann 2020).

A public demonstration of support from ordinary citizens is obviously a welcome bolster for regimes whose legitimacy rests at least in part upon a claim to represent the will of the people. But even regimes whose legitimacy is asserted on the basis of divine or supernatural rather than citizen sanction have sometimes found it useful to mobilize elements of society to shore up their political position. The ill-fated decision of China’s empress dowager Cixi in 1900 to enlist assistance from the ongoing Boxer Uprising in her quest to retain the “Mandate of Heaven” was motivated by the desire not only to rid the country of a destabilizing foreign presence but also to counteract the initiatives of reformers within the imperial bureaucracy itself (Cohen 1998). In the contemporary Arab world, the kings of Morocco and Jordan claim legitimacy through their status as descendants of Prophet Muhammad. And yet they also promote royalist movements, including women and Islamic associations, to enhance their popular appeal.

Opposition to revolutionary movements is a common precipitant of SMMs (even as disgruntled officials sometimes participate in revolutionary contention themselves to exert pressure on higher-level authorities.) “Counterrevolutionary mobilization”—or “collective and reactive efforts to defend the status quo and its varied range of dominant elites against a credible threat to overturn them from below” (Slater and Smith 2016, 1472)—can be observed in many authoritarian settings. Charles Tilly’s classic study of royalist uprisings in the Vendée revealed widespread counterrevolutionary resistance to the French Revolution (Tilly 1964). While these early expressions of anti-revolutionary sentiment among the French populace were not centrally coordinated, by 1848 the government-organized Mobile Guard provided a more effective state-initiated response to revolutionary challenges (Traugott 1985).

State-mobilized movements designed to defend and empower incumbents occur in contemporary democracies as well. Leaders and political parties with authoritarian inclinations may be tempted to resort to this tactic to get around institutional barriers. In the United States, the January 6 Insurrection, in which President Trump encouraged right-wing extremist groups to march on the US Capitol in support of his attempt to thwart the constitutional transfer of power, was one dramatic example (Select Committee 2022). In Modi’s India, the ruling BJP’s reliance on the Hindu-Nationalist RSS movement to advance its electoral ambitions has developed more gradually, but with equally alarming political implications (Sarkar 2022). In twentieth- and twenty-first-century democracies, SMMs have sometimes served as bellwethers of a fateful turn toward authoritarian rule (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

Although SMMs are often promoted by right-wing nationalists—Mussolini’s Blackshirts and Hitler’s Brownshirts being paradigmatic cases in point—leaders operating from a leftist perspective are also susceptible to this approach. Leftist ideologies gave Arab republics a new lease on life in the 1960s and 1970s, with incumbents adopting socialism, Baathism, or pan-Arabism as official state ideologies (Wolf 2023, 221). And following the Arab Uprising, counterrevolutionary movements consisting of leftists and old-regime figures toppled democratically elected representatives in Tunisia and Egypt, installing new authoritarian rulers.

Reflecting a broad spectrum of ideological underpinnings, state-mobilized movements are diverse in both commitment and composition. Marx and Engel’s warning in the *Communist Manifesto* that the lumpenproletariat “social scum” was inclined to serve as the “bribed tool of reactionary intrigue” (Marx and Engels 1848) notwithstanding, it is not always the case that SMMs consist of marginalized thugs-for-hire whose alliance with the state is purely instrumental and politically reactionary. Indeed, from an incumbent’s perspective, such “Lumpen activists” are a risky source of confederates as they are not

ideologically committed and are liable to switch sides, especially during times of crisis (Wolf 2023, 94–98). In response to Ukraine’s Orange Revolution of 2004, civilian counterrevolutionaries were mobilized from a “composite” constituency of disparate social elements through a variety of programmatic, cultural, and patronage appeals. The Ukrainian counterrevolutionary camp included many who were educated, employed, and enrolled in civil society associations. While some explained their involvement in counterrevolution as a demonstration of loyalty to the authoritarian leader, Viktor Yanukovich, others purported to be defending democratic values (Beissinger 2020).

Diversity among SMM participants is matched by substantial variation in actors and intentions on the part of the state as well. Fear of removal from office (whether by assassination, coup, rebellion, revolution, or election) can serve as a powerful impetus for the supreme leader to mobilize support among sympathetic citizens. But government agencies at all levels of the system have mobilized citizens for reasons that go well beyond political strategizing and self-preservation. Authoritarian regimes in East Asia—including 1930s Japan, 1950s–1960s Taiwan, 1970s South Korea, and the People’s Republic of China throughout its history—have, with varying degrees of success, mobilized ordinary villagers in state-led campaigns for rural development (Looney 2020). China in particular resorts frequently to a mode of “campaign-style governance” in which party and government agencies at central, provincial, and local levels dispatch waves of “work teams” composed of both cadres and civilians, whose purpose is to mobilize grassroots society in service to the state’s developmental and disciplinary agendas (Perry 2019).

Intra-State Contention

Aside from serving to advance the general interests of a state and its leadership, SMMs may be undertaken as a weapon of intra-state struggle. In the competitive authoritarian regime of Venezuela, for example, Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian Movement sponsored both reactive and proactive SMMs to match the shifting electoral and protest threats posed by an increasingly powerful opposition (Handlin 2020). On the other side of the political spectrum, state-supported veterans’ organizations in democratic Croatia protested repeatedly on behalf of their patron, the right-wing HDZ Party, whenever electoral losses relegated the HDZ to the ranks of the opposition (Dolenec and Sirinic 2020).

Intra-regime conflict and competition can impel state actors to ally with societal confederates to gain the upper hand in internecine battles. Some movement participants also make significant demands on the state, and may even express serious criticisms of state policies and personnel (Ekiert, Perry, and Yan 2020). Such instances often point to rifts and rivalries within the political leadership or between government organizations that pit some state authorities and agencies against others.

In China, disgruntled factions within the Communist Party have on occasion sought to mobilize followers in opposition to the supreme leader. Defense Minister Lin Biao was accused of attempting this as part of his failed 1971 assassination plot against Chairman Mao (Teiwes and Sun 1996). Deng Xiaoping’s initial encouragement of the Democracy Wall in 1978–1979 was a more successful effort to leverage social discontent in favor of reformist policies that eventually helped to unseat Communist Party chairman Hua Guofeng (Goldman 1995).

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, waged by Mao Zedong’s Red Guards against so-called “bourgeois conservatives” inside his own Communist Party, was a state-mobilized movement launched in the name of rescuing a correct understanding of Marxism-Leninism from the errors of Soviet-style “revisionism.” Like the empress dowager during the Boxer Uprising more than half a century before, Chairman Mao looked to restive elements of Chinese society to combat rivals both inside and outside the government. In stark contrast to Empress Cixi’s conservatism, however, Mao’s recruitment of societal agents was framed as a

crusade to “cultivate revolutionary successors” for the purpose of “continuing the revolution under socialism” (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2008).

Wolf (2023, 30–33) shows that many incumbents propose such “correctivist ideas”—that is, they promise to rectify past “mistakes” or to realize a regime’s “true” purpose—to prop up their support base and consolidate power. In Syria, Hafez al-Assad launched a Corrective Movement that enabled him to gain a wide following and establish his personal rule. In Tunisia, President Kais Saied vowed to realize people’s revolutionary demands and, in the process, put an end to democratic politics. However, the very process of power consolidation creates losers within the regime, who may turn into agents of contention. While scholars have tended to focus on elite struggles, it is important to recognize that local and midlevel officials can also play a crucial role in internecine battles. Such officials may command a sizable number of followers whom they can readily mobilize, sometimes with major consequences. When protests erupted in Tunisia in 2010, a notable number of local and midlevel ruling-party members encouraged their constituencies to take to the streets, though for the most part they called for internal regime reform, as opposed to revolution. Even so, their public expression of contention, combined with the absence of pro-regime countermobilization, bolstered the revolutionary movement and facilitated the regime’s demise.

Important as SMMs can be in shaping domestic political agendas, they are not necessarily confined by the territorial boundaries of the state. The emergence of the Novorossiia (“New Russia”) movement in other parts of Ukraine following Russia’s annexation of Crimea was a case in point (Greene and Robertson 2020). Just as advances in communications technology have facilitated cross-border networks on the part of transnational activists (Keck and Sikkink 1998), SMMs reap similar benefits from the availability of cellphones and social media platforms that allow states to communicate, overtly and covertly, with knowing confederates and unsuspecting accomplices alike. When Egypt’s Tamarod movement resulted in the ousting of the democratically elected president Mohamed Morsi, activists in some other Arab countries sought to follow suit, using Twitter and Facebook to propagate their counterrevolutionary messages. SMMs around the world increasingly resort to social media to mobilize followers in service to both national and international goals (Gunitsky 2015; Michaelsen and Ruijgrok, this volume).

Conclusion

As a common form of contentious politics in contemporary authoritarian regimes, state-mobilized movements have wide-ranging effects. Yet with few exceptions (Ekiert, Perry, and Yan 2020; Wolf 2023), comparative scholarship has focused far more attention on popular mobilization against governing authorities than on contention countenanced by state actors. The dearth of literature on SMMs offers ample avenues for further research. To start with, scholars have an opportunity to distinguish more systematically among various types of SMMs. This chapter differentiated between social movements perpetrated by governing authorities, on the one hand, and those supported by their internecine challengers, on the other. But there are many more SMM types and subtypes, including distinctions based on local, regional and transnational spheres of operation.

We also know relatively little about SMM membership composition, contentious strategies, and goals, and the effects of such variation on political outcomes. Moreover, SMMs do not exist in isolation, and it is therefore instructive to investigate when, how, and why they ally with other (more commonly studied) social movements and opposition movements, and with what consequences, intended and unintended. This work has the potential to provide fresh perspectives to the literature on coalitions and pact making in authoritarian regimes, including during times of political upheaval and crisis. Such studies can also expand and enrich analyses of the mechanisms and processes that generate various patterns of contentious politics.

This chapter has argued that SMMs play an important role in authoritarian inception, regeneration, decay, and collapse, but additional research is needed to uncover the precise ways in which SMMs affect these political processes in different parts of the world. We offer insights drawn primarily from China and the Arab world, two regions where contentious politics under authoritarian rule has been of particular note, but obviously these cases do not exhaust the possibilities for comparative research. The regional and international patterns of SMMs also demand careful investigation, including the role of specific SMMs in autocracy-promotion efforts. This would require unpacking the political economy of SMMs, including the sources and influence of financial support—international as well as domestic. Such empirical investigations promise to open the door to broader analytical insights for theories of contentious politics and authoritarianism alike.

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