

POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND AUTHORITARIANISM IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract:

This research builds on earlier research into the relationship between economic growth and authoritarianism and explores the factors leading to authoritarianism in South Asia. Research has uncovered a tendency toward authoritarianism accompanying an increase in economic growth in some South Asian countries. However, this trend only appears in countries suffering from political instability with rapid shifts into and back out of periods of authoritarian rule. On the other hand, India, pre-1983 Sri Lanka and post-2008 Nepal serve as counter-examples of established democracies demonstrating the benefits of political stability as well as providing a platform for development through the maintenance of open, democratic government and professionalised public service institutions.

The isolated case in South Asia of Sri Lanka slipping from democracy to open anocracy post-1983, rather than authoritarianism, also demonstrates the benefit of nurturing democracy over the long term in support of the “J-curve Theory” put forth by Ian Bremmer. However, the same finding may also indicate that degrading institutions may lead to political instability that increases the likelihood that a state will fall into authoritarianism and a cycle of instability from which it is unlikely to escape. These findings indicate that the key for long-term sustainable growth and stability in the region is the maintenance of strong democratic institutions in order to create political stability.

***Keywords:** Authoritarianism, democracy, J-curve Theory & political stability*

Introduction

This research builds on quantitative research into the relationship between economic growth and authoritarianism and explores the reasons behind slides into authoritarianism in South Asia. Research has uncovered a tendency toward authoritarianism accompanying an increase in economic growth in some South Asian countries. However, this trend only appears in countries suffering from political instability with rapid shifts into and back out of periods of authoritarian rule. On the other hand, India, pre-1983 Sri Lanka and post-2008 Nepal serve as counter-examples of established democracies demonstrating the benefits of political stability as well as providing a platform for development through the maintenance of open, democratic government and professionalised public service institutions.

The isolated case in South Asia of Sri Lanka slipping from democracy to open anocracy, rather than authoritarianism, also demonstrates the benefit of nurturing democracy over the long term in support of the “J-curve Theory” put forth by Ian Bremmer. However, the same finding also indicates that Sri Lankan institutions are degrading in a manner that could lead to political instability in the future.

Research Problem and Objective

I have identified that it is not economic factors that cause South Asian countries to fall into authoritarian rule, but political instability. South Asian countries that fall into authoritarianism the first time proceed to enter into a cycle of shifts between more openness and democracy alternating with sudden shifts toward authoritarianism. Once this cycle begins, escaping it is extremely difficult. India and Sri Lanka have not fallen into authoritarianism in their histories, most likely because of the strength of their democratic institutions over time. This paper will lay out the effects of economics and how they relate to authoritarianism in South Asia, as well as detailing the non-economic catalysts that preceded authoritarian rule in other South Asian countries.

Methodology

The research methodology is primarily quantitative. There is a demonstrated tendency toward authoritarianism accompanying an increase in economic growth in some South Asian countries. This may be due to the necessity of rooting out domestic cultures of corruption in order to enact neo-liberal policies needed to secure foreign direct investment (FDI) from developed nations. However, there are other South Asian countries in which democracy and related regime types like open anocracy indicate that economic growth is better served by the establishment and maintenance of open, democratic regimes. This research examines three hypotheses related to authoritarianism and economic growth in South Asia:

Hypothesis 1: Rates of economic growth in South Asia will be higher in closed anocracies (countries with a mixture of democratic and authoritarian structures, classed as open or closed) and authoritarian regimes than in open anocracies or democratic regimes.

Hypothesis 2: Authoritarianism and closed anocracy will draw in more FDI than democracies and open anocracies.

Hypothesis 3: Regimes that are democracies become closed anocracies or authoritarian regimes following economic shocks and resulting low economic growth rates.

Results and Discussion

The evidence presented here indicates that the adoption of more authoritarian structures in order to increase economic growth can increase FDI and economic growth in unstable South Asian states. However, this comes at the cost of undermining the democratic tendencies and institutions and overall political stability that provide the key for long-term sustainable growth. India and Sri Lanka are the only countries in South Asia that have avoided a direct transition from democracy to authoritarianism due to the long-term resilience of their democratic structures and political stability. This indicates that stable governmental structures should be reinforced throughout the region rather than de-emphasised.

Evidence from other South Asian countries indicates that the presence of unstable institutions is what results in the imposition of authoritarian structures. This is why newly democratic countries and those who have climbed out of periods of authoritarianism and anocracy are seen to return directly to authoritarianism from their democratic classification.

Conclusion

Quantitative research on South Asia uncovers a tendency toward authoritarianism accompanying an increase in economic growth in some South Asian countries. However, this trend only appears in countries suffering from instability manifesting itself in rapid shifts from democracy to authoritarian rule. On the other hand, India, pre-1983 Sri Lanka and post-2008 Nepal serve as counter-examples of established democracy increasing political stability and providing a platform for development through the maintenance of open, democratic government and professionalised public service institutions. This indicates that the key for long-term sustainable growth and stability in the region is the maintenance of strong democratic institutions in order to create political stability.