Chinese Patronage and Southeast Asian Democracy in Distress

Jihyeon Bae
University of Washington, USA
jihyeonb@uw.edu

Abstract: Many countries around the world are beset by the democratic recession, and Southeast Asia is no exception to that. Series of events show that Southeast Asian electoral democracies are receding back to full authoritarianism, and such a phenomenon requires academic attention to investigate its pattern. This paper explores the impact of Chinese patronage on Southeast Asian democracy and argues that its economic and normative support of autocrats enable the continuation of an authoritarian turn in Southeast Asia. Two cases of the Philippines and Cambodia unravel how Chinese patronage leads to autocrats’ disregard for liberal pressures. The logic is twofold. First, economic support enables them to maintain performance-based legitimacy and resume planned policies in the face of democratic states’ sanctions. Second, normative endorsement raises the hurdle of liberal actors to sanction autocrats by changing international audiences’ empirical expectations of the admissibility of strongman leadership. This paper contributes to the literature by incorporating a normative lens into the discussion of the continued democratic recession in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Authoritarianism, Authoritarian Resilience, International Norm, Chinese aid, Democratic Recession
Southeast Asian countries had been on auspicious tracks of democratic consolidation until recently. Elections were held in an institutionalized manner, and political parties seemed to take their roles in electoral competition. However, a plethora of events implies that Southeast Asian democracies are detracting from most of our prospects (Duncan, 2019; Björn & Bonoan, 2019). To preview a couple of case studies which I am going to present later, Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen officially dismissed the main opposition party, and the Philippines’ Duterte instigated mass violence under the banner of “War on Drugs.”

The concept of democratic consolidation itself can be evasive. To encompass various types of polities, I rely on the minimum procedural definition of democracy in line with Levitsky and Way’s (2010) theory. It comprises four conditions: competitive elections, full adult suffrage, protection of civil liberties, and the absence of nonelected officials’ power to govern. What determines how democratic a polity is a state’s qualification of these criteria. In this regard, full authoritarianism is a regime with no channel for opposition actors to legally contest against incumbents for executive power. Regimes that reside between democracy and full autocracy are usually referred to as hybrid regimes or competitive authoritarianism. For the remaining sections, I refer to regimes that meet four conditions of a competitive political environment as liberal democracies.

Existent literatures on the topic of non-Western democracy are centered on whether there exists an idiosyncratic Confucian culture that hamstrings an establishment of democracy in the first place (Shin, 2017; Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Another prominent strand of research is characterized by the modernization thesis, which mainly proposes a positive correlation between economic development and democracy (Lipset, 1960; Przeworski & Limongi, 1997; Inglehart & Welzel, 2009). Other variables, including immigration, economic recession, and unemployment rate, followed afterward (Hegre et al., 2020). It is tempting to conclude that Southeast Asian countries are not yet domestically ripe and economically developed to settle democracy. However, regarding the steady economic growth of the region and the burgeoning middle class, there is something more than the domestic economic condition that determines the fate of democracy.

Apart from the existing work focusing on domestic determinants, this research aims at suggesting international factors as the central explanatory variable for the resilience of authoritarianism in Southeast Asia in the face of democratic pressure. Two cases of Cambodia and the Philippines show that the existence of economic and normative support from the black knight China can explain the persistence of the authoritarian trend despite the two countries’ export dependence on liberal democracies.

**Literature Review**

As previously mentioned, domestic factors have been predominantly suggested as determinants of regime trajectories. Literature on international variables has only recently been spotlighted. Plattner (2015) pointed out the global competition between democratization efforts and autocracies coupled with autocracies’ persistent performance are sources of doubt about democracy (see also Gat, 2007). It is also often mentioned that the populace is appealed to authoritarian ascendancy, which undermines the fundamental pillars of democracy (Foa, 2018). However, existing literature focuses on changing sentiments of the populace who live in non-authoritarian countries, whereas this paper investigates diverging outcomes in regime types.

Meanwhile, there exists a relevant strand of regime studies done on international factors based on the framework of “authoritarian diffusion” (Ambrosio, 2010). Based on his frame, recent case studies discuss whether Russia and China have intentions for diffusing authoritarian value to their neighborhoods and, if so, whether authoritarian reach is circumscribed to geographically proximate regions (Weyland, 2017; Brownlee, 2017; Buzogány, 2017). Most authoritarian diffusion literature focuses more on the intention of such patronage of authoritarian countries rather than the mechanism and repercussions of diffusions (Kneuer et al., 2019; Bank, 2017).

Economists have delved into the question of whether conditional aid provided by liberal democracies facilitates the democratization of recipient states. Csordas and Ludwig (2011) showed that foreign aid, in general, has a positive influence on stabilizing democratic institutions in the recipient countries but does not have an impact on transitioning the
regime type to democracy. Bermeo (2011) similarly showed that aid from authoritarian donor countries has a negative correlation with recipient countries’ democratic transition. Adolph and Prakash (2021) also provided an empirical analysis that posits that growing export volume to China amid declining exports to Western democracies leads to a more restrictive environment for nongovernmental organizations. Similarly, Adolph et al. (2017) suggested that growing exports to China led to a decrease in labor standards in the African region. Literature on developmental economics falls short of explaining cases that show strong economic ties with Western democracies as well as incongruent political trajectories.

Another relevant research was conducted by Levitsky and Way (2010). They lay out a framework for the international dynamics of regime transition based on the notions of Western leverage and linkage. According to their model, when Western countries maintain a high level of linkage with authoritarian countries via channels of trade and society-level engagements, it is more likely for autocrats to be democratized because domestic civilians can check against the regime, empowered by foreign media channels. On the other hand, when an autocracy has a low level of linkage, leverage becomes the decisive variable. When Western states have a high level of leverage against an authoritarian regime, autocrats will become unstable because ignoring Western democratic demands can be politically costly.

They pointed out that when there is an alternate non-liberal source of support, Western leverage dwindles because autocrats no longer have to comply with conditions attached to economic support (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Building on their work, Tolstrup (2015) defined black knights as external actors that challenge the democracy of other states and further explored the impact of election bolstering by neighboring black knights. Despite previous works, accounts based on western leverage and linkage fall short of a solid explanation in cases when there are moderate levels of two variables. In a similar vein, I explore the impacts of both economic and normative support from the black knight on ignoring liberal pressure. To make a caveat, my intention is not to investigate the causes of initial authoritarian return but rather to explain the “continuation” of authoritarian return, which only occurs after the initial turn. To put it differently, I focus on the “persistence,” not “initiation,” of authoritarian revival when we clearly expect an increase in liberal pressure against newly rising authoritarian leaders.

Theory

When countries show signs of authoritarian return, it is commonly expected from the multilateral international order that liberal democracies and organizations would try to slow down the process by diplomatic pressure or overt economic sanctions (Ikenberry, 2003; Pevehouse, 2002). If sanctions and pressures from liberal democracies are crucial enough, emerging authoritarian state leaders will make concessions because international isolation from trade and diplomatic ties would risk their remaining ruling years. In other words, the time of authoritarian return is the window within which we expect the escalation of democratic pressure from liberal democracies. Despite a strong force of pressure, we sometimes observe meager impacts. Some authoritarian state leaders do not make any concessions to democratic demands and make even audacious steps toward full authoritarianism. In this section, I provide a theoretical argument that examines the international factor in explaining the continuation of the authoritarian turn in the face of elevated liberal pressure.

First, I conceptualize normative support and elaborate on how it affects authoritarian persistence. I underscore the main idea that economic patronage is not sufficient to explain authoritarian persistence without taking a norm factor into account. Norms are often characterized as a set of acceptable or unacceptable behaviors contingent on social interactions. People conform to a certain pattern of behaviors when two conditions are met, namely empirical and normative expectations. First, there should be an empirical expectation that a sufficient number of others are behaving in a similar pattern. Second, there should be a belief that they are expected to acknowledge and follow the pattern being observed (Bicchieri, 2016; Brennan et al., 2016).

Empirical expectation forms when individuals receive information about the general tendency of other actors’ behaviors and propensity either by witnessing a pattern themselves or getting information from a credible source. In this context, normative support is conceptualized as a high-profile statement that changes people’s empirical expectations of how most others
behave. It takes the form of counterfeiting support rate for incumbents to falsely signal general evaluations. Injecting the idea that people follow a single pattern of behavior makes it harder for dissidents to defy the trend, which is why empirical expectation is crucial.

Another function served by norms is characterized by constitutive power. Based on norms, people attach positive or negative assessments of certain behaviors and enforce sanctions accordingly (Horne & Mollborn, 2020; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Sanction enforcements tend to be legitimized based on societal standards embedded in norms. For example, if social norms that consider civil rights as fundamental human rights are embedded in society, it becomes costly for state leaders to initiate policies that ban associations. The exact opposite also holds. If there is a social norm that does not value the right to association as much as other social rights, it becomes less costly to quell political demonstrations.

Considering the roles that norms play in determining the political cost imposed on state leaders for carrying out certain policies, publicly stating that a behavior is considered “acceptable” is crucial in shaping social interactions. I further examine the specific mechanism through which China’s normative support can help authoritarian state leaders embolden unprecedented and illiberal norms. I argue that people’s empirical expectation of Southeast Asian regimes’ legitimacy is shifted when high-level Chinese officials make public statements that emphasize the necessity and inevitability of illiberal and repressive policies. Public speech that endorses authoritarian state leaders influences empirical expectation by sending the message to both domestic and international audiences that the new leader’s incumbency is supported by some actors, including a country as formidable as China.

The fact that support comes from China, in specific, matters because of its rise in power. A voice coming from a strong state allows China to have an important normative impact, as Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2020) claimed. They pointed out that “authoritarian gravity centers (AGCs)” that export autocratic ideas to the region function as role models to neighboring states. China, with its growing authority in the international political scene, is the desired trajectory that other state leaders in the region are willing to emulate. Such pulling effect of China as a gravity center empowers its voice in that there are more listeners and followers of official statements from China.

The question of how the information provision by public endorsement changes the cost of liberal pressure can be answered by Donno’s (2013) theory of election monitoring. According to her seminal piece, election monitoring helps the enforcement of liberal electoral norms when it spreads information about a violation because the information makes it easier for states to justify their sanctions against norm violators. International actors certainly bear the cost of ruptured diplomatic or social ties with authoritarian states they are shaming. What determines the level of cost is the information disseminated to the audiences. Clear evidence of election fraud suggests that norm enforcers can justify their sanctions against violators by pointing to the evidence.

Although the election monitoring mechanism lowers the cost of liberal norm enforcement by providing evidence of electoral misconduct, normative support for the illiberal regime has the exact opposite effect. When the information that Hun Sen’s regime is getting support from China becomes common knowledge, it becomes a common fact that everyone else also received the very same information. The thinking that people are in support of the regime puts a burden of justification of punishment on international rights advocates.

The point that official statements are made on the international stage instead of bilateral communication channels matters precisely in this context. Official statements made at forums like the United Nations create room for normal competition at the international level. According to the norm cycle theory, domestic norms escalate to international forums, and they compete with or supplement existing international norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Unlike bilateral communication from one state to another, staging a normative argument at the international level sparks a norm competition from the eyes of global spectators.

Before turning to the next section, another caveat should be made here. I am not suggesting that domestic or international audiences would somehow suddenly think repression is acceptable after listening to a speech from a Chinese official. Instead, the idea of authoritarian state shifts from being “utterly unacceptable” to “disputable” when there is an official claim that alludes that some Asian countries need a different form of governance from Western democracy. This shift increases the burden of proof that falls on rights advocacy groups to pressure
authoritarian states in that now they must justify their criticism and sanction. Consequently, authoritarian states anticipate lower costs of turning blind eyes to democratic pressure.

Hypotheses

The theoretical part maintained that both economic and normative endorsements of neighboring Southeast Asian authoritarian regimes account for the persistence of authoritarianism in the face of heightened liberal pressure. First, the economic aid package financially enables autocrats to forge their state apparatuses and to maintain an incumbent-friendly political playing field without relying on conventional aid with conditionalities. Chinese aid regime differs noticeably from most of the OECD donor countries, which lends itself to different political ramifications. Blaire and Roessler (2021) pointed out that Chinese aid regimes differ from OECD aid regimes in that there are no political or economic conditionalities, fewer anti-bribery or corruption regulations, and an absence of trackage from international transparency regimes. Given enough amount of money, autocrats can carry out their controversial policies and thus can prolong their regime survivals which otherwise could have been restricted by OECD aid regimes.

Another mechanism in which Chinese economic patronage supports authoritarianism is ascribed to the preservation of performance-based legitimacy. The citizenry ascribes the trustworthiness of a government to its performance, which leads to the public belief that the government holds an appropriateness to provide public services with authority (Levi et al., 2009). Authoritarian leaders’ legitimacy has been precariously based on rapid economic growth, which is prone to a plunge should foreign funding ceases to flow. Considering the ephemeral characteristic of performance-based legitimacy, economic patronage from China helps the regime carry on its developmental project without a halt. If there had not been an alternate source of aid from China, newly rising authoritarian state leaders would have faced a sudden break with the growing economy.

Next, normative support from China allows illiberal policies to compete against liberal norms which used to dominate international norms. As a result of raised bars for liberal pressure to blame authoritarian return, authoritarian leaders can face a lower cost of turning blind eyes to liberal pressure. As China is reckoned as the formidable challenger against the traditional hegemon, explicit support from China puts strength on the pushback against liberal pressure on the international norm competition stage.

To examine how Chinese supports empower Southeast Asian autocrats, this paper employs case analyses of Cambodia and the Philippines. Both countries went through salient turns from electoral democracy to authoritarianism, and both economies are heavily dependent on exports, which allows me to control the effect of trade dependence. Autocrats’ official statements and remarks proxy indirect linkages between events. By analyzing the two countries’ recent public statements, this study concludes that China’s economic and normative support resulted in the continuation of authoritarianism despite international liberal pressure.

The main hypothesis is that authoritarian leaders blatantly downplay liberal democracies’ criticisms when there is Chinese patronage. One of the major alternate explanations is that regime trajectories are dependent on the regime types of major economic partners. Cases of Cambodia and the Philippines falsify such claims in that both countries rely on exports to liberal democracies. If the alternate explanation could fully explain political outcomes, then these two countries should not have made bold movements that made their trade partners frown. However, when there were sufficient economic support and normative patronage from China, two authoritarian leaders chose to defy their export partners’ urges.

Cambodia: Rigged Electoral Justice

Cambodia manifests how a Chinese provision of financial package empowers authoritarian policies. Cambodia officially proclaimed itself to be an “electoral democracy” in 1993, when the first election was held. After then, it seemed to follow a durable track of the democratization process. To consolidate electoral institutions, the United States provided a huge amount of financial assistance intended for helping local elections as well as political campaigns. Owing to both domestic as well as external efforts to forge electoral democracy in Cambodia, the general election was held, and Hun Sen came into power. However, soon after becoming the prime minister, Hun Sen dissolved the main opposition party, Cambodia National Rescue...
Party (CNRP) and exiled its leader Kem Sokha. Kem Sokha was criminalized for alleged treason against the regime. Hun Sen also expelled a number of English media journalists and jailed prominent opposition leaders (European Parliament, 2017). Without having the opposition party or media, the election became intensely skewed toward Hun Sen.

Without much surprise, the United States criticized the election as being illegitimate and quickly promulgated its rescindment of the promised aid package for the Cambodian general election planned in 2018. Also, members of the European Union imposed tariffs on rice imports products from Cambodia, which is the backbone industry of the domestic economy. Such retraction of financial support could have resulted in insufficient resources for the incumbents’ own political mobilization and hence jeopardized incumbency.

Although the United States and the European Union lambasted Cambodia for carrying on the rigged election after disbanding the opposition party, Hun Sen did not make concessions to the Western countries’ demands (Hutt, 2019). Such outright disregard is especially puzzling considering the economic context. According to the World Integrated Trade Solution dataset provided by the World Bank, the United States has been the biggest export destination until 2019, which is the most recent date the data is available. It has accounted for around 30% of Cambodia’s total merchandise trade share (World Bank, 2019). China, on the contrary, accounted for 6.83% of the total merchandise trade share in 2019. If the economic linkage with the West were the determining factor of the alignment decision, we would have noticed Hun Sen’s accommodations of democratic pressure. Clearly, economic linkage with the West cannot fully explain Hun Sen’s disregard for liberal pressure.

**Economic Patronage: Performance and Electoral Legitimation**

As I theorized earlier, a combination of economic and normative patronage from China enabled Hun Sen’s provocative disregard for liberal pressure. It was economic patronage from China that helped Hun Sen kick off his renewed term in office. Just a few days after the European Union’s proclamation to impose tariffs on Cambodian rice imports, China pledged to provide a US$588 million aid package to Cambodia (Reuters, 2019). This subsequent largesse from China belittled Western impacts, especially as the amount of Chinese aid package far outnumbered that previously offered by the United States. The European Union’s trade sanctions became less critical to the Cambodian economy as well.

Economic support was a crucial source that boosted the electoral legitimacy of Hun Sen by enabling the 2018 general election as planned. China donated election-related logistics like computers, ballot boxes, printers, and cameras so that the election could take place on time (Lipes, 2017). One may wonder why the electorate would support Hun Sen. For competitive authoritarian regimes like Cambodia, authoritarian incumbents can easily win the election through the unlevel electoral playing field and simultaneously make it more challenging for citizens to impugn the legitimacy than outright full dictatorship without any elections.

Second, the continuation of the economic development project prevented Hun Sen from facing a sudden economic crisis, which in turn would have triggered a legitimacy crisis. As has been hypothesized, economic performance has been a crucial pillar of legitimacy for the Cambodian government. The Hun Sen regime used to enjoy popular support based on economic achievement and social stability (Un, 2011).

Relevant indices from the V-Democracy data present a clearer pattern between economic patronage and continued democratic decline (Lindberg et al., 2014). V-Democracy dataset provides detailed indices that allow researchers to focus on a specific pillar that defines democracy. In order to proxy the main dependent variable, the continued authoritarianism in Cambodia, I used the “additive polyarchy index” and “institutionalized autocracy” variables. The polyarchy index is the amalgam of principles of electoral justice, which includes freedom of association, clean elections, freedom of expression, elected executive, and the level of suffrage. Institutionalized autocracy measures the degree of restriction in electoral competition, as has been characterized by the Polity Project (Marshall et al., 2002. It is clearly the case that the level of electoral democracy had declined noticeably since the year 2015 when the then-leader of the opposition party CNRP, Sam Rainsy, was forced to flee. With a continuous crackdown on the Western media and opposition party, Cambodia’s polyarchy index was on the decline. Of course, the level of institutionalized autocracy began
to escalate with the diminished size of the opposition party and journalism.

It is notable that a digression from democracy has not slowed down despite liberal pressure. To test the causal claim between economic patronage and authoritarianism, I included GDP per capita and “rational-legal legitimation” variables, which each represent a leader’s reliance on performance-based legitimacy and election-based legitimacy. Rational-legal legitimation score increases when a leader refers to the legal norms and regulations to justify the incumbency. Hun Sen’s regime increasingly legitimated itself by stating that the result was from a democratic election, which is a common rhetoric in competitive authoritarian settings (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Un, 2011).

The second channel of legitimacy came from economic performance. Despite the partial withdrawal of the European Union’s preferential trade agreements and cut off the United States’ aid package, the Hun Sen regime was able to justify its ruling based on performance because he had alternate funding from China as soon as its Western funding channel was blocked.

**Normative Patronage: Norm of Strong State for Stability**

It becomes trickier when testing the relationship between normative patronage and authoritarian sustenance. I hypothesize that Chinese normative endorsement disseminates information about the general trend of support toward the regime to international audiences. Right after the 2018 general election conducted with the de facto absence of the opposition party, China formally announced its acknowledgment of the Hun Sen regime. China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that “China supports the Cambodian side’s efforts to protect political stability and achieve economic development (emphasis original) and believes the Cambodian government can lead the people to deal with domestic and foreign challenges and will smoothly hold elections next year” (Blanchard, 2017). China also showed a friendly diplomatic engagement with Hun Sen by greeting him as a leader of the country after the election (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2018). Acknowledgment of Hun Sen as a state leader signaled the crucial implication of China’s formal acceptance of the election result.

Public endorsements change people’s expectations of how the regime is perceived by others. It disseminates the information that there is some level of support for the regime, especially when there is a need for economic development, which is the main point from Hun Sen. Consequently, rights advocates find it more challenging to criticize the legitimacy of Hun Sen’s electoral result with the information about the increasing acknowledgment of his incumbency. The
chronology (Table 1) highlights major events that show a pattern between Chinese economic and normative supports and the ensuing behaviors of the Hun Sen regime.

One may wonder if it is the factor that caused the initial return to authoritarianism that persists. In this counterfactual world, it would not be China’s patronage but the cause of the initial return of authoritarianism that explains the continuation. However, the initial anti-democratic turn took place in the absence of Chinese support and with a moderate level of linkage to the West. China was not a strong ally of Cambodia from the beginning. When Hun Sen ousted the co-prime minister Ranariddh by a coup in 1997, Western states and members of the ASEAN suspended aid which amounted to US$782 million. Although China did not lambast a coup outright, it supported US$3 million, which is far less than retracted aid (Po & Primiano, 2020).

It is also important to ask if the absence of Chinese patronage would lead to democracy. The following event is a good litmus test to test a hypothetical claim. By the end of 2019, the threat of the European Union’s withdrawal from a preferential trade agreement was imminent. Hun Sen showed signs of vulnerability by releasing CNRP activists and repairing democratic ties with the Trump administration (Ciorciari, 2020). In January 2020, China made timely support for Cambodia by securing Hun Sen a US$600 million grant aid (Ciorciari, 2020). When liberal pressure was just about to steer the trajectory of an anti-democratic turn, China chimed in, and Hun Sen still rules at the time of this writing.

The Philippines: War on Drugs

The Philippines had been on the verge of autocracy and democracy for several years. Although there was a series of vicissitudes, its political system was widely categorized as electoral democracy during the post-Cold War (Human Rights Watch, 2007; German Action Network Human Rights-Philippines, 2007). Yet, its democratic institutions and electoral justice were soon imperiled. After Rodrigo Duterte’s inauguration as the president, he was outspokenly initiating repressive policies under the name of “War on Drugs.” Individuals were executed without any formal investigation procedures, neither are they convicted through a legitimate legal process. Human rights reports reveal an atrocious situation in the Philippines where “approximately 3697 drug personalities died in connection with antidrug operations” from July 2016 to October 2017 (United Nations Human Rights Council).

Table 1
Order of Events in Cambodia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Major Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>April, the United States embassy announced a US$1.8 million grant to assist local elections in 2017 and the 2018 general election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>November, Hun Sen dissolved the leading opposition party, Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>November, United States announced to cut promised financial assistance for the 2018 general election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>December, China pledges Cambodia with funding for the 2018 general election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>August, Hun Sen won the general election with 80% of the popular vote in the National Assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>August, Acknowledgment of Hun Sen’s incumbency by China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>January, European Union warned to impose tariffs on rice imports from Cambodia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>January, China promised US$588 million in volume aid to Cambodia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>April, Xi Jinping pointed out that China and Cambodia are iron friends; Premier Li Keqiang expressed that the two countries enjoy traditional friendship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>July, the United States House of Representatives passed the “Cambodia Democracy Act”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>October, Hun Sen responded, “the game of placing sanctions and embargoes does not kill anyone.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Attacks on human rights activists, journalists, and the minority are reported to be prevalent (Galace, 2018). Enormity carried out by Duterte was heavily lambasted by the United Nations after special rapporteurs’ investigations (European Union External Action, 2016).

International sanctions followed soon after the disclosure. The European Union threatened to adopt punitive sanctions by raising tariffs on the Philippines’ import products and withholding the Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus (Kine, 2017). Its threat of economic sanctions is particularly critical considering that the European Union has been one of the biggest trade partners with the Philippines. In 2012, the European Union accounted for 30% of foreign direct investment stock in the Philippines, which far outnumbers the portion taken by Japan and the United States (Cigaral, 2017). Duterte must have expected to face strong criticism. What led Duterte to boldly ignore liberal pressure despite its strong economic ties with European economies?

Economic Patronage: Performance and Continuation of Popular Projects

My hypothesis suggests that Duterte was able to ignore pressure due to China’s support after the Philippines’ anti-democratic turn. First, I address how Chinese economic patronage enables Duterte’s sustenance of an authoritarian regime. As the theory suggests, its economic aid directly enables persistent growth that the regime can claim credit for. Such performance-based legitimacy is not ruptured by sanctions from liberal economies.

Chinese aid package also enabled the construction of punitive apparatuses as had been planned. In 2016, China announced its plan to build four mega rehabilitation centers in the Philippines, which was soon followed by the Obama administration’s public condemnation. In 2017, China further provided US$15 million grant for drug rehabilitation and law enforcement (Santos, 2017).

With the construction of rehabilitation centers, Duterte could keep his pledges which made him a popular leader in the first place. Because Duterte has been enjoying popular support for the fight against drugs and his strong-leader style, penal policies have been the central pillar of his populist rhetoric (Kenny & Holmes, 2020). Had it not been for Chinese aid that supported the construction of rehabilitation centers, Duterte’s popular pledges to end the drug problem would have been aborted.

To better illustrate a pattern, Figure 2 provides key variables from the V-Democracy dataset. A declining trend of the “Additive polyarchy index” shows the continuation of authoritarianism since 2015, along with the “mobilization of democracy” index, which

Figure 1. The Philippines
captures the civil society’s de facto capacity to mobilize for democratic promotion. A decline in mobilization capacity goes hand in hand with the state’s capacity to either repress or deter anti-regime activities. Although inconsistent, the opposition parties’ autonomy shows a slight decline over time. Still, the Philippines showed continuous economic growth despite loosened economic ties with liberal democracies.

**Normative Patronage: Norm of “Necessary Evil”**

In terms of normative patronage, Xi Jinping officially announced the necessity of state repression to tackle social maladies. Approbation of an economy as formidable as China further boosts the norm of a strong state for the sake of social stability, which again puts a bigger burden of proof for sanctions on liberal actors. Table 2 shows a snapshot of how the Philippines managed to push back against liberal pressure. There is a clear pattern of Duterte’s overt pushback against liberal pressure after a Chinese normative endorsement.

A formal meeting held in October 2016 between Xi Jinping and Duterte showed a strong affinity between the two, during which China pledged full support for Duterte (BBC, 2016). After two days since the beginning of the meeting, Duterte pledged his separation from the United States (BBC, 2016). Duterte’s public statement of his willingness to depart from ties with liberal democracies amounts to his apparent scorn of criticism against Manila’s policies.

In the international political scene, China was the only champion of Duterte’s regime at the United Nations Human Rights Council. Its representative to the United Nations, Ma Zhaoxu, stated: “China highly appreciates the relentless efforts made by the Philippines for the promotion and protection of human rights, and the remarkable achievements it has made” (South China Morning Post, 2016). After China’s public statement made at the United Nations, Defense Minister Delfin Lorenzana stated that the United States and the European Union could just withdraw their assistance if they do not like Manila’s policies to fight against drugs (Deutsche Welle, 2016).

Again, I want to draw a clear boundary of this article’s purview of explanation. Chinese patronage came after the Philippines’ anti-democratic turn, which came slowly since the year 2015. I do not intend to make a causal claim between the initial authoritarian revival and Chinese patronage. The initial turn in 2016 took place “without” Chinese patronage. In fact, before Duterte’s presidency, the two countries were known for acrimony (Santos, 2017) due to continuous territorial disputes over the South China Sea. Only after Duterte’s realignment with China after he became the president did China spoke favorably for the regime. Duterte made alarming pledges during the electoral campaign, and the cause of the initial turn had little to do with Chinese patronage.

**Table 2**

*Order of Events in the Philippines*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Major Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>February, A Constitution ratified a tripartite system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992-2015</td>
<td>Four presidencies (Fidel Ramos, Erap Estrada, Gloria Arroyo, Benigno Aquino III)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>June, proclamation of Rodrigo Duterte as the president</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>July, China pledged to help Duterte build four mega drug rehabilitation centers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>September, Obama administration’s condemnation of Duterte during the ASEAN summit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>October, Duterte’s visit to Beijing During the visit, two states agreed to set the South China Sea dispute aside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>March, China provides US$15 million grant for drug rehabilitation and law enforcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>May, Chinese representative makes a supporting claim in the United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>July, Philippine’s defense minister said Western countries should withdraw aid if they are not fond of Manila’s policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>April, Duterte signed business agreements worth US$12 billion at China’s Belt and Road Forum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

Conventional literature failed to account for the continued anti-democratic trend in Southeast Asia despite the high level of liberal pressure and a moderate level of economic linkages. This paper contends that Chinese normative and economic endorsement for Southeast Asian autocrats allow them to ignore liberal pressure by providing means of earning legitimacy and empowering illiberal norms at the international level. In the cases of the Philippines and Cambodia, authoritarian leaders did not make any concessions to American and European demands when there was normative and economic patronage from China. This research contributes to the field by incorporating a normative theoretical lens into the discussion of regime studies.

References


