Introduction

International Research Group on Authoritarianism & Counter-Strategies

Conceptualizing Authoritarianism

For the last decade and a half, we have been witnessing a worldwide resurgence of reactionary nationalist, racist, anti-feminist, and religious discourses and movements, as well as rapid authoritarian transformations of political systems in all regions of the world. These can broadly be characterized as a further deepening of the non- and anti-democratic features of neoliberal capitalist states and societies, including the expansion of their punitive and repressive nature and increasing state and para-state practices of violence, neutralization of resistance, and marginalization of subordinate groups. Nevertheless, these ideological elements and political practices converge in specific and often very diverse amalgams, and although there are wild dreams of a "nationalist International" (Matteo Salvini), more often than not there seem to be more differences and disputes than commonalities between authoritarian actors.

This means that we are facing a worldwide phenomenon ('global authoritarianism'), which on closer inspection, however, does not in fact show up as global, but as heterogeneous and fragmented. Critical knowledge production and Left politics, which take an international and internationalist perspective, are therefore confronted with a variety of political as well as theoretical and conceptual problems. Thus, the central question arises whether and how these often very different authoritarianisms can be productively conceived of together, if at all: where are the convergences, connections, and parallels between these processes of authoritarian transformation worldwide? Does the current phase differ appreciably from other, preceding phases of authoritarian capitalist rule, such as those we can periodically observe in Europe, Latin America, West Asia and North Africa, Southeast Asia, and numerous other regions? And if so, in what way, i.e. what facets and dimensions actually give this authoritarian phase its specificity?

The difficulty of conceptualizing authoritarianism is further aggravated by its increasing ideological usage in Western mainstream discourse, which places it in opposition to the ideal of 'liberal democracies' (usually reserving the term for regimes that enter into conflict with Western powers). So the question arises

whether the concept of authoritarianism can provide us with anything more than a formal description of what, in the worst case, is seen merely as a 'deviation' from the ideal liberal model of the state.

We consider that it can, but this requires acknowledging, as Pedro Salgado argues, that "liberal values are not mutually exclusive with authoritarian practices, but simply rearrange them around a different conception of political subjectivity" (in this volume). Likewise, as the Brazilian sociologist Florestan Fernandes pointed out, under capitalist democracy, the "authoritarian element is intrinsically a structural and dynamic component of preservation, strengthening and expansion of the 'capitalist democratic system'" (2019, 45). In this sense, Julieta Mira shows how authoritarian institutional practices are embedded within democratic regimes, and Hülya Dinçer in her text points towards the often processual authoritarian transformation when discussing Turkey's transition towards "autocratic legalism" and the systematic creation of "legal black holes" for arbitrary authoritarian rule.

Thus, a critical global perspective on authoritarianism implies both to acknowledge its inherent inscription and embeddedness in (post)colonial capitalist states and societies, and to think of it in historically and geographically specific terms, as Inés Durán Matute and Mariano Féliz develop in this book. In this sense, we consider that the concept does not compete with other, sometimes more specific accounts—be they fascism or Bonapartism, authoritarian populism or authoritarian neoliberalism—but rather allows us to build a conceptual arc between the concrete and necessarily specific expressions of a global trend towards an increasingly weaponized regime of capital accumulation coupled with processes of de-democratization and brutalization of social and political practices and relations.

At the core of the current authoritarian turn of global capitalism lies a shared experience of a world in crisis—a multifaceted or 'civilizational crisis', as some observers write. The ecological crisis coincides with overlapping national, regional, and international political crises, a global crisis of representation and, by extension, of the legitimacy of (neo-)liberal democracies, massive economic dislocations, and a long train of closely related migration, health, social, and other crises, all of which seem to be reinforcing each other constantly. The effects of these crises are globally very uneven, while at the same time they contribute to deepening global inequality. In the face of this general collapse, which had a first spectacular expression in the financial crisis of 2008/9, and has recently gained much pace with the pandemic and the Russian attack on Ukraine, neoliberal capitalism seems to have definitely lost its hegemonic aura. But instead of experiencing its end—as many hoped we would when powerful emancipatory movements interrupted the political scene in the aftermath of the financial crisis—we are witnessing a zombie version of neoliberalism: stripped of its liberal imagery and promises (for an institutional rule of law, open market economy, liberal social values, and a better future), but so

deeply inscribed in political, social, and economic practices that there really seems to be *no alternative*—neither from below, nor from above.

In the face of the rise of European fascism, Antonio Gramsci (1971) famously observed that "if the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer 'leading' but only 'dominant'", the masses "no longer believe what they used to believe previously": "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying but the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (1971, 275–76). The diverse expressions of authoritarianism can be fruitfully analysed as such symptoms. We should add, though, that not only the masses, but also the ruling classes have lost their 'beliefs'—or, as Mike Davis bluntly puts it:

> Everyone is quoting Gramsci on the interregnum, but that assumes that something new will be or could be born. I doubt it. I think what we must diagnose instead is a ruling class brain tumour: a growing inability to achieve any coherent understanding of global change as a basis for defining common interests and formulating large-scale strategies. (Davis 2022)

In this sense, the multifaceted crisis and its concrete local expressions caused contradictions and heavy upheavals within global capitalism, as well as within the nationally and regionally dominant groups who struggle over which path to take. In the absence of a viable popular alternative to this mess, authoritarianism can thus be seen as a contingent response of the dominant classes to the crisis and their own inability or unwillingness to articulate a new hegemonic project (see Demirovic 2018) —or rather, as a diverse and often contradictory *set of responses* whose common denominator is their anti-democratic and frenetically neoliberal character. This is not to say—as many simplified accounts that focus on 'leader figures' do—that authoritarianism is solely a top-down project directed 'against the (otherwise immaculate) people'. Rather, as Gustavo Robles and Fábio Franco remind us in their contribution to this volume, we have to take into account that it is also produced "from below", as neoliberal rationality systematically destroys bonds of social solidarity and produces authoritarian subjectivities who permanently demand competition, performance, and flexibility from themselves and others, while nowadays it has little more to offer than precarization, hyper-exploitation, and a state of permanent individual and collective anxiety.

Current authoritarianisms build on this. In its *authoritarian populist* guise, it operates through an active regressive mobilization of the individuals and the 'masses' through traditional and renewed radical Right narratives—based on imagined neo-colonial ethnic, racist, sexist etc. identities—combined with an open radicalization of neoliberal values (such as competitiveness, recklessness, self-management, capitalization etc.). Hatred is channelled towards the political and liberal cultural 'elites', the 'others', 'losers' and perceived competitors, but also towards everyone who dares to question the supposedly 'natural order of things', and the individual

and collective imperfectness and weaknesses that may stand in the way of unhindered accumulation. In her contribution, Ailynn Torres Santana discusses this intimate relationship of contemporary anti-feminist and neoconservative discourses and authoritarian politics in Latin America and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the noise that authoritarian populists are creating should not divert our attention from the authoritarian transformations happening within liberal democratic regimes led by liberal (conservative or social democrat) governments, who increasingly rely on politics of control and discipline rather than consent-building, let alone material concessions to the dominated. Such developments, for which the EU and its core countries offer good examples, have been discussed under the concepts of *authoritarian neoliberalism* and/or *statism*. Often more clearly in line with prior phases of neoliberalism, authoritarian neoliberalism nevertheless constitutes a qualitative change in that it rapidly deepens its anti-democratic nature and expands practices such as

> the repeated invocations of 'the market' or 'economic necessity' to justify a wide range of restructurings across various societal sites … the growing tendency to prioritize constitutional and legal mechanisms rather than democratic debate and participation, the centralization of state powers by the executive branch at the expense of popular participation and other nodes of governance, the mobilization of state apparatuses for the repression of oppositional social forces at a range of scales, and the heightened pressures and responsibilities shifted onto households by repeated bouts of crisis and the restructuring of the state's redistributive mechanisms. (Bruff and Tansel 2019, 2)

But more often than not, the differentiation between these variants is more one of perspective rather than of its actual character. Thus, what mainstream discourse presents as opposing poles—liberal democracy vs. authoritarianism—is in fact deeply intertwined and overlapping, as authoritarian populists are *also* neoliberal-statist, while authoritarian (neo-)liberals *also* rely on reactionary discourses (against migrants, unions, 'welfare bums', and the like). Aesthetic differences aside, they are both part of a reactionary global culture war from the far right, and they share their absolute commitment to neoliberal forms of exploitation and governance, which are hermetically shielded against popular interference.

Perspectives from the South

Thus, authoritarianism is not located in an identifiable space, but rather, traverses political, economic, and social relations and structures in a heterogeneous manner—globally, but also within states and societies. Acknowledging this leads to implications such as a critical revision of the spatial categories with which we analyse

the authoritarian transformations worldwide. In this sense, the perspectives discussed in this book do not only concern the Global South and the authors do not split the geographies and political processes examined on a north-south axis. They acknowledge the widening North-South divide. But this disparity is not simply between countries (if it ever was); it also exists between and within communities on a smaller scale.

In various academic circles, there is an ongoing discussion on the meaning, usage, applicability, and analytical usefulness of the *Global South* as a critical term. The World Bank's low- and middle-income nations in Africa, Asia, Oceania, Latin America, and the Caribbean are usually referred to as the Global South by certain academics and many non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This description just represents the most recent one in a long line of catch-all terms that are meant to identify, categorize, and describe the 'poorer portions of the world'. Some academics and activists continue to adopt this nation-state-focused definition, while others have criticized it. In this edited volume, we prefer to embrace the term and hopefully deterritorialize it for a more holistic understanding of it. "There are Souths in the geographic North and Norths in the geographic South", as Anne Garland Mahler put it (2018, 32). Following from this, the book contains an astonishing chapter on the intertwined relationship between the North and South in terms of extractivism under capitalism, and the effects of Global North country policies in the South (see Sabrina Fernandes, in this book).

It is not a new practice to employ ideas to characterize and categorize regional disparities and uneven economic development. After World War II, when many nations gained their independence from colonial authority and started to be the focus of international 'development' aid, this tendency persisted and gained popularity (Dados and Connell 2012). The phrases 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' (or 'developing') became popular ways to categorize the globe (Clarke 2018). As many people have pointed out, this terminology was problematic for a number of reasons, including the narrow focus it implied on economic growth and levels of industrialization; the implication that there was a universal measurement of 'development' and that national development could be evaluated against this (Western) standard; and the assumption that "development" would help "traditional societies" to catch up with "modern ones" (Kothari et al. 2019).

Thus, the renewed appeals from academics and activists for a 'non-Western' interpretation of global concerns, poverty, and inequality, as well as for a deeper comprehension of the regional, national, or locally-based experiences and struggles do not come as a surprise. In connection with this, scholars who were interested in understanding and mapping geopolitical processes and relationships as well as those who wanted to call attention to political conflicts being fought outside of the 'Western' world started using the term 'South'. In contrast to earlier phrases that othered the 'poorer portions of the world', the term's inspiration originated,

in large part, from the South and was intended to centre the South. This is the main intention of this book in using the term as well.

According to Jessica Schafer et al. (2017, 7), the phrase has become more popular over the past ten years in the development and academic communities because it appears "able to incorporate the centrality of historical and contemporary patterns of wealth and power into a loosely geographically defined concept". The concept of 'Global South' is more than just a metaphor for underdevelopment, as Nour Dados and Raewyn Connell (2012, 13) point out. It highlights a long history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and economic and social transformation that maintains significant inequalities in living conditions, life expectancy, and access to resources. This issue is also widely discussed in the book within chapters focusing on authoritarianism from a colonial perspective (see Salgado, this book) and authoritarian urban practices during and after Apartheid in urban South Africa (see Mlotshwa, this book). Thus, the phrase challenges the elitism of Western political science and emphasizes geopolitical linkages and processes while also giving researchers and activists a platform to analyse the particulars of problems, processes, and conflicts at a local, regional, or global scale. By examining subaltern agency and oppression and connecting localized conflicts to the dynamics of global power systems and dominant social groupings across spatial scales, researchers have adopted the term 'Global South'. However obscure, clouded, and vague the term Global South may be, the researchers and authors of this book decided to embrace it as a way to address power relations and dynamics of exploitation and domination, and to empower the continuing struggles and resistance in a neocolonial world order.

Countering Authoritarianism and Building Alternatives

Countering authoritarianism often involves a combination of two or more factors, such as: denouncing and raising awareness of the situation; building campaigns to gather local strength and/or solidarity from abroad; mobilization methods that range from demonstrations and occupations to armed resistance; and community-building and active construction of alternatives beyond/in spite of the state. A counter-strategy is not merely practical, but also requires theoretical engagement to understand the nature of what is being opposed. Thus, the social actors in opposition to authoritarianism often return to the question of whether they are facing fascism, neo-fascism, a neoliberal version of authoritarian urban practices, the deepening relationship between colonialism and modern capitalism, or the development of new techniques of control and ideological influence, among others, to evaluate and re-evaluate their own counter-strategies. They also do so by learning from similar confrontations in other places and times. In this fashion, the researchers behind this book also hope to contribute to the devising of counter-

strategies, not only through awareness, but also by engaging with this learning process.

Learning from other places is important in order to build common counterstrategies that can reverberate in the region and, hopefully, lead to consolidation and continuation. The current phase of authoritarianism is not the sum of simply coincidental events, but reflect the level of sharing and collaboration between various actors, especially on the far right. The case of India is exemplary, since pillars of Hindutva can also be linked to Nazism and Italian Fascism, while today the use of social media platforms to spread hate and violence under Modi is also key to promoting disinformation and far-right ideology in other parts of the world (see Nizaruddin, this book). In the Myanmar case, digital connections offer a counterpoint. The military junta's crackdown on people's financial accounts affected fundraising strategies by the opposition. As a response, resistance groups began to seek donations through video platforms with the support of diaspora communities that also use their own access to social media platforms to denounce the dictatorship and circumvent the censorship faced by those in Myanmar (see Nwet Kay Khine, this book).

Of course, resistance to authoritarianism also runs into its own contradictions. One of these contradictions can be found in the modalities through which activism is produced by the civil initiatives that are integrated with transnational civil society networks, while these modalities are not independent from neoliberal labour relations and global power inequalities, as the case of the rights-based civil society in Turkey exemplifies (see Sözen, this book). Furthermore, opposition can be fragmented and it is expected that people will fight over different political projects as the alternative to be presented. Because of this, it is necessary to note that different levels of authoritarianism are embedded in both Right and Left forms of government. Issues around developmentalism and megaprojects help to highlight its persistence under progressive governments to secure capital accumulation, as is the case with Mexico and Argentina (see Durán Matute and Féliz, this book). This has implications for social movements and other political actors associated with these governments and helps to reveal the limits of treating elections as the main form of combatting authoritarianism. Yet, cases such as the Philippines show that there are instances where methods of radical left resistance have become stale, and parliamentary tactics have actually led to some success recently (see Viajar, this book).

Housing and land struggles should also be observed for they not only reveal continuities of authoritarianism across different regimes, but they also help to connect people over more immediate common projects where demands are made to the state, but also built in spite of it. The authoritarian facet of neoliberal urbanism in Brazil and Turkey can be compared, but the movements in each country can also learn from each other (see Can and Fanton, this book). Soweto residents would

protest over housing even on election day, in South Africa, where other movements, as well as in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, have been able to organize hundreds of thousands of farmers around matters tied to land reform (see Mlotshwa and also Monjane, this book). Since demanding is not enough, movements often have to find ways to implement projects that give meaning to the struggle, such as through agroecology, which demonstrates capacity for community-building and politiciza-tion. In a way, new social dynamics arise due to the informality of certain types of resistance as forms of negotiating the tensions with and against authoritarianism from the state.

The different situations analysed in this book, from Latin America to Southeast Asia, highlight that the struggle against authoritarianism is not simply about top-pling regimes, but essentially connected to world-making. Authoritarianism can become entrenched in ideologies and the regimes they inspire, but it is also a tool for advancing unjust projects and shaping mentalities in freer societies. This ver-satility makes authoritarianism a long-standing characteristic of political projects both on the Left and Right and, as such, the counter-strategies to it must also be versatile and focused on connecting opposition to alternative hegemonies. As ar-gued by Rodrigo Nunes, it is not about having an ideal model that can be replicated, but understanding that collective processes, in this case ones tied to emancipatory goals, work best ecologically, that is, by "making the most of plurality" (2021, 286). Attending to the various contradictions at play is part of the task, and the chapters in this book add to a body of analysis that helps to identify the dangers of author-itarianism after, during, and before they become concrete so that this knowledge can be translated into sharper and perhaps even faster courses of action.

Reconsidering Disciplinary Boundaries and Mitigating Geographic Limitations

This book results from several conversations, workshops, and conferences between scholars and activists, including those who wrote the chapters below and many others who participated in various discussions from the birth of IRGAC to the mo-ment of writing this introduction. Three conversations are of special relevance here. The first materialized within and between the inaugural cohort of IRGAC fellows in 2019 and only moments before the global pandemic changed the nature of in-person conversations and meetings. The second emerged from different articles and pieces in English and many other languages published on the IRGAC website, discussed in closed and open conferences, and considered with different cohorts of IRGAC fellows, including the Middle East and North Africa cluster that joined the group in April 2021. The third emerged from informal and formal conversations between the editorial committee, the programme director, and staff of IRGAC, and

other units at the RLS. These conversations paved the way for a discussion of authoritarianism and different counter-strategies that draw on the lived experiences of societies and people living in the South and others moving between various localities across geographic regions. In many ways, these chapters below reflect the intended and expected theoretical and empirical messiness that accompanies open-ended discussions of authoritarianism and ways to understand new forms of such political systems across both the Global North and South. Furthermore, they also emphasize the need to reconsider and even reimagine why existing explanations of authoritarianism in, from, and within the South are neither exceptional nor satisfactorily conceptualized.

In many ways, this book is an appreciation of the complexity and expected confusion that emerges with unpacking theoretical concepts and finding real-world evidence to validate claims that speak of different struggles, whether through reflecting on the ordinary lives of individuals in extraordinary situations and taking into account why and how such authoritarian practices remain a relevant scope of study. The book is an interdisciplinary, intersectional, and multifaceted treatment of authoritarianism that moves beyond disciplinary boundaries and considerations, and one that truly challenges geographic limitations in producing knowledge on contentious issues. To this end, we will highlight three important points on methodology and sources.

First, this book brings to the fore the voices of scholars, activists, and researchers to analyse the different faces of authoritarianism in the South. While considering the importance of inviting scholars primarily to write, analyse, and reflect on different forms of authoritarianism and counter-strategies in the South, we are aware of the limits of such conversations within the academy. Hence, we sought to rectify some of the issues related to scholarly echo chambers by challenging and even pushing against the artificial boundaries between scholars and activists. While we acknowledge that these are not monolithic categories and in other words, some scholars are not activists and many activists are not scholars, we are further contesting the artificial boundaries that separate activism from the academy and vice versa by hosting conferences and panels that truly engage with different milieus outside of the strict confines of the academy. By bridging the different types of knowledge in different geographic locations, this book discusses some pressing debates that unpack authoritarianism and highlights the need for combining abstract theoretical insights and real-world evidence to provide a holistic account that pushes beyond the theory-reality divide.

Second, this book includes analytical reflections from the lived experiences and different meetings and exchanges between the contributors and many others at different events. The gist of these encounters and exchanges is focused on providing practical reflections and insights on the different manifestations of authoritarianism and the various forms of resisting such practices, whether through

the creation of transnational networks or sustaining existing local coalitions that constantly seek to challenge the existing status quo. Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, much of the writing and editing of the book happened through virtual outlets. While this approach could have limited the potential of conversations that otherwise unfold at in-person events, the editors and the contributors mitigated the distance by ensuring that workshops and conferences—whether online or later in-person—would not disrupt the quality of the contributions below and the overall labour of bringing this book to life. While the book is published in English, several contributors wrote their chapters in their native language and in some instances these were later translated into English. Importantly, the coeditors and contributors are working diligently to ensure that future editions of the book will reach a wider audience and one that transcends the English-speaking world.

Finally, this book is among the first in the broader literature on authoritarianism to exclusively bring together scholars and activists from different corners of the world. This forms an important step in bringing to the fore knowledge production from the South and giving priority to scholars to engage with each other in developing important insights beyond mainstream explanations. By centring the knowledge and experiences of scholar-activists in the South, this book is a vital contribution to the scholarly debates and serves as an invitation to make more space for knowledge production in wider academic and disciplinary publications that challenge South-North and South-South divides, geographic limitations, and disciplinary silos. Importantly, the book highlights the value of inter- and multidisciplinary approaches and methodologies. The diversity in academic training and insights did not impede a cohesive and engaging conversation throughout the book that cuts across strict disciplinary norms. While the book's framing engages with how political scientists, economists, and historians conceptualize and examine authoritarianism, the chapters below are not geared toward engaging with strict methodological and disciplinary concerns. For instance, some chapters engage with deep theoretical debates to demonstrate the rise or vivid features of authoritarianism, and others look deeper into recent struggles that show the various forms of counter-strategies and struggles in conversation with other revolutionary situations. This book is the result of scholar-activist engagement with the problem of authoritarianism, so we urge the reader to take in its academic rigour, but to also interpret it politically. There is, after all, the hope that matters of authoritarianism will one day be the concern of studies of the past, rather than analysis that also deals with the present and future, as is the case for us today.

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