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The menu of autocratic innovation

Lee Morgenbesser 

School of Government and International Relations, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

ABSTRACT

This article develops the menu of autocratic innovation to account for a perceived transformation in the nature of autocratic rule. Drawing from an original list of 20 techniques intended to cultivate the pretence of accountability without permitting the actual practice of it, the article describes how autocratic innovation takes different forms (informational, legal, political, reputational and technological) and concerns different targets (citizens, civil society activists, opposition members and foreign policymakers). This theoretical framework is tested against nine autocratic regimes in Southeast Asia from 1975 to 2015. The evidence shows substantial variation in terms of the form and target of at least six distinct techniques: libel and defamation suits, anti-civil society measures, mock compliance to human rights agreements, public relations firms, think tanks and zombie monitors. The article concludes by discussing three possible explanations for why autocratic innovation occurs: waves of autocratization, density of international linkages and leadership turnover.

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KEYWORDS Accountability; autocratic regimes; dictators; innovation; Southeast Asia

Introduction

Autocratic rule is undergoing a transformation. From the advent of a social credit system in China, utilization of machine-learning techniques to predict mass protests in Russia, permanent hiring of US public relations firms by the monarchy in Saudi Arabia, deployment of intrusion malware to monitor opposition actors in Uganda, and the takeover of independent media organizations by foreign shell companies in Venezuela, many autocratic regimes around the world are exhibiting change. The defining feature of this transformation, it appears, is innovation. “Faced with growing pressures”, Dobson writes, “the smartest among them neither hardened their regimes into police states nor closed themselves off from the world; instead, they learned and adapted”.¹ In similar terms, Puddington describes how many autocratic regimes have sought to stop the advance of democracy by adapting, learning and mimicking the best practices of democracy.² Despite growing awareness of how autocratic regimes are developing a more innovative set of techniques, questions remain about the nature of this transformation.

A paucity of analytical tools has so far stymied investigation of this phenomenon. In conceptual terms, scholars lack a coherent framework for synthesizing the disparate

CONTACT Lee Morgenbesser  l.morgenbesser@griffith.edu.au

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techniques being used by autocratic regimes. How should research on the emergence of mass protests, for instance, be unified with that on real-time intrusive surveillance? How should research on the passing of fake news laws be integrated with that on the growth of transnational alliances between ruling parties? In theoretical terms, scholars have yet to reconcile many of the more innovative techniques used by autocratic regimes into a testable set of propositions about different political outcomes. The allure of studying readily observable institutional structures has in many ways stymied the development of theories examining change in other areas of perceived concern. In empirical terms, scholars have few cross-national resources for determining the usage of many techniques now preferred by autocratic regimes. Despite claims that libel suits are the “new” preferred method for silencing political opponents, for example, Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew began utilizing this tool a full four decades ago.³ Such analytical roadblocks are indicative of the challenge – and opportunity – that confronts any investigation into how autocratic regimes are embracing innovation.

This article introduces the “menu of autocratic innovation” to account for how autocratic rule is undergoing a transformation. Drawing from an original list of 20 techniques, it demonstrates how innovation involves different architects (bureaucratic officials, political elites, regime leaders), different forms (informational, legal, political, reputational and technological) and different targets (citizens, civil society activists, opposition members and foreign policymakers). The unifying theme is that each innovation is designed to mimic the presence of horizontal and vertical accountability, but also prevent the actual practice of it. The menu of autocratic innovation is substantiated through an empirical analysis of autocratic rule in Southeast Asia between 1975 and 2015. Using the cases of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam, the article demonstrates how these autocratic regimes have utilized at least six distinct innovations: libel and defamation suits, anti-civil society measures, mock compliance to human rights agreements, public relations firms, think tanks and zombie monitors. The novelty of innovation is shown to be intertwined with the meanings autocratic regimes attach to different techniques across the region and over time. This article accounts for these contextually situated practices.

The article begins by drawing attention to how the field of comparative authoritarianism has overwhelmingly focused on various institutional arrangements and autocratic survival. Seeking to come to terms with the transformative nature of autocratic rule, the second section addresses this imbalance with the introduction of the menu of autocratic innovation. The third section then details six of the innovations practiced by Southeast Asia’s mix of autocratic regimes. To show that the direction of change is not uniformly towards innovation, the section also highlights three missing innovations practiced elsewhere in the world. The conclusion of the article summarizes the findings and offers three possible explanations for why autocratic innovation occurs.

Comparative authoritarianism: finding the menu

Since the turn of the century, a rich body of scholarship has emerged on the nature of autocratic regimes. A significant focus has been on the levels of contestation and participation permitted, which led to the development of “hybrid regimes” as a tool of conceptual classification.⁴ The goal is to account for the diversity of regime types in existence, while simultaneously avoiding conceptual stretching by making more modest claims about the prevalence of autocracy and democracy. A subsequent line

of enquiry has focused on the function(s) performed by nominally democratic institutions in autocratic regimes, be it constitutions, courts, elections, legislatures, and parties.⁵ The most common explanation is that these formal institutions help ameliorate the threat posed by political elites (who can upturn the existing power-sharing arrangement); opposition groups (who can push for democracy); and citizens (who can overthrow the political order). All these actors can generate unwelcome change for autocratic regimes.

The need to thwart these strategic actors is premised on such action contributing to a range of political outcomes valued by autocratic regimes. For the field of comparative authoritarianism, the most studied have been the distinct but overlapping outcomes of durability, longevity, stability and survival. The relevant scholarship has assigned causal importance to the linkage between autocratic states, emergence of elite protection pacts as bulwarks against contentious politics, differential effects of formal institutions as well as the triumvirate of co-optation, legitimation and repression.⁶ A general fixation of the previously mentioned scholarship, however, has been the relationship between readily observable institutional structures and the survival of authoritarian regimes. In the view of Pepinsky:

Authoritarian regimes do many things besides grow/stagnate and survive/collapse. They decide to murder their subjects or not; to favor certain ethnic groups or not; to integrate with the global economy in various ways; to mobilize, ignore or 'reeducate' their citizens; to respond to domestic challenges with repression, concessions or both; to insulate their bureaucracies from executive interference or not; to delegate various ruling functions to security forces, mercenaries or criminal syndicates, or subnational political units; and to structure economies in various ways that might support their rule.⁷

The next section describes how innovation is one of the many *other* things autocratic regimes “do” and “do not do” in the course of their lifespan. Despite the pejorative connotations sometimes attached to mere description, it is embraced here as a distinctive – and essential – task of political science. In the view of Gerring:

We need to know how much democracy there is in the world, how this quantity – or bundle of attributes – varies from one country to country, region to region, and through time. This is important regardless of what causes democracy or what causal effects democracy has.⁸

The same logic applies for the nature of autocratic rule today.

The menu of autocratic innovation

The transformative nature of autocratic rule is denoted by the emergence of a menu of innovation. The most sophisticated form of autocratic rule now encourages laws to be bent, not broken; institutions to be managed, not made meaningless; political opponents to be circumscribed, not eliminated; citizens to be disempowered, not indoctrinated; economic gains to be distributed, not concentrated; and foreign engagement to be self-reinforcing, not self-defeating.

An uncomfortable truth about innovation, however, is that many of the included “autocratic” techniques can be traced back to “democratic” architects. Travelling GONGOs have long been permitted to attend the United Nations Human Rights Council; anti-civil society measures were purportedly first enacted in India; transnational party alliances are a standard strategy of major political parties in the European Union; international television networks were made commercially viable by the likes of

the British Broadcasting Corporation in the United Kingdom; and intrusion surveillance is still practiced by the National Security Agency in the United States. This undignified track record is indicative of how many techniques do not so easily discriminate between autocratic and democratic regimes. The nature of authoritarian practice instead encapsulates all “patterns of action that sabotage accountability to people over whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by means of secrecy, disinformation and disabling voice”.⁹ The figurative menu outlined here therefore captures how autocratic regimes are increasingly utilizing techniques designed to maintain the façade of accountability without allowing the practice of it. In the hands of autocratic regimes, the techniques take five broad forms (informational, legal, political, reputational and technological) and target four different actors (citizens, civil society activists, opposition members and foreign policymakers). In a few instances, the technique is systematically targeted at all these actors. The menu is summarized in Table 1.

The collection, production and dissemination of information is a characteristic feature of all autocratic regimes. Each of these tasks is important for building support, detecting opposition and undermining the self-organizing potential of society. Since all autocratic regimes suffer from an information deficit, there is an inherent risk they underestimate the level of public dissatisfaction that exists and overlook the risk of mass protests emerging. To overcome this information scarcity, some autocratic regimes have sought to collect information on the beliefs, grievances and preferences of citizens. In China, for example, the microblogging site Weibo is known to act as a “de facto polling system that the state uses as a feedback mechanism to adapt its policies, inform official media or identify and neutralize potential threats”.¹⁰ Beyond the collection of information, its production and dissemination is generally

Table 1. The menu of autocratic innovation.

Innovation	Primary target	Prototypical case	Supporting source
<i>Informational</i>			
Preference Divulgence	Citizens	Russia	Lankina et al. (2020)
Travelling GONGOs	Civil Society	Cuba	Walker (2016)
Unfriendly Media Ownership	Citizens	Egypt	Reporters Without Borders (2019)
Zombie Monitors	Citizens	Belarus	Walker and Cooley (2013)
<i>Legal</i>			
Anti-Civil Society Measures	Civil Society	Turkey	Gilbert and Mohseni (2018)
Defamation and Libel Suits	Opposition	Singapore	Sim (2011)
Fake News Laws	Systematic	Malaysia	Fernandez (2019)
Interpol Red Notices	Opposition	Tajikistan	Lemon (2019)
<i>Political</i>			
Imitation Legislatures	Citizens	Venezuela	Casey (2017)
Nominal Anti-Corruption Bodies	Citizens	Rwanda	Booth and Golooba-Mutebi (2012)
Pro-Government Mobilisation	Citizens	Syria	Hellmeier and Weidmann (2020)
Systemic (Winning) Opponents	Opposition	DRC	Wilson and Pilling (2019)
Transnational Party Alliances	Opposition	Saudi Arabia	Burnell (2017)
<i>Reputational</i>			
Human Rights Mock Compliance	Policymakers	Togo	United Nations (2018)
International Television Networks	Systematic	Qatar	Samuel-Azran (2013)
Public Relations Firms	Policymakers	Equatorial Guinea	Quinn (2015)
Think Tanks	Policymakers	United Arab Emirates	Jilani and Emmons (2017)
<i>Technological</i>			
Flooding (Strategic Distraction)	Systematic	China	Roberts (2018)
Foreign Influence Operations	Citizens	Iran	Timberg and Romm (2019)
Intrusive Surveillance	Systematic	Uganda	Parkinson et al. (2019)

designed to stir cognitive dissonance. Using the remaining techniques, the goal is to have individuals and groups perceive a higher level of accountability than what exists in practice. Unfriendly media ownership offers the façade of impartiality and objectivity, but leverages the power of editorial omission to limit criticism of official actions and policies; government-organized non-government organizations maintain the outward appearance of neutrality, but subtly advance government positions on key political issues; zombie monitors feign conformity to normative standards of international election observation, but combined with a preference for incumbent leaders and parties. The point of these autocratic innovations is to pay homage the idea of accountable government, but also weaponize information in a way that prevents its actual emergence.

The menu of autocratic innovation also contains techniques of a legal nature. Described elsewhere as lawfare, legal fixing or rule by law, each technique is designed to exploit the existing degree of control autocratic regimes retain over various legal and judicial systems. Beginning in the mid-1990s, for example, autocratic governments started passing laws to restrict foreign funding of non-government organizations operating inside their territory. In the intervening period, this technique broadened to include further restrictions on how all types of non-government organizations have to be registered, organized and operated.¹¹ The shrinking space for civil society has also been accompanied by other innovations, including the targeted use of defamation and libel suits (which deliberately blur the boundaries of opposition criticism), the advent of “fake news” laws (which can be wielded bluntly or sharply to stifle free expression) and the politicized issuing of Interpol red alert notices (which increases the cost of dissent beyond national borders). By exploiting legal and judicial systems in such ways, autocratic regimes can allege that the real problem is legal culpability on the part of citizens, civil society organizations and opposition members, rather than a lack of accountability on the part of themselves. This fiction provides a prop to the notion of equality before the law; albeit in a legal system subject to the discretionary authority of those in power.

A range of more politically orientated techniques also feature on the menu of autocratic innovation. By utilizing imitation legislatures, nominally independent anti-corruption bodies, pro-government mobilization, systemic-winning opponents and transnational alliances between ruling parties, autocratic regimes aim to present a more accountable government to citizens and a more formidable ruling party to opposition actors. Given the choice between having no anti-corruption body and a truly independent anti-corruption body, for example, autocratic regimes can establish a nominally independent anti-corruption unit.¹² This innovation not only sends a false signal to citizens that there is a powerful actor working to eliminate petty, grand, and systemic corruption, but creates the impression that those committing wrongdoing are accountable to the rule of law. Somewhat differently, transnational alliances between ruling parties are formal agreements to provide mutual support for the maintenance of autocratic rule. The United Russia party, for example, has forged at least 40 agreements with ruling (and opposition) parties around the world.¹³ A copy of an alliance agreement, which was obtained by this author, include commitments to hold joint consultations and exchange information on current issues affecting each country, including organizational work, party building, youth policy, and other areas of mutual interest. The increasing cooperation seen between autocratic ruling parties around the world means opposition parties will suffer the consequences of innovation.

Autocratic “image management” can be serviced via the menu of autocratic innovation. This term captures “efforts by the state or its proxies to protect or enhance

the legitimacy of the state's political system outside its borders".¹⁴ A frequent target of such persuasion is policymakers in the United States. One technique of autocratic regimes, for example, is to permanently employ public relations firms based in Washington D.C., rather than just on an ad hoc basis. A few recent media reports have noted an increase in the number of autocratic regimes that have paid these groups to promote a positive image of their democratic credentials; specifically, by drafting letters, lobbying lawmakers, issuing press releases and monitoring media reports. Autocratic regimes in China, Malaysia, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, for example, have all employed the fabled services of McKinsey & Company to help advance their national policies, improve their international reputations and whitewash their human rights records.¹⁵ A similar but more opaque technique is to fund think tanks based in Washington D.C. Despite claims that such relationships do not compromise the integrity of the research being produced, autocratic regimes clearly use think tanks to gain support for their foreign policy priorities. A partial list includes the likes of the Atlantic Council, Brookings Institution, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Middle East Institute, German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Stimson Center.¹⁶ This quid pro quo arrangement provides critical funding to the think tanks, but also a false signal of the domestic and international accountability of autocratic regimes.

The technological aptitude of autocratic regimes is channelled through the final set of techniques on the menu. Arguably more than any other form of innovation, it is here that the distinction between different political regimes breaks down. "This image of a battle between virtuous democracies and malicious autocracies obscures a growing trend: a convergence in how democratic and autocratic governments are using surveillance and disinformation to shape political life".¹⁷ One such technique is flooding: "The coordinated production of information by an authority with the intent of competing with or distracting from information the authority would rather consumers not access".¹⁸ The use of troll armies, for example, captures how governments pay online commentators to harass critics, spread misinformation and erode trust in independent media outlets. Originally pioneered in Russia, some of the practitioners now include the autocratic regimes ruling China, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Uzbekistan.¹⁹ Despite being aligned with autocratic regimes, troll armies help maintain the mirage of accountable government by providing plausible deniability for the use of censorship, propaganda and repression. Another technique is the advent and employment of intrusive surveillance. This alarming term encapsulates the varying use of artificial intelligence, facial recognition, malware hacking, machine learning and/or satellite infrastructure to systematically control individuals and groups. Some obvious examples include the use of Huawei's Smart City nervous system in Angola; NSO Group Technologies Pegasus spear phishing software in Kuwait; ZXMT System data processing software in North Korea; Blue Coat's PacketShaper appliances in Venezuela; and Gamma Group's FinFisher spyware in Zimbabwe. The recent embrace of such intrusive surveillance allows autocratic regimes to appear more accountable through the use of a "hands-off" approach to repression.

The menu of autocratic innovation: Southeast Asia in comparative perspective

The need to substantiate the menu of autocratic innovation is abetted by a comparative analysis of Southeast Asia. Since achieving independence between the 1940s and 1960s

(with the exceptions of Thailand initially and East Timor later), autocratic rule has been a mainstay of political life. In contrast to other regions of the world, such as Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America, the historical transformation wrought by democratization had little long-term impact in Southeast Asia. The added fact the region combines economic, political and social diversity with geographical proximity has long made it an ideal testing ground for theories of autocratic politics.²⁰ Ultimately, if the menu of autocratic innovation is going to be observable anywhere, it should be in Southeast Asia.

The following section analyses six techniques from the menu of autocratic innovation practiced across the region. The data covers autocratic regimes residing in Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam between 1975 and 2015.²¹ The findings demonstrate that they have learnt to use defamation and libel suits, anti-civil society measures, mock compliance to international human rights agreements, zombie monitors as well as public relations firms and think tanks in Washington D.C. To further delineate the nature of scope of innovation, it illustrates how three other menu items have not been adopted by autocratic regimes in Southeast Asia.

The original sin of repression has been a major area of change for Southeast Asia's autocratic regimes. Historically, they placed few limits on the means by which they pursued their ideological and political goals. This strategy produced significant civil and political rights violations against large segments of the population, while forsaking the appearance of accountable government. Some symptomatic cases included Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, Indonesia during the mass killings of the mid-1960s and newly reunified Vietnam under the Communist Party. A contemporary example is the genocide against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. The problem with such wholesale repression is that while it might eliminate or reduce dissent, it can also produce civil war, economic calamity, international condemnation, military defections and refugee crisis.²² Over time, however, Southeast Asia's autocratic regimes have mostly made innovative changes to how they wield repression.

The evolving nature of repression in Southeast Asia is evidenced by the way autocratic regimes have treated opposition leaders. The enduring goal is to deter any specific activities perceived as threatening to the established political order. But what is the optimum way? The most regressive technique is to simply eliminate key opposition leaders. This is what happened to Benigno Aquino in the Philippines, which represents the only recorded case of assassination amongst Southeast Asia's autocratic regimes over the last four decades. Another technique is to keep opposition leaders under house arrest or confined to prison on politically motivated charges. This technique has been applied to Kem Sokha in Cambodia (treason), Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia (sodomy), Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar (mostly never formally charged) and J. B. Jeyaretnam in Singapore (misreporting party accounts). A related technique entails banning or preventing these same individuals from fleeing abroad. Travel bans have been used sporadically in Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore, while in Myanmar Aung San Suu Kyi was encouraged to leave and never return. The problem with all these techniques is that they break an unnecessary surplus of international human rights laws, while simultaneously drawing condemnation from civil society groups, international organizations and liberal states. This makes it easier to call attention to the politicized nature of the treatment, which raises the cost of repression for autocratic regimes.

An increasingly common technique is instead to use the legal and judicial system to suppress opposition leaders. Rather than assassinating, imprisoning or banning them, autocratic regimes have learnt to wield libel and defamation suits (see [Figure 1](#)). In Singapore, to cite the best example, Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Chok Tong and Lee Hsien Loong all previously filed a criminal complaint against a key opposition leader over a perceived injustice, often leading to vast sums of compensation.²³ Similar libel or defamation cases have been exercised against Sam Rainsy in Cambodia and Karpal Singh in Malaysia. This strategy helps preserve the belief that the rule of law is sovereign, which is essential to the façade of accountability erected by many of Southeast Asia’s autocratic regimes. The very fact there has been a shift in the way opposition leaders are targeted is illustrative of the changing intensity of repression and, more pertinently, autocratic innovation.

Beyond opposition leaders, Southeast Asia’s autocratic regimes have used the menu of autocratic innovation in order to deal with civil society. This describes the charities, interest groups, labour unions, professional associations, social movements and other non-governmental organizations engaged in civil or political activities. Given the capacity of civil society groups to assist regime change through the injection of organizational resources and strategies, restraining them is a critical priority. The traditional strategy of some autocratic regimes in the region has been to ban civil society groups entirely. The examples of Brunei (since 1984), Cambodia (1975–1993) and Laos (throughout the 1970s and 1980s) are representative of this approach, which abandons even the pretence of a vibrant and pluralistic actor capable of keeping the state accountable.

The strategy of most autocratic regimes now has been to expand the sphere of civil society, whereby these groups are better able to pursue their collective interests and ideals with autonomy from the state. This is captured by [Figure 2](#). Utilizing Varieties of Democracy data, the black line measures popular involvement in civil society

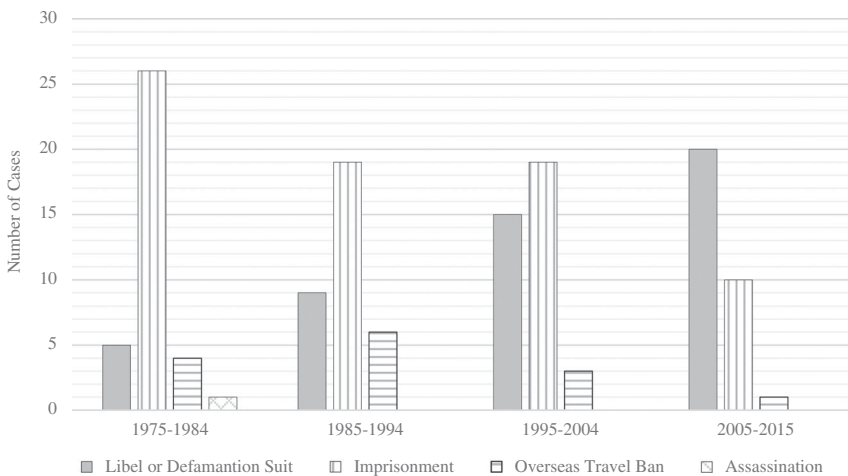


Figure 1. Treatment of opposition leaders in Southeast Asia.

Note: The data is from Morgenbesser (2020: qoa_opplaw; qoa_oppri; qoa_oppexit; qoa_killed), who codes how leaders from the three most popular opposition parties are treated. The 2015 data has been added to the last period for aesthetic purposes, but it does not change the overall trend.

organizations, but also the extent to which the government represses them and achieves control over their entry and exit into public life. This is arguably the leading cross-national time-series measure on the health of civil society today. What it shows is that the space for civil society across the region has become more robust over the last four decades. Indeed, it suggests there has never been a better time for civil society groups working in autocratic Southeast Asia.

This underlying story of robustness is diluted by the overarching story of innovation: Southeast Asia's autocratic regimes have learnt to better control civil society groups through a range of astute techniques. Using data from Christensen and Weinstein, the grey line in Figure 2 presents aggregate data on “anti-civil society” measures in Southeast Asia.²⁴ A starting point is requiring civil society groups to register with the government, but only after completing a set of vague procedures subject to delays (as opposed to procedures that are well-defined and timely). Such troublesome barriers to entry are seen in the examples of Cambodia, Singapore and Vietnam, where the ruling parties routinely interfere in the registration process for civil society groups. After registration, many autocratic regimes have imposed a range of extra and usually very stringent requirements. This includes whether civil society groups must disclose any sources of foreign funding, which usually leads to a further round of scrutiny. A variation involves restrictions on groups that receive funding from external sources known to defend human rights and promote democracy. It essentially allows autocratic regimes to permit autonomous activity on developmental issues, whilst restricting it on political issues. The example of Laos is key here. Another requirement is to set partial boundaries for civil society groups already registered and foreign-funded. In Singapore, for instance, human rights advocates are often prevented from engaging in the very activities their groups are registered to engage in, such as advocating for greater political rights and civil liberties.²⁵ The innovation here is that autocratic regimes do not have to either securely forbid or insecurely permit civil society groups, but rather control them within a self-defined space of accountability.

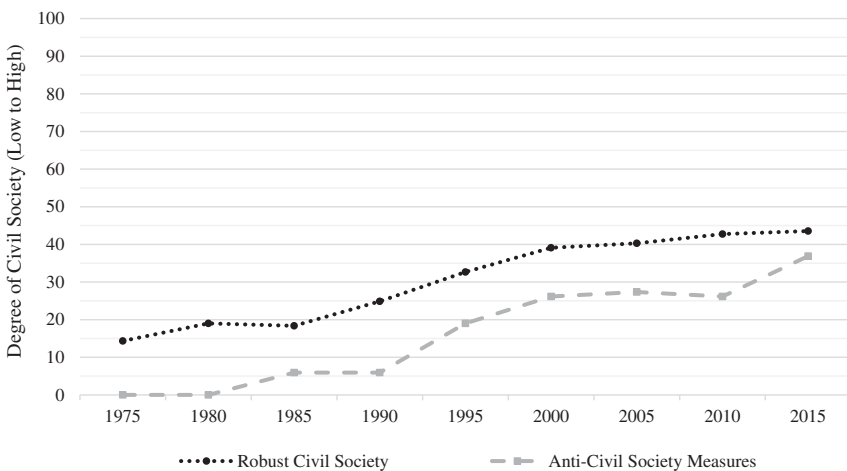


Figure 2. Civil society in Southeast Asia's autocratic regimes.

Note: The black line data is sourced from Coppedge et al. (2019: v2csprcpt). The grey line data combines thirteen subtle interference tactics coded by Christensen and Weinstein (2013).

International law offers another way to understand how autocratic regimes have engaged with the menu of autocratic innovation. This is particularly so in relation to prominent human rights agreements, including but not limited to the Genocide Convention (1948), Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights Covenant (1966), Civil and Political Rights Covenant (1966) and Convention against Torture (1984). The field of comparative politics has advanced multiple explanations for why autocratic regimes might participate in legal regimes designed to establish and monitor their acquiescence to human rights standards. The most prominent include the need to imitate their neighbours, relieve pressure for political change, encourage citizens to internationalize violations as a defence of their country and reap the rewards of compliance without living up to their legal commitments to actually protect human rights.²⁶ Notwithstanding the distinct motives that exist for individual autocratic regimes to ratify agreements, the lack of international enforcement mechanisms means the resulting pretence of accountability consistently outweighs any cost of participation.

Southeast Asia's autocratic regimes have made an innovative choice with respect to the international human rights regime: mock compliance. This denotes the outward appearance of formal compliance, but combined with relatively disguised behavioural divergence from established standards.²⁷ In this respect, the top panel of [Figure 3](#) shows that autocratic regimes in the region – like democratic regimes everywhere – have increasingly ratified more of the international conventions that make up the international human rights regime. This approach offers many benefits. Despite being a signatory to ten agreements (as of 2015), for example, Cambodia's government has used ratification as a rhetorical counterfoil to criticism of their human rights accountability, while also ignoring their legal obligations when it is politically expedient to do so. Over the past several years, it has repeatedly breached the 1951 Refugee Convention by forcibly extraditing Uighur and Montagnard asylum seekers back to China and Vietnam. In that respect, the bottom panel of the [Figure 3](#) shows that increasing ratification of international human rights agreements is not correlated with increasing respect for human rights (that is, the absence of physical violence committed by government agents and the absence of constraints of private liberties and political liberties by the government). Indeed, greater protection for human rights has been either mostly absent in Laos and Myanmar; longstanding but imperfect in Malaysia and Singapore; and lagging in Cambodia and Vietnam. This fact is illustrative of how the lack of enforcement mechanisms behind international human rights agreements displaces any tangible costs of ratifying them. The innovation for autocratic regimes in Southeast Asia has been realizing this windfall of false accountability, acting upon it and the reaping the rewards of it.

The increasing rate autocratic regimes have ratified international human rights agreements reoccurs with respect to another innovation: continuously hiring public relations firms in Washington D.C. (see [Figure 4](#)). Besides Brunei and Laos, every autocratic regime in Southeast Asia has experience utilizing these firms as a way of shaping external perceptions of governmental accountability. An early adopted of this innovation was Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. In 1977, he paid Doremus & Company \$500,000 – approximately \$2 million today – to improve the public image of his regime in America, which was dominated by negative views of his imposition of martial law.²⁸ During the 1990s, to cite another example, Indonesia's GOLKAR party paid millions of dollars to Hill & Knowlton to improve international opinion of its deplorable policies towards East Timor.²⁹ After the 1997 coup, the Cambodian

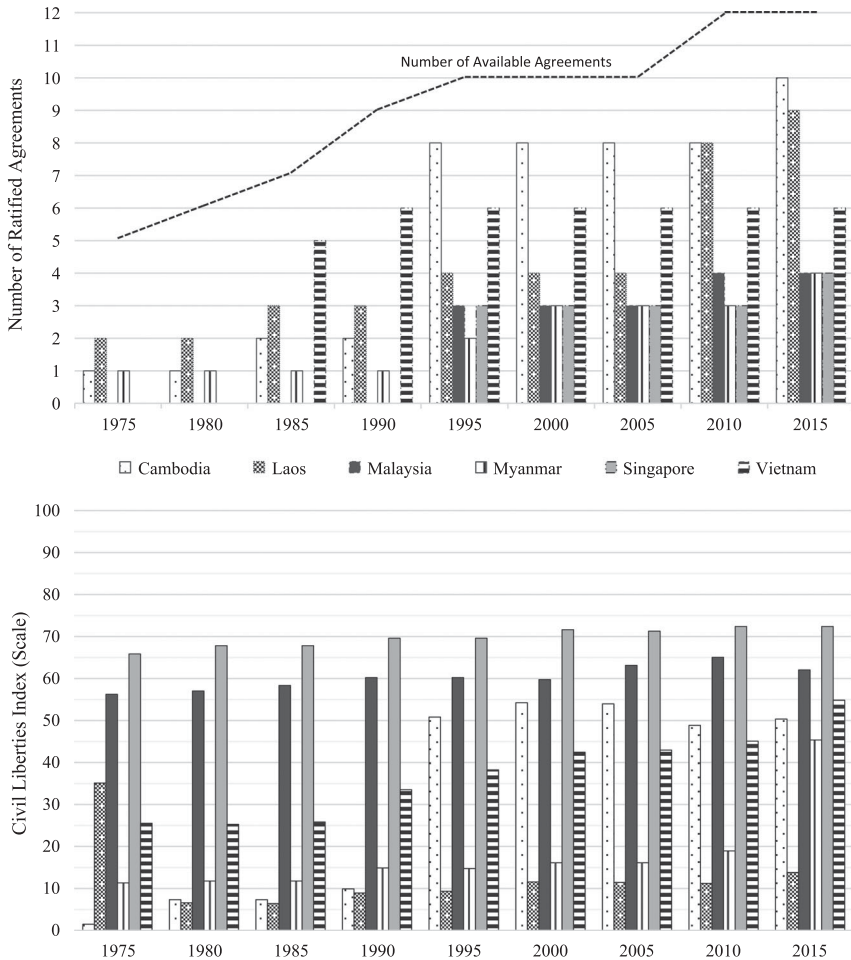


Figure 3. Ratification of human rights agreements vs extent of civil liberties.

Note: The top panel combines ratification data from the United Nations (2018). The bottom panel is sourced from Coppedge et al. (2019: v2x_civlib), which did not include data on Brunei.

People’s Party also paid several hundred thousand dollars to Porter Wright Morris & Arthur. The firm was tasked with quashing a US Senate resolution that criticized Hun Sen for being the sole abuser of human rights in Cambodia.³⁰ The difference today is that most such firms are hired continuously, rather than on an ad hoc basis. Despite outstanding questions about the precise “effect” they have on different political outcomes, adopting this tool at least provides autocratic regimes an opportunity for positive valence that would otherwise be forsaken.

The goal of improving how autocratic regimes are viewed within the United States gives rise to the use of another innovation: think tanks (see again Figure 4). Only a few of Southeast Asia’s autocratic regimes have funnelled money to them, but the number has marginally increased in recent years. Between 2001 and 2004, for instance, the Malaysian government paid Belle Haven Consultants to enhance its image and build closer ties with policymakers in the United States. The public relations firm was co-

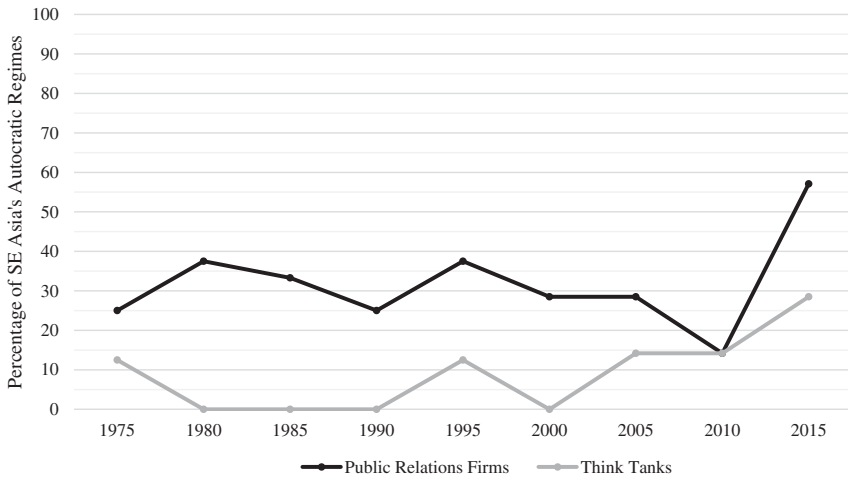


Figure 4. Public relations firms and think tanks in Washington D.C.

Note: The black line data is sourced from the United States Department of Justice (2019). The grey line data is coded by Morgenbesser (2020: qoa_think).

founded by the president of the Heritage Foundation, Edwin Feulner, who steered the think tank to adopt a new, pro-Malaysian outlook. This strategy included hosting speeches by visiting dignitaries, organizing research trips, publishing reports and manipulating critical commentary.³¹ Another example is the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, which was long received donations from Singapore and Vietnam. In 2014, for instance, the Centre published a report titled *A New Era in US-Vietnam Relations*, which criticized pro-democracy actors and whitewashed the regime's human rights record. An exposé later found that the report and many other activities of the think tank were directly financed by the Vietnamese government.³² This affair demonstrates that, at least in the short term, there are tangible benefits for autocratic regimes innovative enough to provide discreet funding to think tanks in the United States.

Another item on the menu of autocratic innovation utilized by autocratic regimes has been zombie monitors. Beginning in the late 1980s, the number of elections monitored by intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and sovereign states increased substantially. This brought increased criticism of the behaviour of autocratic regimes, which signalled their compliance to the international norm in exchange for certain benefits, such as foreign direct investment, membership in international organizations and a token of legitimacy.³³ Over the last decade, however, autocratic regimes fought back via the creation of zombie monitors. Instead of either allowing unfettered observation or forbidding all observation, they began employing partisan individuals and groups who could be relied upon to provide a positive assessment of their flawed elections.³⁴ Such zombie monitors have been observed in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cameroon, Ecuador, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Kazakhstan, Mozambique, Russia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Uganda, Uzbekistan, Venezuela and Zimbabwe, amongst other countries. A glowing endorsement from zombie monitors has helped the autocratic regimes ruling these countries claim to be representative of and

accountable to their citizens, while also offering a useful counterfoil to criticism of their flawed polls.

The deployment of zombie monitors represents an emerging technique amongst Southeast Asia's autocratic regimes. The first recorded case was Cambodia's July 2013 election. On this occasion the poll was declared "free" and "fair" by the International Conference of Asian Political Parties and the Centrist Asia Pacific Democrats International, two groups whose travel, accommodation and incidental costs were covered by the ruling Cambodian People's Party. The next recorded case was Malaysia's May 2018 election. Here the Barisan Nasional coalition deployed the Malaysian Commonwealth Studies Centre, which was based in the United Kingdom. A closer inspection revealed that the group was funded by the Cambridge Malaysian Education and Development Trust, which itself was wholly funded by the Malaysian government. One of the trustees was none other than Prime Minister Najib Razak. The most glaring case was Cambodia's July 2018 election. In an example of autocratic learning, the ruling party shed its exclusive use of groups and now turned to individuals *and* groups. A clear example was Anton Caragea, a Romanian diplomat with a track record of bestowing strange awards upon dictators around the world. To lend credibility to the election, Caragea mobilised no less than seven groups – the Diplomatic Center, Institute of International Relations and Economic Cooperation, European Council on Tourism and Trade, European Council on International Relations, European Diplomatic Academy, Parliamentary Assembly for Sustainable Development Goals and World Elections Monitors Organization. Despite the façade of autonomy and plethora of names, Caragea was found to be the director of every single organization.³⁵ By simulating a climate of expert opinion and spreading an illusory notion of electoral integrity, autocratic regimes yet again deprive citizens of a periodic opportunity to hold their government accountable.

Checking the menu?

The previous section offered a unidirectional account of autocratic regimes in Southeast Asia selecting from the menu of autocratic innovation. Notwithstanding the new information provided on the form and target of innovation, it is worth emphasizing that those same autocratic regimes have failed to employ other techniques. This implies that the process of innovation is not aimed towards a complete transformation, but a partial modification based on an undefined set of intersubjective costs and benefits. The following highlights three such missing innovations in Southeast Asia: systemic (winning) opponents, imitation legislatures and traveling government-operated non-government organizations.

A staple of the political life in Azerbaijan, Turkey and Rwanda, systemic opponents are government-created or government-aligned parties deployed to simulate compliance to the democratic virtues of accountability, competition and representation. Despite being official opposition parties, they lack the necessary autonomy and independence from the incumbent dictator, ruling party or military junta. The benefit of this innovative technique is that it

Offers lower-level party cadres alternative career paths and thus limits the risk of defections from the regime, while co-opting opposition elites into regime sanctioned activity and marginalizing extra-systemic opposition. Overall, it bolsters regime stability by reducing (particularly electoral) unpredictability, hard-wiring competitiveness.³⁶

In Indonesia, for example, Suharto once merged nine existing political parties into the United Development Party and the Indonesian Democratic Party because there was too much electoral competition. After the 1977 elections, once they gained seats in parliament, these systemic parties acted as a “sparring partner” for GOLKAR and then eventually became preoccupied with factional infighting. To uninformed or apathetic citizens, the benefit of systemic parties is that they offer the semblance of electoral competition and legislative representation in a political system that may be lacking both features. Across Southeast Asia, no autocratic regime has utilized the technique of systemic parties in more than three decades, much less allowed them to “win” an election.

A related technique is imitation legislatures. This refers to a cooperative forum or advisory congress designed to represent – or pretend to represent – the public interest in the event existing state institutions are deemed ineffective and unaccountable. In Russia, for example, Vladimir Putin created the Public Chamber, which is a forum made up of civil society representatives who allegedly conduct public examinations of key state decisions. The establishment of this institution, Putin claimed, “essentially means civilian control of the work of the state system, including the law-enforcement bodies and the special services”.³⁷ This technique has been rarely practiced across Southeast Asia. In the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos sanctioned the creation of the interim National Assembly, which was supposed to be the institutional bridge from the presidential to parliamentary form of government.³⁸ Notwithstanding its inclusion of agriculture, industry and youth representatives, the Assembly was stacked almost exclusively with members of the New Social Movement of United Nationalists, Liberals and Others, which was the umbrella coalition of Marcos. The benefit of this sort of “legislature” is that it helps regulate the relationship between state and society as well as promotes the idea of greater accountability to citizens, civil society organizations and opposition groups. Despite the known benefits of this auxiliary institution, Southeast Asia’s autocratic regimes have failed to build them.

The technique of creating government-operated non-government organizations (GONGOs) is characterized by a similar level of inactivity. Such organizations create the impression that civil society actors support government policy, undercut the pronouncements of actual non-government organizations promoting democracy and human rights, lower the perception of how much censorship exists and muddle the political discourse by inserting moral and factual relativity. “Unhappy with a civil society that independently monitors and challenges them”, Cooley describes, “authorities have been busy building their own tame simulacrum of it that collaborates with power rather than criticizing it”.³⁹ Across Southeast Asia, the Pagoda Boy Association in Cambodia, Movement for Progress in Malaysia, Union of Science and Technology Association in Vietnam and Environment Council in Singapore are all identifiable examples of GONGOs. What is missing is their deployment within regional and international organizations. A leading example is China’s interaction with the United Nations Human Rights Council. Of the 47 nongovernment organizations from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macau that are authorized to participate, 37 are under the authority of the government.⁴⁰ This has allowed the Chinese Communist Party to promote a positive image of its accountability to human rights guarantees and harass activists who criticize it in this leading forum. With respect to Southeast Asia, however, no evidence could be found of autocratic regimes using travelling GONGOs in the same innovative way.

Conclusion

This article developed the “menu of autocratic innovation” to account for perceived global transformation in the nature of autocratic rule. The unifying theme of the 20 incorporated techniques, which take of different forms and target different actors, was the need for autocratic regimes to maintain the allure of accountability without allowing the actual practice of it. Using the case of Southeast Asia from 1975 to 2015, the article showed how autocratic regimes across the region had adopted six innovative techniques and rejected another three techniques. This mixed performance raises an obvious but outstanding question: why does autocratic innovation occur? The simplest answer is that the relevant architects believe the adoption of techniques will directly contribute to a desirable political outcome: authority, durability legitimacy, popularity, stability or survival. The problem with this answer is that it cannot account for the *varying* rates of adoption observed in the preceding pages. The contrasting attentiveness shown to autocratic innovation presupposes the existence of an alternative explanation. The remainder of this article considers three possibilities: waves of autocratization, density of international linkages and leadership turnover.

The first explanation is that global “waves of autocratization” encourage the development, diffusion and deployment of innovative techniques amongst autocratic regimes. A wave is a “time period during which the number of countries undergoing democratization declines while at the same time autocratization affects more and more countries”.⁴¹ The current wave of autocratization began in 1994 and encapsulates 75 episodes of substantial decline in democratic regime traits. The underlying logic here is that autocratic regimes utilize techniques they understand to contribute to the consolidation of power or the breakdown of democracy in other polities. The ownership model, production style and editorial policy of Fresh News in Cambodia, for example, shares many similarities to the global television network Russia Today. The organizational structure and supporting activities of troll armies in Singapore, to cite another example, bears a striking resemblance to the “50 Cent Army” operating in China. The thrust of the waves of autocratization explanation is that any measurable success in the maintenance or establishment of autocratic rule will prompt aspiring architects to emulate best practice. This explanation speaks to the use of an autocratic playbook – a collection of predictable strategies to further concentrate power in the hands of an unaccountable executive.

The second explanation is that “international linkages” between autocratic regimes promotes innovation. This term refers to the density of cross-border ties between countries across a variety of political, economic, and/or social dimensions. The research of Tansey et al. has shown how higher levels of autocratic linkages – in the form of trade volume, migration flows, diplomatic ties and geographic proximity – has a systematic effect on the duration of autocratic regimes.⁴² The last mechanism, in particular, encourages learning and emulation because similar and neighbouring autocratic regimes can more easily gain information about successful techniques of political control.⁴³ A “first-mover” architect who employs a technique to stave off mass protests in their country, for example, offers an accessible blueprint to powerholders in neighbouring countries. The very act of innovation is therefore implicit to the process of “diffusion-proofing”, which describes how autocratic regimes employ similar pre-emptive techniques to reduce the likelihood that waves of popular mobilization will threaten them.⁴⁴ Beyond the example of mass protests, the geographical proximity of

Southeast Asia's autocratic regimes means innovation has lower opportunity costs than might be observed in other parts of the world.

The final explanation is that leadership changes within autocratic regimes produces changes in the rate of innovation. Since no two leaders rule in the same way, it stands that the forms and targets of innovation vary considerably. The use of defamation and libel suits against opposition leaders, for example, was far more prevalent under Lee Kuan Yew (1959–1990) than his son Lee Hsien Loong (2004–). The hiring of public relations firms in Washington D.C., to cite a different example, was not at all a tactic of Ne Win (1962–1988) but routinely employed by Than Shwe (1992–2011). A crucial factor is that the variation seen in these cases occurred despite the presence of both a global wave of autocratization and geographical proximity to other autocratic regimes. This finding is indicative of how the dynamic governance modes, policy approaches, rhetorical styles and technological capacities of political leaders' effect when and how innovation takes place. The fact some autocratic regimes tolerate horizontal and vertical accountability up to a predefined limit, while others seek to eradicate this attribute entirely, speaks to the contextually situated nature of innovation. Any effort to predict the form and target of innovation is thus fraught with difficulty, but a menu of autocratic innovation is evidently available.

Notes

1. Dobson, *The Dictator's Learning Curve*, 4.
2. Puddington, *Breaking Down Democracy*.
3. On this claim, see Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 83.
4. Diamond, "Thinking About Hybrid Regimes."
5. Ginsburg and Simpser, *Constitutions in Authoritarian Regimes*; Shen-Bayh, "Strategies of Repression"; Morgenbesser, *Behind the Façade*; Gandhi, *Political Institutions*; Miller, "The Autocratic Ruling Parties Dataset."
6. See Tansey et al., "Ties to the Rest," 1221–54; Slater, *Ordering Power*; Knutsen et al., "Autocratic Elections," 98–143; Gerschewski, "Three Pillars of Stability," 13–38.
7. Pepinsky, "Institutional Turn," 650–1.
8. Gerring, *Social Science Methodology*, 109.
9. Glasius, "What Authoritarianism Is," 518.
10. Sullivan, "China's Weibo," 8.
11. Carothers and Brechenmacher, "Closing Space"; Dupuy et al., "Hands Off My Regime."
12. Chen and Weiss, *The Political Logics of Anticorruption*.
13. Coalson, "Russia: Partying Abroad."
14. Dukalskis, "Toward a Theory of Authoritarian," 2.
15. Bogdanich and Forsythe, "How McKinsey Has Helped."
16. Williams et al., "Foreign Government Contributions."
17. Gunitsky, "The Great Online Convergence."
18. Roberts, *Censored*, 80.
19. Ayres, "Government-Controlled 'Keyboard' Armies."
20. Slater, "Democracy and Dictatorship."
21. The autocratic country-years are sourced from Boix et al., "A Complete Data Set," who provide a dichotomous measure of democracy for all sovereign countries. The analysis of Indonesia (1975–1998) and the Philippines (1975–1985) is limited to their autocratic country-years. Finally, Thailand is excluded because of a lack of regime continuity (that is, six alternations between autocracy and democracy over the four decades under analysis).
22. Davenport, "State Repression and Political Order."
23. Sim, "The Singapore Chill."
24. Christensen and Weinstein, "Defunding Dissent."
25. Rodan, "Embracing Electronic Media."

26. Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, "Human Rights in a Globalizing World," 1373–411; Gruffydd-Jones, "Citizens and Condemnation," 579–612; Hathaway, "Do Human Rights Treaties," 1935–2042.
27. Walter, *Governing Finance*, 5.
28. Sloan, "More Nations Seek a P-R Polish," F3.
29. Dhani et al., "Political Public Relations in Indonesia."
30. Grainger, "PR Firms Finds it Tough," 2.
31. Edsall, "Think Tank's Ideas Shifted," A01.
32. Rushford, "How Hanoi's Hidden Hand."
33. Hyde, *Pseudo-Democrat's Dilemma*.
34. Debre and Morgenbesser, "Out of the Shadows," 332–3.
35. Morgenbesser, "Fake Monitors."
36. March, "Managing Opposition in a Hybrid Regime," 507.
37. Richter, "Putin and the Public Chamber," 39.
38. Wurfel, *Filipino Politics*, 127–9.
39. Cooley, "Countering Democratic Norms," 123.
40. Wee and Nebehay, "At UN."
41. Luhrmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization," 1102.
42. Tansey et al., "Ties to the Rest."
43. Goldring and Greitens, "Rethinking Democratic Diffusion."
44. Koesel and Bunce, "Diffusion-Proofing," 754–6.

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Notes on contributor

Lee Morgenbesser is a senior lecturer with the School of Government and International Relations at Griffith University and a recipient of an Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Research Award (2018–2020). His research areas are authoritarian politics, dictators, democratization, election observation and Southeast Asian politics.

ORCID

Lee Morgenbesser  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3062-1284>

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