



How Global Efforts to Promote Regional Organizations Can Strengthen Authoritarian Regimes

Maria Josepha Debre, University of Potsdam

Regional organizations – such as the African Union, the Association for South East Asian Nations, the Common Market of the South, the Arab League, and the Commonwealth of Independent States – have mushroomed since the 1990s. Inspired by the success of the European Union, states around the world have sought to institutionalize cooperation to promote sustained socio-economic development, liberalize trade, secure peace and stability, and promote democracy and human rights.

Although regionalism has long been hailed as the solution to collective problems, there is also a dark side to regional integration. Current research shows that autocratic regimes can exploit regional structures to strengthen their hold on power and boost non-democratic rule. This is particularly worrisome given that the European Union and the United States are – with increasing frequency – channeling funding for democracy promotion through these regional institutions. Unintentionally, democracy promoters may end up strengthening authoritarian regimes.

Regionalism in the Global South

To understand organized regionalism – that is, institutionalized cooperation among at least three states with geographically limited membership – historical roots and divergent regional trajectories must be considered. In post-World War II Europe, regional integration was pursued as a peace-project to contain nationalism and rebuild crippled economies. In the Global South, however, regionalism was intertwined with post-colonial nation-building. Although inspired by movements such as pan-Arabism, pan-Americanism, or pan-Africanism, regional projects reflected efforts by newly created states to protect their national sovereignty rather than build strong transnational institutions.

Accordingly, regional organizations in the Global South often embrace strong norms of solidarity and non-interference in domestic affairs. For example, the Association for South East Asian Nations provides absolute protection for national sovereignty as it furthers regional cooperation based on consensual and informal agreements among governments. By now, autocratic regimes can easily exploit such regional arrangements originally designed to help states in their struggles for post-colonial independence.

Autocratic Survival Strategies and Regional Organizations

Autocracies use a number of strategies to counter challenges to their survival. They threaten and repress opposition, buy loyalty from fellow elites, use religion as an instrument, justify their power with appeals to nationalism or tradition, and manipulate elections to feign democratic legitimacy. In addition, autocracies are increasingly exploiting regional organizations to boost their financial and security resources and garner strategic information and diplomatic protection. Some examples tell the story.

- During the Arab Spring uprisings in Bahrain, the Gulf Cooperation Council immediately provided a venue to coordinate strategies to manage public protests. In March 2011, the Council staged a military intervention, sending troops that saved the hardline Bahrain regime from painful concessions to opposition parties.
- During the Urumqi riot in 2009, the Chinese Communist Party was able to appeal for regional support through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Faced with mounting resistance from Muslim communities in the western province of Xinjiang, the regime criminalized legitimate political opposition by invoking the regional discourse about the three evils of “terrorism, separatism, extremism.”

- Zimbabwe's long-time President Mugabe was able to cling on to power during the highly contested presidential elections in 2008, and then reclaim an absolute majority in 2013, in part because of protection he received from fellow presidents in the Southern African Development Community and the African Union. During annual summits, both organizations refrained from condemning the violence Zimbabwean government militias inflicted on the opposition and shielded Zimbabwe from United Nations sanctions. Mediation efforts led by the Development Community enabled Mugabe to remain in office under a power-sharing agreement with the opposition even though he lost the popular vote. During the 2013 elections, the election observation mission of the Southern African Development Community validated flawed Zimbabwean electoral proceedings while barring other, more critical international observers.

In such ways, regional organizations in the Global South protect autocrats from international pressure and interference after instances of repression. In effect, these organizations serve as sites to exchange “worst-practices” and can provide autocratic regimes in their midst with recognition, moral support, and regional resources to stabilize and legitimate non-democratic rule. Regional cooperation has clearly become an important new tool for autocratic survival, and its distorted functioning in this way should get more critical scrutiny from international agencies and policymakers.

The Limits of Cookie-Cutter Regionalism

Both the European Union and the U.S. are some of the biggest actors in international democracy promotion. They spend millions of dollars annually on programs and projects to empower civil society, promote the rule of law, and strengthen democratic institutions. Additionally, encouraging regionalism has become a key objective for the European Union. Inspired by its own history, the European Union hopes to inspire similar trajectories in other world regions.

But research lays bare the limits to this liberal logic. Only where sets of regimes are open to democratic change and operating in a supportive environment can regionalism further democratization. A cookie-cutter approach to building regional institutions cannot work. Before looking to build or reinforce regional bodies everywhere, democracy promoters should carefully consider the varying designs, scope, and memberships that determine how regional organizations actually function. It makes no sense to pour ever more international largesse into regional pacts that, in practice, reinforce repressive autocracies and stymie popular movements.

Brief prepared as Yale Fox International Fellow 2017-2018, Yale University.

Read more in Maria Debre and Lee Morgenbesser, “Out of the Shadows: Autocratic Regimes, Election Observation and Legitimation” *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 3 (2017): 328-247.