

## RESEARCH INSIGHT

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### Military and Clerics in Muslim Autocracies

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#### Executive Summary

This research elucidates the willingness of an autocrat to push through institutional reforms in a context where traditional authorities represented by religious clerics are averse to them and where the military control the means of repression and can potentially make a coup. We show that although the autocrat always wants to co-opt the military, this is not necessarily true of the clerics. Empirically, the dominant regime in contemporary Muslim countries is the regime of double co-optation: the autocrat resorts to a double-edged tactic that consists of pleasing the official clerics by slowing the pace of reforms and ensuring the loyalty of the military to be able to put down an opposition instigated by dissident clerics. Exclusive co-optation of the military obtains only where the autocrat's intrinsic legitimacy and the loyalty of his army are relatively strong while the organizational strength of religious movements is rather low. Radical institutional reforms can then be implemented. Rent economies where ultra-conservative clerics are powerful enough to block any institutional reform that they dislike represent another polar case.

#### Context

Long-term economic growth and equitable development obviously require the presence of a state sufficiently strong to reform the existing social and economic order. The question as to whether a democratic or an autocratic state is better suited to the task is unsettled. That democracy is not necessarily a precondition of development is attested by the historical experience of many presently developed countries. What seems undisputable, however, is the need for a "modern" state that has the capacity and the strength to carry out several key institutional reforms, in particular growth-promoting reforms, that drastically change erstwhile rules and practices. Most Muslim regimes can be described as authoritarian, whether of the strong or mildly strong variety. An authoritarian state is strong if the ruler exclusively relies on an army powerful enough to put down a rebellion led by traditional leaders. Such a strategy is obviously risky since too powerful an army may make a coup against the ruler. The alternative strategy consists of building a mildly strong state that co-opts or seduces traditional leaders and may therefore be content with a moderately-sized army yet at the cost of more modest reforms. What guides the choice of an autocrat between these two regimes is a fascinating question that we have explored both theoretically and empirically in Auriol, Platteau, and Verdier (2020). Why have Islamist movements gained so much importance after the end of the Cold War, and why did Saddam Husayn eventually turn into an adept of Islamist ideas are the kind of questions that the reported work addresses.

## The impact of foreign military assistance: the end of the Cold War and the rise of Islamism

Instead of being able to freely choose the size of his army based on internal political order considerations, an autocrat may be constrained by geopolitical forces that play out at the international level. What the theory expounded in Auriol, Platteau, and Verdier (2020) then shows is that ample foreign military assistance may dispense a ruler with the need to co-opt traditional authorities, such as religious leaders, whereas its sudden discontinuation will have the opposite effect of making such co-option necessary. This apparently happened with the end of the Cold War when many developing countries that were clients of the major world powers were suddenly deprived of significant external military support. In Muslim autocracies, in particular, the effect was to compel the ruler to revise his political strategy by allowing religious leaders and Islamist movements to exert a greater influence on the social, educational, and judicial levels.

Figure 1 below shows how, considering that the end of the Cold War occurred around 1990, military expenditures as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product significantly declined for the entire world in the following two decades. This worldwide trend is confirmed for the developing countries for which data are available: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, Oman, Indonesia, for the Muslim world, but also India and Sub-Saharan Africa taken as a whole. The major exception is Turkey where the ratio slightly increased between 1990 and 2000 only to fall abruptly between 2000 and 2010. In Iran and Morocco, the ratio fell between 1990 and 2000 but increased in the subsequent decade (see World Bank dataset). Trends between 2010 and 2018 are more varied and reflect the intervention of other international events, including terrorism, that disturbed the legacy of the post-cold-war environment.

Other forces were simultaneously at play, foremost among which was the rapid international diffusion of Islamist ideologies originated in Pakistan (the ideas of al-Mawdudi) and Saudi Arabia (Wahhabism) and the delegitimizing of autocratic regimes crippled by corruption. The combination of the diffusion of radical religious ideologies (thanks to the financial support of Saudi Arabia), of a weaker army, and loss of legitimacy due to inefficiency and corruption all implied a weakening of the autocrats. Interestingly, the theory proposed can also account for these various influences, and in this way can shed light on the impact of important international circumstances and policies on the internal politics of Muslim countries. In a nutshell, when the hold on power of the autocrat, measured by his legitimacy and the repressive power of his army, declines compared to the influence of the religious leaders over the population, the theory predicts a shift towards policies favoured by Islamist movements.

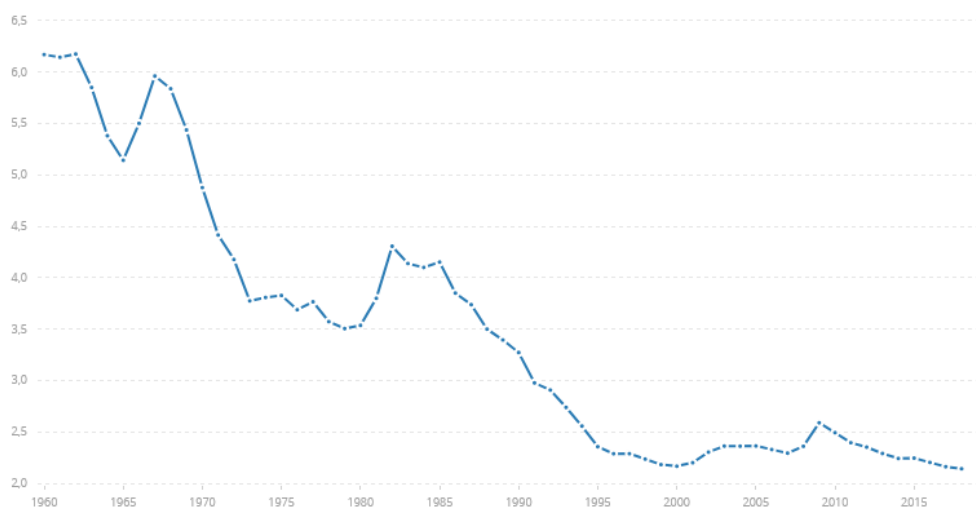


Figure 1: Military expenditures as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product –whole world, 1960-2016

## Research implications and impacts

The rise of Islamism should not be seen as a structural trait of the Muslim civilization, but rather as a contingent phenomenon that obeys the autocratic logic of national leaders driven by specific motives and facing specific constraints, including those emanating from the international environment.

Foreign interventions and influences, particularly in the form of foreign military assistance, exert a significant influence on the political economy of Muslim countries. Massive military aid buttresses strong authoritarianism whereas its sudden disruption or reduction may coax autocrats to lean towards religious forces.

Religious forces operating inside Muslim countries should not be amalgamated into a single entity but should rather be seen as a mix of heterogeneous movements. While some of these movements are actually close to autocratic power, some others stand outside the officialdom and refuse to meddle in politics or else are openly opposed to the regime. The latter can be radical and puritan clerics claiming for a return to a “pure” world from which corruption and compromises with the political clique at the top have been eradicated. The distinction between social conservatism and liberalism then becomes ambiguous. Official clerics who support the regime in exchange for material rewards are both progressive or socially liberal in the sense that they do not (systematically) oppose institutional reforms that promote individual emancipation and greater gender equality, for example. On the other hand, they are politically illiberal in the sense that they condone the corruption and the excessive brutality of ruling autocratic regimes.

The military, like the clerics, can also be bought off by the autocrats. This is not only because they receive a sizeable defense budget over which they have a large discretion, but also because they are given significant perks in the form of special housing quarters, rights of ownership over important productive assets, etc (see Siddiq, 2017, for Pakistan, and Sayigh, 2019, for Egypt). The economic advantages outrageously enjoyed by the military thus contribute to bring political stability to the autocracies prevailing in many Muslim countries (and in other countries as well, as attested by the example of Myanmar).

## Concluding remark

An important feature of the approach followed in Auriol, Platteau, and Verdier (2020) is the assumption that the religious clerics act in a decentralised manner, which implies that they do not belong to a vertically structured organization. This assumption evokes the situation of many religions (Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism), yet not that of Christianity (with the remarkable exception of American Protestantism). It bears emphasis that in such a framework religious clerics can be replaced by tribal or clan leaders. Not only do they represent localized polities, but they also dislike institutional reforms (in land relations, political governance, education and justice) that encroach upon their erstwhile prerogatives. In this broader perspective, tribal and religious leaders are thus seen as interchangeable actors, not as separate ones. Separating these actors is actually not straightforward: the distinction between religious and non-religious traditional authorities may be blurred because their respective values and preferences are often hard to disentangle, at least when clerics stand for the popular religion of the masses (see Platteau, 2017: Chap. 3).

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