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HOW AUTOCRATS WEAPONIZE WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Elin Bjarnegård and Pär Zetterberg

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Of all the countries in the world, the one with the highest share of parliamentary seats held by women is Rwanda. Reserved seats for women were introduced by the 2003 Constitution. Since its adoption, women's representation in the 80-seat Chamber of Deputies has grown well beyond the two-dozen seats originally allotted, reaching 49 seats (61 percent) after the 2018 election. In 2007 and again in 2016, Rwanda's President Paul Kagame won gender-equality awards for promoting the inclusion of women in his country's political system.¹ In Dakar, Senegal, he collected the African Gender Award, while nine years later in his own country's capital city of Kigali, he picked up the Gender Champion Award.

Rwanda is an autocracy. Kagame has dominated its politics since it emerged from genocide and civil war in the early 1990s, and has been president for more than twenty years. During that time, Freedom House has always rated the country Not Free, and numerous observers have detailed the Kagame regime's pursuit of power through electoral fraud, coercion of opponents, and human-rights abuses. Rwanda's gender-equality reforms are part of a wider strategy to draw attention away from its government's undemocratic practices.² By drastically increasing women's political representation, one scholar notes, the Kagame regime has "dressed its increasingly authoritarian governance in democratic clothing."³

Rwanda is not the only authoritarian country that has made remarkable progress with regard to women's political inclusion. Although authoritarian states have historically exhibited stark gender inequalities,

the three decades since the Cold War's end have witnessed a dramatic change with respect to legislation related to women's rights. International protocols such as the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action; the Millennium Development Goals; UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security; and the Sustainable Development Goals have pushed countries to take active measures to increase women's access to decisionmaking positions as well as education, paid labor, and healthcare. Partly in response to these efforts, countries across the globe have adopted an increased number of gender-equality reforms since the mid-1990s. While the push for gender equality has been global, autocracies have—somewhat surprisingly—adopted a majority of these reforms.⁴ For instance, of the 75 countries that have adopted gender-based quota laws for parliamentary representation,⁵ about two-thirds (51) have been ruled by nondemocratic governments.

Why do autocrats appear to support women's political inclusion? They may have ideological reasons to do so (for instance, in socialist states), but strategic considerations can weigh as well. Autocrats use surveillance, manipulated elections, and coercion to stay in power, but some also seek enhanced legitimacy in order to win, if not approval, at least passive obedience or toleration. Modern autocrats are more likely than their predecessors to adopt gender-equality reforms to boost regime legitimacy while shifting attention away from violations of electoral integrity and human rights.

What we are seeing, in other words, is “autocratic genderwashing.” By taking credit for advances in gender equality, autocratic governments put the spotlight on an area that is widely seen as linked with democracy, while drawing the focus away from persistent authoritarian practices. More specifically, taking credit for gender-equality progress enables autocrats to devise legitimization strategies aimed at specific groups: the political opposition, international actors, and civil society and citizens.

To understand autocracies' active adoption of reforms promoting women's rights, we need to place this development in the context of the rise of the post-Cold War liberal world order. Before the 1990s, women's political inclusion and general empowerment figured little in democracy promotion. As gender equality reached the international agenda, however, the repertoire of democracy-developing efforts gradually expanded to emphasize the representativeness of political systems.⁶ With this, the idea of women's inclusion became an integral aspect of democracy-promotion efforts, to the point where gender equality and democracy are now widely seen as intimately connected and have been described as inseparable “bundled norms.”⁷

The international community has thus increasingly embraced this bundling of democracy and gender while democracy promotion has gained in importance and influenced the behavior and strategies of au-

tocrats. In the post–Cold War era, authoritarian states, particularly those with links to Western democracies, have responded to pushes for democracy by developing formal democratic institutions and opening up

The idea behind autocratic genderwashing is to help a regime appear progressive, liberal, and democratic while diverting attention from its persistent authoritarian practices.

to elections.⁸ These are not countries undergoing transitions to democracy, however. They are, rather, electoral autocracies or competitive authoritarian regimes that allow multiparty elections, but only in a distorted, manipulated form. Just as autocrats have learned to exploit the institution of the multiparty election in order to signal the presence of a democracy that is not really there, so also have these

rulers learned to use gender equality in a similar way. By announcing its adherence to a gender quota in parliament, for instance, an authoritarian regime can pose as committed to the democratic value of inclusion while sidestepping pressures to allow that parliament to be freely and fairly elected.

Thus, autocratic genderwashing means the promotion of gender equality *with ulterior motives*. The idea behind it is to help a regime appear progressive, liberal, and democratic while diverting attention from its persistent authoritarian practices. It may be calculated—as when a regime follows a public-relations plan that sets out the choice and timing of its gender-equality reforms—or it may be opportunistic, as when many autocrats jumped on the bandwagon and adopted electoral gender quotas after the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Whether it is planned or ad hoc (or a bit of both), autocratic genderwashing involves a risk-reward assessment. Because the norms of democracy and gender are so firmly bundled, the rewards, in terms of signaling democracy and enhancing the prospects for regime survival, are likely to be high. The association between democracy and gender equality often builds on an uncritical assumption rather than on a deeper analysis. Excessive eagerness to equate even superficial gender-equality reforms with democracy makes it too easy for autocrats to benefit from such reforms. Autocrats can expect that boosting women’s representation in political institutions will be seen as a mark of democratic progress, even if the institutions in which more women are now included have scant power.⁹ At the same time, gender-equality reforms tend to involve little risk to the regime compared to changes that might strengthen the opposition or lead to fair electoral competition. In many autocracies, women legislators have so far tended to be more loyal to their respective parties than men are.¹⁰ Women are often more dependent on party hierarchies and leaderships because women have limited access to other pathways to politics, such as local clientelist networks.¹¹ In an

authoritarian setting, women's loyalty may be even a condition for their inclusion. So bringing more women with ruling-party affiliations into parliament can solidify rather than threaten regime support. Enhancing women's political inclusion, in other words, can be an effective cooptation strategy that carries little risk for an autocracy's survival.

From a normative perspective, then, bundling gender equality together with democracy is problematic. Such bundling gives autocrats an opening to use inclusion (of women) as a ploy to fend off fairer competition between government and opposition. In any definition of democracy, fair competition is fundamental. Unless reforms promoting women's inclusion make competition fairer, they do not, in and of themselves, constitute democratic improvements. In the absence of fair competition, autocrats can twist even seemingly inclusive reforms into instruments of an authoritarian regime.

The Shield of Legitimacy

The question then becomes *how* autocrats use gender-equality reforms to promote regime survival. While there has been a strong focus on autocrats' use of coercive strategies to stay in power, gender-equality reforms belong to another type of autocratic strategy: legitimacy-seeking.¹² It may be possible to rule by coercion only, but that is a risky course compared to making one's power seem justly held. Autocrats have state-run media and schools to channel propaganda, and can also seek legitimacy and prestige through the hosting of various international events.¹³ Different legitimization strategies can be aimed at different actors, and the strategies need not always win active approval for the regime, since in many cases passive compliance or toleration may be enough to suit authoritarian purposes.

Some legitimization strategies are related to the identity of the regime. For instance, there are ruling parties that justify their right to rule by referring to historical achievements such as a founding role in the state-building process. Anticolonial liberation movements turned ruling parties—Mozambique's Frelimo is one example among many—have often trumpeted their actions as battles for national independence. Another identity-based legitimization strategy is claiming a common, national ideology. Autocratic regimes sometimes proclaim an official belief system, based on nationalism or—in Iran, for instance—on a specific religion. A third legitimization strategy that builds on regime identity is personalism. Throughout history, there have been many autocratic regimes (such as the 1930–61 Rafael Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic) that have sought to justify their right to rule by focusing on specific characteristics of the leader. Frequent praise lauds the ruler as a charismatic figure, blessed by unique innate qualities and charged with a historic mission to lead the country.

TABLE—LEGITIMATION STRATEGIES AND TARGETS OF AUTOCRATIC GENDERWASHING

Legitimation Strategy	Targeted Actors	Example of Gender-Equality Reform
Procedure-Based	Political Opposition	Change of electoral rules directly or indirectly affecting the representation of women
Prestige-Based	International Community	Symbolic but highly visible improvements of the status of women
Performance-Based	Citizens	Delivery of rights or services tailored for particular constituents

Gender-equality reforms belong to another set of legitimation strategies that are output-oriented rather than identity-based. Understanding this means focusing more intently on the actions of the autocratic regime. Building on the work of Christian von Soest and Julia Grauvogel, we identify three ways in which autocrats use gender equality to seek legitimacy.¹⁴ Each way can serve the regime as a shield against a different threat to its stability. They are: procedure, prestige, and performance. When coupled with a specific gender-equality reform, these constitute legitimation strategies, targeting different actors depending on whom the autocrat is seeking to impress, and where the threats are coming from.¹⁵

The Table summarizes this analytical framework. It suggests, first, that autocratic regimes see in gender-equality reforms a means of maintaining dominance over the political opposition. Second, regimes also resort to such reforms in order to gain prestige internationally—a good thing to have when rulers are anxious to evade outside pressures for democratization. Third and last, autocrats seek performance-based legitimacy from women citizens or women’s organizations to appease mass publics. When these legitimation strategies are also used to secure regime stability and forestall democratization (typically by preserving strict limits on political competition), they amount to autocratic gender-washing.

In practice, the same gender-equality reform may be used in several legitimation strategies at once, targeting more than one audience. For instance, ratifying an international treaty may, under certain circumstances, appeal to audiences both international and domestic. Because autocrats must deal with potential threats coming from a variety of directions, it is useful to distinguish among the different legitimation strategies used in the various cases. They constitute distinct but integrated parts of a multifaceted approach with one aim: to help autocrats use gender-equality reforms to avoid democratization.

To be effective, any legitimation strategy must be carefully adapted to the political landscape in which it is used. The strategy must “count”

in the eyes of relevant actors—it must shape how they view the regime, and affect their choice to back (or at least tolerate) the regime rather than withdraw support.

Rigging Representation

When autocrats decide to hold elections, the objective is typically to gain a claim to *procedural* legitimacy without losing control of the rules of the game. When invoking procedural sources of legitimacy, autocrats overtly link their right to rule to election results or to the legal framework in place. They stress that they have followed the rules, without mentioning that it is *they* who have made the rules, and who decide how they are applied. Autocrat-authored rules tend, not surprisingly, to advantage autocrats. Their opponents get the short end. Procedural-legitimation strategies involve the political institutions at hand; ruling parties frequently use these to control the opposition. The procedural control of the opposition is efficient precisely because it allows and even encourages the opposition to join the political game. When opposition parties opt to “invest” in existing institutions by competing within their ambit and sticking to the regime’s procedures, these parties thereby offer an implicit endorsement of the regime’s institutional set-up. Their defeat, when it comes, looks procedurally legitimate: They agreed to compete by the regime’s rules, and now they have lost under them.

This procedural game tends to go on constantly in competitive autocracies, and can take many different shapes and forms. Gender-equality reforms are a relatively new element in the game. When an electoral reform is designed to favor the ruling party, the loss of electoral competition can be disguised as a gain for inclusion if women are placed in the “safe seats” that the reform creates. When the opposition loses the election in which it has chosen to participate even as the government party is fielding more women candidates, any additional seats that the government wins can be portrayed as a gain for democratic inclusion. Thus does autocratic genderwashing become part of the procedural-legitimacy game. Gender equality can be strategically applied to sugarcoat the undemocratic effects of a particular reform, but new gender-equality reforms can also be introduced to divert attention from other authoritarian tactics.

Procedural-legitimation strategies that hinge on gender-equality reforms tend to concern women’s presence in parliament. The adoption of electoral gender quotas constitutes an increasingly common way of revising the rules of the electoral game in a more inclusive direction. Over the last three decades, gender-quota laws have become one of the world’s widest-reaching electoral reforms. Electoral gender quotas often really do improve the representation of women. Countries with reserved seats have significantly more women in their parliaments than do coun-

tries that have not adopted any quota.¹⁶ The average proportion of parliamentary seats reserved for women deputies is 24 percent. Nevertheless, gender quotas can be used as instruments of autocratic genderwashing. This is particularly the case when, in practice, they also effectively limit political opposition. The most common method that a ruling party will use is to arrange the gender quota so that it mainly benefits women who are stalwarts from that party, leaving opposition women out in the cold.

It is difficult to quantify exactly how many “extra” seats authoritarian ruling parties the world over have granted themselves using gender quotas. One reason is that global representation data disaggregated according to party and gender are scarce.¹⁷ Another reason is that “gender quotas” is an umbrella term for a number of different electoral reforms aiming to increase the representation of women. One of the two main types of quotas—candidate quotas—applies to the regular candidate-selection process by specifying that a minimum percentage of each party’s candidates must be women. In these cases, there are no “extra” seats to fill and thus we cannot easily assess the gain for autocratic parties.

The other main type of gender quota—reserved seats—is of particular interest here, as it has been adopted exclusively by nondemocracies. Today, it is used in about twenty countries. This type of quota uses different mechanisms to earmark parliamentary seats for women. These mechanisms can be designed so as to benefit either ruling parties or opposition parties, and a study of the preferred design of autocrats can give us a rough indication. Until the year 2000, women were with few exceptions indirectly selected to reserved seats.¹⁸ For instance, the seats were filled after the parliamentary election, in relation to the election result, or appointed by the executive. This indirect selection clearly benefited ruling parties over opposition parties. Over the past twenty years, it has become more common to elect women directly to reserved seats, mostly by introducing special districts or lists for women. Such direct elections of women are integrated into electoral processes that are already skewed in favor of ruling parties.

It is only in a handful of “best-loser” systems, of the type first pushed through by international organizations in Afghanistan in 2004, that reserved seats have been designed with a potential to even out inequalities between government and opposition parties (as women’s reserved seats in this system are filled by women who ran against men in the general election and received substantial numbers of votes, albeit not enough to be elected).

An example of ruling-party bias can be found in Singapore, where the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) has long used strategic electoral calculations to maintain hegemonic rule. The PAP’s methods include ethnic quotas and a form of gerrymandering designed to ensure that minorities (mostly meaning Singaporeans with Malay or Indian ethnic roots) do not form a majority in any district. The PAP’s goal is to prevent

the rise of ethnically based opposition parties. Gender concerns have recently been folded into this scheme. The PAP has been tilting toward gender equality in its rhetoric, and has adjusted its Group Representative Constituencies (GRCs) by expanding them in size and number in order to allow for more women as PAP nominees. The GRCs generally represent PAP “safe seats” that the opposition rarely wins. Increasing their size and number has helped the PAP to position itself as more inclusive without trading away any of its electoral strength.¹⁹

In Tanzania, the authoritarian party that has long ruled the country has engaged in authoritarian learning by actively reforming and adapting the “special seats” gender-quota system to ensure that it will continue to help the regime win elections despite changing competitive dynamics. For instance, the regime has repeatedly increased the number of parliamentary seats earmarked for women while maintaining a system in which these seats are filled after the election according to the proportion of votes that each party received. This system clearly disadvantages the traditional main opposition party, whose supporters live clustered on a pair of islands (Zanzibar and Pemba) off the Tanzanian mainland. At the same time, however, this design has worked to the advantage of another opposition party whose voters are more geographically dispersed.

Again, the ruling party has sought ways to adapt the reform. In a constitutional-amendment process that was halted in 2015 due to tensions with and criticisms by the opposition, the ruling party attempted to push through an even more radical system of representation that would not only have given women parity with men but would also have reinforced ruling-party strength by allotting seats to both men and women on a first-past-the-post basis.²⁰ This demonstrates that authoritarian governments, just like other political actors, go through iterative learning processes. Reforms can have both intended and unintended consequences. For an authoritarian government, in control of legislation, this often means the adjustment and adaptation of laws over time.

In other cases, procedural gender-equality reforms have figured in efforts to divert attention away from undemocratic changes. In Ethiopia in 2004, the ruling party adopted a voluntary gender quota (at least 30 percent of its candidates had to be women), explicitly declaring that women’s representation was an indicator of true democracy. In the elections that followed, however, there was evidence of substantial manipulation of voting results, indicating that the ruling party had no intention of democratizing elections. More women did wind up in the regime-dominated legislature, but they were tightly tied to the ruling party and a major motive for the whole exercise had been to deflect questions about election fraud.²¹

In Bangladesh, the controversial Fourteenth Amendment (2004) to the 1972 Constitution raised the retirement age of Supreme Court justices from 65 to 67. The provision was passed during an opposition

boycott of parliament, going through on a 226-to-1 vote. The point of the change was to allow the continuance in office of then–Chief Justice K.M. Hasan, whom the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) wanted to keep in place for partisan reasons. To make this maneuver more palatable, the BNP rolled into the amendment a stronger gender-quota provision that ensured women more seats in parliament.²²

Autocrats see gender quotas as useful from more than one angle. Bangladesh is a poor country that relies on foreign aid; the BNP likely saw the beefing-up of the parliamentary gender quota as a low-risk move that had an additional big potential payoff in the form of more funding from abroad. Even though the BNP did not manage to stay in power, its less-than-democratic successor, the Awami League, has kept the quota. In Singapore, the old-line PAP may have had an eye on the need to appeal to a growing young and progressive electorate.

Reputation Laundering

Autocrats may use gender-equality reforms to seek *prestige* in the eyes of the international community in an attempt to appease external threats while bolstering regime-legitimation narratives. In order to understand institutional stability, one must consider international linkages.²³ Gender equality is an increasingly important instrument for securing foreign support. Autocratic genderwashing implies that women are placed in symbolic roles and high-ranking positions, gender-equality legislation is introduced, or women's rights are strengthened—all so that an authoritarian regime can position itself as modern and progressive and thus enhance its international reputation.

Autocracies have specific strategic motives for seeking reputation enhancement. One hope is to avoid criticism and external pressure to democratize—in other words, regimes believe that genderwashing can encourage donor countries to lay off and stop pushing for, say, reforms that would open up wider political competition. The need for economic resources such as foreign direct investments, loans, and development funding may also drive gender-related reforms.²⁴ Regimes that can rake in such resources will be better insulated against pressures to democratize, while having access cut off or throttled could bring an authoritarian system big trouble if its economy suffers.

Most examples of autocratic genderwashing to achieve international prestige concern the adoption of gender quotas or the increase of women's representation. International organizations have started to rank countries based on the parliamentary presence of women. Rwanda, as noted, is at the top, and Jennie Burnet claims that these policies “give members of the diplomatic corps in Kigali liberty to overlook the regime's authoritarianism and human rights abuses.”²⁵ A recent public-opinion study suggests that authoritarian regimes with gender quotas are

onto something here: Citizens in donor countries perceived autocracies as more democratic and were more likely to support giving them foreign aid when they had adopted quotas and increased women's political representation.²⁶

There are other ways in which gender equality can be used to enhance a country's international reputation while drawing attention away from antidemocratic tendencies. Take, for example, Cameroon. President Paul Biya has been in power since 1982, making him (crowned monarchs aside) the world's longest-tenured chief of state. Biya and his party followed many of the recommendations that came out of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women were strengthened. In 1997, Cameroon created the Ministry for Women's Affairs and the Consultative Committee for the Promotion of Women. This eager compliance with international norms for gender equality helped Biya to secure significant funding from both individual donor countries and multilateral sources. Since 1995, Cameroon has netted more than US\$19 billion in official aid and development assistance.

The added money and prestige came cheap: Biya never gave the new ministry much of a budget, and the committee met only three times in twelve years. In practice, these supposedly women-friendly but hollow institutions undercut the activities of women's organizations and progressive ministry staffers.²⁷ Biya's regime, meanwhile, has kept on rigging elections, limiting the activities of opposition parties, and restricting freedoms of the press and association. To this day, Cameroon remains a firmly authoritarian state with a Freedom House rating of Not Free. Thus, both international organizations and individual donor countries have contributed to strengthening the state capacity of an authoritarian regime that has been able to reap the benefits, both internationally and domestically, of making public statements and creating state institutions in support of gender equality without being held accountable for the lack of real democratic progress.

Coopting Civil Society

Autocrats may also seek to appease threats to their rule coming from citizens by claiming superior *performance* in the gender-equality area. Such claims commonly involve citing real or feigned achievements in satisfying citizens' needs. In gender-equality terms, this often means high-profile gender-equality projects supported by the state. The passage of legal reforms related to women's status or well-being can also figure in performance-legitimacy claims. The autocrat's main interest is to forestall mass mobilization around these issues. As is common in authoritarian regimes, state resources will be used to spread word of government achievements (real or imagined), while critics will be denied

media access. Boundaries between the state and the ruling party will be willfully blurred, and the government's performance claims will receive little critical scrutiny.

Authoritarian regimes are most likely to allow civil society activity in areas such as gender equality that are not perceived as directly threatening to the sitting regime but where it, instead, can take credit for any progress made. There are several reasons for ruling parties to collaborate with civil society to seek legitimacy while exerting control. Allowing civil society to operate conveys the impression of a functioning democracy. Also, by complying with the bureaucratic framework in order to carry out activities, civil society organizations reaffirm the authoritarian order. Authoritarian links to civil society can be a useful source of information for the regime. Finally, welfare-oriented civil society organizations, in particular, can prove useful when they deliver social services or fulfil social needs that the state apparatus does not. When the regime successfully coopts civil society projects, the rulers can take credit for the services provided and claim performance-based legitimacy.²⁸

There are multiple examples of this legitimization strategy. For instance, in Algeria, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika expanded women's rights over his 1999–2019 presidency. In 2005, at the time he was signing a peace deal with Islamist fighters, he amended Algeria's 1984 Family Code. The original, long a target of criticism from women's groups, had included major concessions to Islamists. The amended code broke with some Islamist interpretations, for instance by raising the minimum marriage age to nineteen for both men and women, and by declaring that only a woman herself (and not a proxy) could consent to her marriage. The amendments may have been motivated by Bouteflika's need to win support (or at least silent acquiescence) from civil society's progressive forces for his efforts to make peace with Islamists after a bloody internal war that broke out in 1992 (when the army interrupted elections) and then raged for a decade, killing perhaps 150,000 Algerians.

Additional gender-equality reforms adopted under Bouteflika accorded women wider political rights and more recourse against violence. Women's groups had become more active in pressing for these changes, but they also fit the regime's rising interest in "presenting itself as a champion of women's rights."²⁹ Such a strategy was a way for Bouteflika to convince the world that his regime cared about democracy, and also to cultivate support among women and the more liberal segments of Algerian society. Even as the regime was adopting parts of civil society's reform agenda, however, it was putting new constraints on civil society itself. Women's organizations were not spared, as they found their access to foreign funding restricted. Some civil society organizations were closed outright.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), which has never received any-

thing but a Not Free rating from Freedom House since its survey began fifty years ago, adopted a high-profile gender-related reform in June 2018. It made world headlines when the KSA ceased being the only country on the planet that banned women from driving. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), who had come to power a year earlier and begun making top-down changes, wanted (and still wants) to garner support among younger Saudis. He seeks to portray himself as progressive and reform-minded. Action on questions of women's rights lends itself to these purposes. The MBS modernization plan for the country, "Vision 2030," calls for women to enter the workforce in greater numbers to help the KSA diversify its economy and escape dependence on oil rents. Working women will, of course, need to drive.

While women activists in the KSA have long fought for the right to drive, MBS was careful not to give the women's movement any credit for the reform. How could he, when he was imprisoning women's-rights activists—including right-to-drive campaigners—as part of a crack-down that he began in January 2018? Their suppression, moreover, has been just one episode in a multifront campaign of human-rights abuses that has included arbitrary detentions, disproportionate punishments, and the October 2018 murder of dissident Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey.

Letting women drive may have been aimed mostly at a domestic audience whose backing MBS needs, but there is no question that Saudi Arabia has also received international plaudits for the change. There was extensive world media coverage of what came off like an MBS public-relations coup. In both Saudi Arabia and Algeria, the regimes made advances toward greater gender equality even as each remained an authoritarian system (the KSA's dominated by the monarchy and Algeria's by the military) that circumscribed freedom of association, including for the very activists whose reform ideas the regimes were claiming as their own.

As the above examples illustrate, autocratic genderwashing comes with authoritarian control over women's-rights activists. Controlling and limiting mass mobilization is part and parcel of an authoritarian government's strategies for staying in power. Allowing the empowerment or mobilization of women outside the realm of the authoritarian government may even improve the chances for democratizing movements to succeed.³⁰

Exposing Autocratic Genderwashing

Only by exposing autocratic genderwashing can we effectively caution against it. Scholars of authoritarianism should explore empirical strategies for identifying autocratic genderwashing and for analyzing when and where different types of autocracies are likely to use gender-equality reforms to seek procedural legitimacy or to claim interna-

tional prestige or domestic performance. Our illustrations suggest that autocratic regimes use genderwashing as part of legitimization-strategy packages that vary depending on which threat or threats the autocrat is attempting to guard against. As the cases of Algeria and Saudi Arabia suggest, moreover, a single gender-equality reform can “multitask,” serving more than one legitimization strategy and appealing to more than one audience. Perhaps this versatile quality of genderwashing—along with the low level of risk it involves—explains why it has become so popular among autocracies.

Still, are there specific contexts that produce specific types of genderwashing behavior among autocracies? And do certain types of gender-equality reforms lend themselves more easily to genderwashing? Analyzing variations among autocracies and across policy areas is important because we are simultaneously witnessing a recent trend in which some autocracies and backsliding democracies are increasingly attacking feminism, seeking to roll back progress in areas like women’s sexual and reproductive rights and family law.³¹

Our argument about autocratic genderwashing, in contrast, suggests that far from openly attacking women’s rights, many autocrats seek to portray themselves as champions of gender equality. Emerging research on international prestige particularly considers electoral autocracies—countries where multiparty elections are allowed, but manipulated. Cameroon, Rwanda, and Uganda all fall into this category. Each is also bound to the West by a strong system of linkages and leverage.³² All receive European and North American aid, and their trade with developed democracies is significant. Appearing democratic in the eyes of international audiences is important to the rulers of these countries. All find the tendency to bundle together gender and democracy norms a useful source of new opportunities to bolster democratic appearances without really becoming more democratic. These considerations suggest that genderwashing as a means of winning prestige on the world stage is more common in this set of autocracies than in other authoritarian states. Here is a task for empirical research.

Whatever their uses for autocrats, it is clear that gender-equality norms have become more popular with many nations, not just ones with competitive authoritarian governments. Are autocrats, by genderwashing, acknowledging the growing importance attached to gender-equality norms by the international community? While the enhanced status of gender equality in the past three decades constitutes remarkable progress, the risk that it can be “hijacked” for nonegalitarian purposes is real. Politicians, diplomats, international investors, journalists, academics, and activists should be careful not to be led into conflating women’s increased inclusion in politics and society with democratization. While egalitarian reforms are important as such, they are no substitutes for free and fair elections with open competition. In addition, oppositionists in

authoritarian countries should be wary of how gender-based electoral reforms may affect the playing field, since it can be expected that autocratic governments will not deal with such reforms in a neutral way, but will seek advantage from them. It is no coincidence that the introduction of reserved seats for women on the African continent has been largely driven by dominant parties, as they are the only parties in a position to design and apply such a reform to reconcile gender-equality commitments with increased electoral strength.

Lastly, organized citizens who care about both democracy and gender equality need to be aware of the risk that their government's adoption of a gender-equality reform could be hollow, could be an attempt to coopt women's organizations and high-profile women leaders, or could be both of those things—an empty gesture that is also an underhanded trick.

Of course, gender-equality reforms in authoritarian countries, even if the handiwork of rulers with suspect motives, may still make a difference for women and render societies more just. Even if autocrats are acting strategically—which increases the risk that they will treat gender-equality reforms as mere window dressing—it remains possible that women's increased legislative representation can, under certain conditions, generate improvements for women, for instance by spurring higher public-health spending and leading to lower maternal and infant mortality rates.³³ Such advances are obviously valuable. Yet our main point remains: Even as they assess gender-equality reforms on their merits, the targets of autocrats' legitimations strategies (such as donor countries) should be aware of the larger democracy-evading games that authoritarian regimes are playing when they make these reforms. Their adoption by autocrats should not exempt those rulers from critical evaluations of their motives, or fool policymakers in democracies about what is going on when autocrats seek to genderwash their regimes.

NOTES

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