



Research Article - Araştırma Makalesi

GOVERNANCE, INSTITUTIONS, AND ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SINGAPORE AND SOUTH SUDAN

ABSTRACT

The ongoing debate between democratic and non-democratic systems has gained significant attention in contemporary political discourse. With the rise of authoritarian regimes, the long-standing assumption that democratic principles are prerequisites for economic development has been increasingly challenged. While some authoritarian regimes, such as China and Singapore, have demonstrated notable economic successes, others, like South Sudan, face persistent economic struggles. This divergence raises critical questions about the relationship between governance systems and economic outcomes. This study aims to address the following research question: How do governance structures, institutional capacities, and historical contexts influence economic development in authoritarian regimes? By employing the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), the study compares two contrasting authoritarian regimes: Singapore, an economically successful case, and South Sudan, an economically struggling one. The research incorporates a structural-historical approach to examine the factors that differentiate their economic trajectories, such as institutional efficiency, historical legacy, and policy decisions. The findings of this study contribute to the broader literature on authoritarianism and development by offering a nuanced understanding of how governance systems shape economic performance. In doing so, it challenges simplistic assumptions about authoritarian governance and highlights the complexities underlying economic success and failure.

Keywords: Democracy, Authoritarian Regimes, Economy, South Sudan, Singapore

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Introduction

The relationship between governance systems and economic development remains a topic of enduring academic and policy interest, particularly in light of the resurgence of authoritarian regimes in the post-Cold War era. Traditionally, democratic governance has been associated with economic growth due to its emphasis on accountability, transparency, and institutional checks and balances (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006; Sen, 1999). However, the economic achievements of certain authoritarian regimes, most notably in East Asia, have challenged this long-standing narrative. Countries like Singapore and China have demonstrated that substantial economic progress can occur under political systems that restrict civil liberties and political pluralism, raising critical questions about the assumed universality of democracy as a prerequisite for development (Rodrik, 2000; Fukuyama, 2011). In stark contrast, authoritarian states such as South Sudan have experienced economic stagnation and institutional fragility, which underscores the heterogeneity of outcomes within similar governance structures.

This study addresses these contrasting outcomes by investigating the institutional, socio-historical, and policy-driven factors that shape economic development in authoritarian regimes. Specifically, it compares the economic trajectories of two seemingly similar systems—Singapore and South Sudan—through the lens of governance structures and institutional performance. This study compares two contrasting authoritarian regimes—Singapore and South Sudan—by explicitly linking institutional capacity, historical legacies, and policy decisions to economic performance. This analysis builds on existing frameworks, such as Acemoglu and Robinson's (2006) thesis on inclusive versus extractive institutions, Smith's (1966) structuralist approach to economic development, and Rodrik's (2000) emphasis on institutional quality as a determinant of growth.

The salient feature of this study lies in its focused comparative analysis of two authoritarian states with divergent economic outcomes. On one hand, Singapore represents a case of developmental authoritarianism, where strong institutions, policy coherence, and effective state capacity have fostered economic prosperity and global integration (Huff, 1995; Peebles & Wilson, 2002). On the other hand, South Sudan exemplifies a fragile authoritarian state marked by weak institutions, endemic conflict, and policy incoherence, resulting in persistent economic underperformance (De Waal, 2014; Rolandsen, 2015). This dichotomy challenges simplistic assumptions about authoritarian governance, highlighting the need to understand the contextual and institutional underpinnings of economic trajectories.

The study employs the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) as its primary methodological framework to identify and analyze the critical variables that explain the contrasting economic performances of Singapore and South Sudan. While the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) allows for a structured comparison between Singapore and South Sudan, its limitations in providing in-depth analysis are acknowledged. To address this, the study incorporates additional qualitative case-specific data, such as policy decisions, institutional structures, and socio-historical factors unique to each country. This multi-faceted approach ensures a more comprehensive understanding of economic outcomes within both regimes. However, future studies could benefit from mixed-method approaches, including field interviews, statistical regressions, and longitudinal analyses for greater analytical depth. The MSSD is particularly effective for comparative studies where cases share similar governance structures—such as restricted political freedoms—but exhibit significant variation in outcomes (Landman, 2008). By isolating key variables, including institutional capacity, historical legacies, and policy effectiveness, this study seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which governance structures influence economic development. In addition, a structural-historical approach is integrated to provide a deeper analysis of the institutional frameworks and socio-political conditions shaping economic outcomes in both cases (Smith, 1966; North, 1990). This dual methodological approach enables a nuanced understanding of authoritarian governance and its developmental implications, while addressing potential limitations such as selection bias and generalizability (Lim, 2010; Gerring, 2004). By juxtaposing a high-performing authoritarian regime (Singapore) with a struggling one (South Sudan), the study not only contributes to ongoing debates on authoritarianism and development but also provides insights into the broader question of whether economic success is contingent upon democratic governance or can emerge under alternative political models.

Ultimately, this research underscores the complexity of governance-development dynamics, offering a theoretically informed and empirically grounded analysis of economic trajectories in authoritarian systems. It contributes to the existing literature by moving beyond binary narratives of democracy versus authoritarianism, emphasizing the role of institutional quality, historical contingencies, and policy choices as critical determinants of economic outcomes.

I. Defining Authoritarianism

The contemporary global landscape has ushered in an era where democratic governance is widely recognized as legitimate and enlightened (Caramani, 2020). Despite this, the resilience and spread of authoritarian regimes in the post-Cold War period have raised critical questions regarding their adaptability and influence.

Recent studies highlight the rise of "autocratization," a process where democratic systems gradually erode through subtle authoritarian practices, such as the weakening of checks and balances and the curtailment of civil liberties (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

The varieties of authoritarian systems have evolved significantly. While Juan Linz (2000) historically placed regimes between democracies and totalitarian systems, more contemporary work by Levitsky and Way (2010) emphasizes competitive authoritarianism, where formal democratic institutions exist but are systematically undermined by ruling elites. Modern examples, such as Orban's Hungary, and Putin's Russia, illustrate how leaders consolidate power through electoral manipulation and suppression of dissent (Bermeo, 2016). These regimes blur the lines between democracy and authoritarianism by maintaining institutional facades while subverting their essence.

Recent studies emphasize the role of centralized authority in authoritarian regimes' durability. According to Magara (2024), authoritarian systems like Singapore's thrive due to their ability to suppress dissent while fostering economic growth through technocratic governance. Conversely, fragile states like South Sudan struggle under authoritarianism, as their governance models are plagued by corruption and weak institutional frameworks, which prevent state-building and economic stability.

Furthermore, the role of digital technologies in modern authoritarianism cannot be overlooked. Guriev and Treisman (2020) argue that contemporary autocrats rely less on overt repression and more on "informational autocracy"—a strategy that employs media control, disinformation, and surveillance to manipulate public perception while avoiding the overt violence associated with older forms of dictatorship. This reflects the dynamic adaptability of authoritarian governance in the 21st century. Pye (2023) note that such strategies have enabled some regimes to maintain domestic control while projecting an image of modernity on the global stage, a phenomenon particularly evident in Singapore's authoritarian capitalism. In addition, the global rise of populist leaders in ostensibly democratic systems has further challenged traditional definitions of authoritarianism. Mounk (2018) contends that populist movements often act as gateways to authoritarianism by fostering polarization, delegitimizing opposition, and weakening democratic institutions under the guise of representing the "will of the people." This underscores the growing complexity and fluidity of authoritarian governance, necessitating a more nuanced analytical framework.

Thus, contemporary authoritarian regimes vary widely, both structurally and operationally, ranging from military juntas to hybrid systems that co-opt democratic tools. Scholars increasingly emphasize the importance of understanding these nuances to assess the resilience, adaptability, and societal impacts of authoritarianism in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. As highlighted by Doboš and Mičko (2024), this complexity is particularly pronounced in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa, where the failure to reconcile historical grievances with modern governance models continues to challenge state legitimacy and institutional coherence.

II. Democracy, Authoritarianism, and Economic Stability

The relationship between governance systems and economic development remains central to political science and development studies. Recent empirical analyses have challenged traditional assumptions about the superiority of democratic systems in fostering economic growth. For example, Przeworski et al. (2000) argue that while democracies tend to promote inclusivity and long-term growth, they are not inherently superior to authoritarian regimes in generating short-term economic gains. Indeed, authoritarian regimes like China, Vietnam, and Singapore have demonstrated remarkable economic success by implementing decisive policies without political opposition (Caramani, 2020). Malesky and London (2014) highlight that Vietnam's economic growth under authoritarian rule was achieved through institutional experimentation and gradual market liberalization, enabling economic adaptation while maintaining tight political control. Similarly, China's "authoritarian capitalism" (He & Thøgersen, 2010) illustrates how centralized governance can drive economic reforms and infrastructure development with speed and efficiency unmatched by democratic systems. However, the authoritarian advantage is not universal. Knutsen (2011) notes that while some authoritarian regimes achieve economic success, others—like South Sudan, Zimbabwe, and Venezuela—are plagued by corruption, conflict, and weak institutions, resulting in economic stagnation. Recent studies emphasize that the quality of institutions, rather than the regime type itself, is the critical determinant of economic stability and growth (North, 1990; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019).

Also, recent research highlights the divergent outcomes of authoritarian governance based on institutional quality. As Haenig and Ji (2024) point out, Singapore exemplifies an authoritarian regime that has successfully leveraged its institutional efficiency and global integration to foster sustained economic growth. In stark contrast, South Sudan's authoritarian system is characterized by weak institutions, endemic corruption, and an inability to capitalize on its resource wealth, leading to economic stagnation and political instability.

A more critical perspective questions the sustainability of authoritarian-led growth. Haber and Menaldo (2011) argue that while authoritarian regimes may achieve short-term economic gains, their lack of political accountability often leads to inefficiencies, elite capture, and economic inequality. For instance, China's rapid industrialization has resulted in significant environmental degradation and widening income disparities, highlighting the trade-offs of authoritarian economic policies. Furthermore, recent global trends demonstrate that democracies, despite their challenges, tend to foster more equitable and inclusive growth (Gerring et al., 2020). Democratic systems prioritize the protection of property rights, political stability, and innovation, which are vital for long-term economic resilience. Conversely, authoritarian regimes face greater risks of economic volatility due to their dependence on centralized decision-making and the absence of mechanisms for institutional correction (Besley & Kudamatsu, 2008). Ariöz and Topdağ (2024) argues that the interplay between governance models and economic outcomes is particularly evident in fragile states like South Sudan, where authoritarian practices exacerbate socio-economic inequality and hinder resource management. Meanwhile, Singapore serves as a counterexample, where institutional coherence and technocratic governance have enabled long-term economic prosperity, despite its lack of democratic freedoms.

Ultimately, the democracy-authoritarianism debate underscores that economic success is not solely contingent on regime type but on institutional capacity, governance quality, and the ability to adapt to global economic changes. As Sen (1999) argues, development must be understood as a multidimensional process encompassing freedoms, equity, and human well-being—factors that authoritarian regimes often struggle to address.

III. Singapore's One-Party Authoritarianism and Economy

Despite its small size, spanning only 716 square kilometers, Singapore holds a significant place in debates on democratization (Verweij & Pelizzo, 2009). Contrary to liberal democratic theory, the nation demonstrates a high level of economic development and rule of law, despite being governed under an authoritarian, one-party system. This illustrates that the rule of law does not inherently guarantee democratic governance. Singapore offers an East Asian alternative to the Western democratic model (Bell, 1997). Since 1965, the country has been governed by the People's Action Party (PAP). Following the 30-year rule of Lee Kuan Yew, his son, Lee Hsien Loong, currently holds power. Although elections are held every four to five years, they are widely regarded as ceremonial. Singapore's authoritarianism is often described as "soft authoritarianism," but fundamental democratic principles, such as freedom of expression, remain limited.

The opposition is subject to suppression, with opponents of the regime frequently facing imprisonment. The government prioritizes societal interests over individual rights in its policy development, which has led critics to accuse the regime of fostering a "culture of fear" (Leong, 2000). Despite this, Singapore remains competitive internationally, thanks to its advancements in technology, capital accumulation, trade policies, and human resources (Toh, 1998). The stability and continued economic growth of the regime have been central to the persistence of the one-party rule.

Economic Consequences of the Singapore's One-Party Rule

Under the 30-year reign of the PAP, Singapore experienced rapid increases in per capita income. This economic progress altered the country's social dynamics, significantly reducing poverty levels while improving welfare through government-supported initiatives in housing, employment, and education (Rodan, 1998). Between 1960 and 2000, Singapore recorded the highest increase in national income globally, and by 1997, it ranked eighth in the world in terms of overall welfare. Per capita income rose from just \$511 in 1965 to \$54,000 in recent years (Ilzins, 2015), increasing the legitimacy and acceptability of the one-party regime among the population. Although the 2008 global financial crisis slowed growth, Singapore remains a magnet for job seekers due to its wealth and prosperity (Verweij & Pelizzo, 2009).

In the 1980s, Singapore's government incorporated information technology into its strategy to transform the country into a manufacturing hub. Economic planners sought to promote the widespread application of IT to boost welfare levels (Rodan, 1998). The government established state-sponsored committees aimed at computerizing public services, with software and telecommunications emerging as key areas for future development, supported directly by the state. As a result, Singapore's economy evolved into a knowledge-based system.

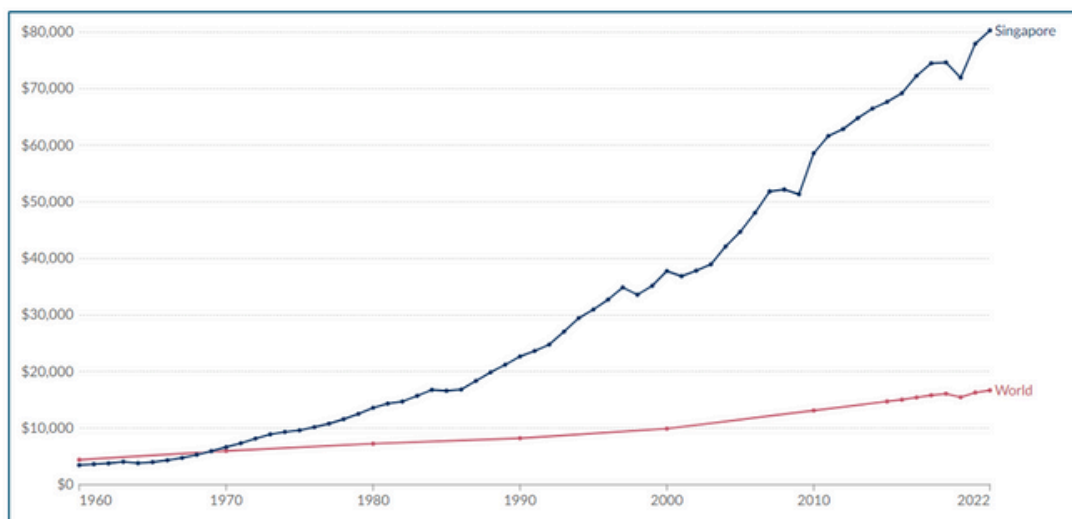


Figure 1: GDP per capita of Singapore, from 1960 to 2022

The island attracted workers not only from regional countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines but also from the United States and Europe, lured by the country's advanced IT sector and high wages.

Despite its authoritarian nature, Singapore distinguishes itself from other Asian nations due to its efficient governance, lack of wasteful policies, strong ties between the government and commercial entities, and the absence of cronyism (Low, 2000). This combination of factors has allowed Singapore to maintain a unique position as a prosperous and technologically advanced nation. The GDP per capita of Singapore, from 1960 to 2022 graphic also highlights the country's remarkable economic growth under its one-party rule. Singapore's steady rise in GDP per capita reflects the success of its long-term development strategies, transforming the nation into one of the wealthiest and most competitive economies globally.

IV. South Sudan and Internal Turmoil

South Sudan, which gained independence in 2011, is one of the world's youngest countries. However, the country quickly descended into civil war in 2013, stemming from political tensions between President Salva Kiir Mayardit and his former deputy, Riek Machar (Radon & Logan, 2014). A semblance of peace was restored with the signing of the Khartoum Declaration in 2018. Since independence, the political structure of South Sudan has been largely authoritarian, with President Salva Kiir Mayardit consolidating power by holding the roles of head of state, head of government, and chief of the judiciary (Prunier & Gisselquist, 2003). Despite the lack of a permanent constitution, the interim provisions grant the president the authority to dissolve parliament, while prohibiting his removal from office. According to data from Freedom House (2022), South Sudan ranked among the most repressive countries, scoring just 1 out of 100 points in terms of political and civil liberties. This poor ranking is primarily attributed to the absence of a fair electoral process, ineffective election laws, and limited political pluralism and participation. Elections scheduled for 2015 were postponed to 2018, then to 2021, and finally to 2023, undermining any claims of electoral independence. Although the constitution theoretically guarantees freedom of the press and expression, in practice, the government censors dissent and arrests critical journalists. The civil war has also severely curtailed education, and while the judiciary is nominally independent, it remains largely ineffective. The ongoing political instability and internal conflict have left South Sudan among the least developed nations, according to United Nations criteria, with administrative and socio-historical factors contributing to its economic decline (Husák, 2022).

From South Sudan's Authoritarianism to Economic Problems

South Sudan remains one of the least developed countries globally, despite its considerable natural resources. Decades of military dictatorships, internal conflicts, widespread poverty, and inadequate governance have exacerbated the country's economic struggles. Although endowed with significant resources such as oil, diamonds, and gold, South Sudan has been unable to effectively capitalize on these assets due to the protracted civil war (Baş, 2007). Military interventions have further stifled economic development (Manfredi & Mirghani, 2022). According to International Monetary Fund (IMF) data, average annual per capita income fell from \$1,000 to \$230 following independence in 2011. With limited success in domestic trade, South Sudan has relied heavily on foreign trade, particularly the export of oil. Oil revenues account for nearly all of the country's total exports and over 40% of its GDP (Schull, 1998). Despite numerous conflicts purportedly fought for democratic reforms, the persistence of authoritarian governance and social unrest have hindered the nation's economic progress (Voll, 1992). As a result, South Sudan's largely rural economy has failed to develop, and the country has consistently ranked among the most fragile states in Africa since its independence (Prunier & Gisselquist, 2003).

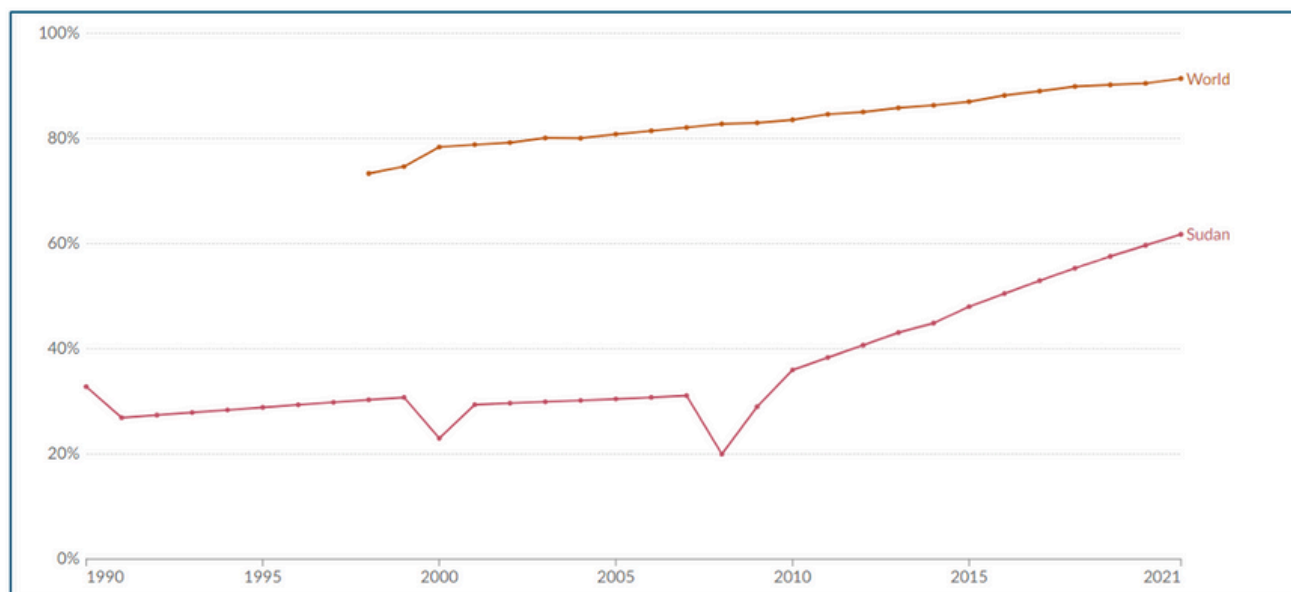


Figure 2: Share of the population with access to electricity of South Sudan from 1990 to 2021

The authoritarian governance of South Sudan, compounded by prolonged internal conflict, has left much of the population in poverty. The civil war that erupted in 2013 caused severe damage to infrastructure and hindered agricultural productivity, pushing nearly 80% of the population below the poverty line (World Bank, 2023). The figure 2 illustrates South Sudan's chronic underdevelopment in basic infrastructure. Despite its natural resources, the country's inability to provide widespread access to electricity reflects the broader economic struggles rooted in weak governance and prolonged internal conflict.

Heavy reliance on oil has made the economy vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices, while widespread corruption, reflected in South Sudan's ranking at the bottom of the Corruption Perceptions Index (180 out of 180 countries), has further diverted resources away from critical sectors like healthcare and education. The authoritarian regime's focus on consolidating power, with frequent delays in elections and ineffective governance, has prevented the implementation of meaningful economic reforms, leaving the country's economy undiversified and stagnating.

V. Comparison of Singapore and Sudan: The Relationship Between Authoritarianism and Economic Development

The debate surrounding the relationship between authoritarianism and economic development is marked by two primary perspectives. One view posits that authoritarian states can achieve economic development more efficiently, while the opposing perspective argues that democratic states are more likely to experience sustainable economic growth. The cases of Singapore and South Sudan provide a valuable framework for analyzing the relationship between authoritarian governance and economic development, as they present contrasting outcomes within similar political frameworks.

Singapore, governed by a form of soft authoritarianism under a one-party system, exemplifies an authoritarian state that has achieved considerable economic success. Its policies focused on technological advancement, attracting foreign investment, and fostering innovation have earned widespread acceptance among its citizens (Bell, 1997). The People's Action Party (PAP), which has been in power for over three decades, has implemented policies that prioritize the development of information technologies and transforming the country into a global technological hub, thus fostering significant economic growth.

In contrast, South Sudan, also an authoritarian state, has struggled to achieve comparable economic progress. Known for its political instability, military coups, and internal conflict, South Sudan has yet to establish the political and economic stability necessary for development. Elections in the country are repeatedly postponed, and the state is further destabilized by ongoing rebellions and crises. The country's pre-independence rural economic history, coupled with the lack of technological infrastructure necessary to harness its natural resources, has rendered its economy dependent on foreign trade. Unlike Singapore, South Sudan has failed to develop the internal social and institutional dynamics necessary for economic growth, resulting in a repetitive cycle of socio-historical challenges.

As Smith (1966) suggests in his structuralist perspective, the institution of the state plays a critical role in shaping the political system and its corresponding order. The divergent trajectories of Singapore and South Sudan reflect the impact of structural differentiation within authoritarian regimes on economic development. Within each country, specific factors highlight internal disparities. In Singapore, the alignment of policy coherence with institutional efficiency has fostered technological innovation, foreign investment, and infrastructure growth across different sectors. Comparatively, South Sudan's institutional fragmentation, compounded by regional inequalities and resource mismanagement, has led to varying economic conditions within its provinces. These internal dynamics underscore the need for comparative analysis not only between the two countries but also within their respective governance and institutional frameworks. The results indicate that institutional efficiency and historical continuity in Singapore fostered economic growth, whereas in South Sudan, institutional fragmentation and internal conflict impeded development. Singapore successfully leveraged its governance to integrate into global markets and attract significant investment, which contributed to its sustained economic progress. In contrast, South Sudan's reliance on oil exports, combined with governance weaknesses and prolonged instability, left its economy vulnerable to external shocks and stagnation. These findings underscore the critical role of governance quality in shaping economic trajectories, highlighting how institutional strength and stability can drive growth, while institutional fragility and conflict hinder development. Singapore's ability to establish functional institutions has facilitated its economic success, despite its authoritarian governance. In contrast, South Sudan's authoritarianism, compounded by internal conflict and institutional dysfunction, has hindered its economic development. As Lindstaedt (2020) observes, authoritarian regimes differ in their structures and capacities, which, in turn, shape their social and economic outcomes.

Thus, it is not accurate to assert that authoritarian states are inherently economically developed or underdeveloped. Rather, this assessment must consider the socio-historical foundations of each state and its society (Hosseini, 2005). Singapore's relatively stable authoritarian regime, characterized by effective state-building and positive economic policies, contrasts sharply with South Sudan's more turbulent and economically stagnant authoritarianism. Consequently, the relationship between authoritarianism and economic development is contingent upon the specific political, institutional, and historical contexts of each state. This study builds on existing findings by Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) and Rodrik (2000), reinforcing that institutional quality significantly impacts economic outcomes.

Singapore aligns with developmental authoritarian models like China and Vietnam, where strong institutions and governance have driven economic growth. In contrast, South Sudan mirrors cases of fragile states such as Zimbabwe and Venezuela, where weak institutions and instability have hindered development. Comparative research across other authoritarian states could provide further insights into the complex relationship between governance and economic performance. Future research may explore the role of international organizations in mitigating economic instability within fragile authoritarian regimes, conduct longitudinal studies to analyze shifts in institutional quality and economic outcomes over time, and examine democratic transitions in formerly authoritarian economies to identify pathways for sustainable development.

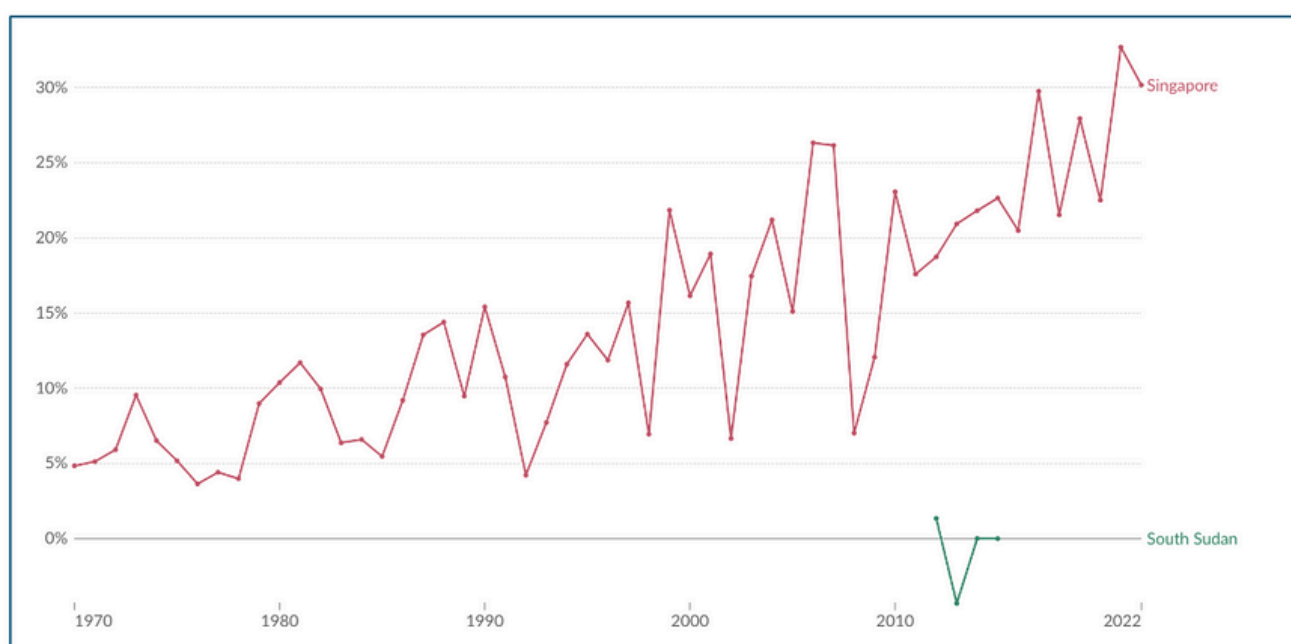


Figure 3: Foreign direct investment, net inflows as share of GDP, 1970 to 2022

In addition to the political and institutional factors shaping the economic outcomes of authoritarian regimes, it is important to consider external influences such as globalization, international trade partnerships, and foreign direct investment. In the case of Singapore, its strategic integration into global markets and ability to attract foreign investments have played a critical role in sustaining its economic growth. South Sudan's limited engagement with the global economy, compounded by its ongoing internal conflicts, on the contrary, has hindered its ability to leverage such external resources for development. These external dynamics further underscore the complexity of the relationship between governance structures and economic performance, demonstrating that while internal factors are pivotal, the broader geopolitical and economic environment also significantly influences a nation's developmental trajectory.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is overly simplistic to assert a direct and uniform relationship between authoritarianism and economic development. While theorists such as Samuel Huntington argue that authoritarian regimes can more effectively implement state policies and economic reforms, contemporary examples demonstrate that the relationship is more complex and context-dependent. Authoritarian states such as China and South Korea have successfully challenged Western democratic hegemony, yet the development trajectory of a state is shaped by multiple factors beyond its political regime alone. This dynamic is particularly evident in the cases of Singapore and South Sudan. Singapore's single-party authoritarian government has successfully capitalized on its historical and national resources, significantly increasing per capita income and transforming the nation into a hub of technological advancement and economic prosperity. Conversely, South Sudan represents an example of a fragile authoritarian state, unable to manage internal civil conflicts and socio-political unrest, thus inhibiting its economic growth. Therefore, when comparing the economic outcomes of states in relation to their governance systems, it is essential to consider additional factors intrinsic to each country's socio-political and historical context. Adopting a structural approach provides a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics. States like Singapore, which have established strong institutional frameworks, can achieve economic development despite their authoritarian governance. In contrast, economic development is more challenging in states with unstable internal dynamics, such as South Sudan. The comparison between Singapore and South Sudan highlights the necessity of examining a state's institutional capacity and socio-historical conditions to fully understand the relationship between political regime types and economic development.

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