

## How Trump and the 2020 US Election Are Helping Authoritarians' Domestic Causes

**The Trump administration has gifted autocrats with three key tools for consolidating their strength at home.**

By Mai Truong

The U.S. Electoral College has secured President-elect Joe Biden's victory. Some argue that Biden's victory should frighten autocrats throughout the world because he emphasizes the promotion of human rights and democracy, which current President Donald Trump has downplayed in relations with many authoritarian regimes. It is true that democratic opponents are likely to face stronger external pressures under Biden's administration, but they should not be too worried. That is because what has happened under Trump's presidency and the 2020 election are helping the authoritarians' domestic causes in three ways: The way Trump has handled the loss shows real weaknesses of democratic institutions that have previously been difficult to expose; it has revealed the popularity of strongmen in many authoritarian regimes, even among traditional dissidents; and the election and its aftermath proved the susceptibility of the public to misinformation campaigns. At least, autocrats in some Asian countries should not be too worried.

First, Trump's refusal to concede power despite the lack of evidence of voter fraud provides autocrats with rare opportunities to show the public that the accusations of electoral fraud and manipulation are not restricted to authoritarian regimes. Autocrats have long attempted to raise the awareness of the "social ills" of democratic countries to counter domestic advocacy for the expansion of democratic freedoms. As an illustration, while news on domestic protests is highly censored and manipulated, state media in China followed the news on the Black Lives Matter movement closely, emphasizing the inequality and racial problems as the failure of liberal democracy represented by the United States. The freedom of information in democracies and the easy transmission of information through digital technologies allow contemporary authoritarian regimes to easily find the "social ills" of their democratic counterparts.

It is more challenging, however, for autocrats to convince the public that long-standing democratic institutions can also be as fragile, vulnerable, and easily exploited as those under their own rule. Trump's refusal to concede power and continuous attempts to blame his loss on a stolen election suddenly afford autocrats such evidence. And many authoritarian governments quickly took advantage of this chance to emphasize that elections in a long-standing democracy can be as easily manipulated as those under their rule. To be sure, the decision of some authoritarian governments in Asia to wait to congratulate Joe Biden may come from their careful diplomatic calculations, but there may be domestic factors at play as well. Such silence certainly has also stirred doubts about the integrity of the U.S. election. A delayed congratulation implies that the government may think that the election results can be overturned. For example, some argue that while waiting to congratulate Biden on his victory, state media in Vietnam frequently reported news of voter fraud lawsuits in the 2020 U.S. election without following up on the

courts' decisions or explaining how state electoral systems work. This creates the impression that the U.S. electoral system is not as strong as typically assumed.

Second, the way the public in many Asian autocracies has reacted to Trump's loss and his baseless claims about electoral fraud unambiguously reveals the type of political leadership that is desired in those countries. A vocal segment of the public in Vietnam, Hong Kong, and China support Trump, who is similar to their authoritarian leaders in many ways. In Vietnam, for example, many prefer a leader who is a strongman, "unequivocal, charismatic, and tough," and are unbothered if he attacks institutional norms. This may imply that many authoritarian governments have successfully ingrained in society a political culture where putting individual leaders above institutions is considered desirable.

Autocrats in China, Hong Kong, and Vietnam should also be relieved to learn that many pro-democracy dissidents support Trump, despite Trump's human rights record regarding migrant children, the "Muslim ban," and white supremacy. This implies that the values many pro-democracy activists pursue may not actually be about democracy or human rights. Many dissidents in Vietnam and Hong Kong supported Trump simply because they believed his victory could weaken China. This actually reveals an interesting possibility that may please autocrats: Democratization may be a secondary goal to nationalism in some activists' minds. This means that these autocrats may be able to somewhat accommodate activists' goals without letting go of power.

Finally, the way the public in many Asian autocracies has reacted to Trump's loss also reveals that they are highly susceptible to misinformation and disinformation. While a similar pattern can be observed in the United States, this revelation helps autocrats in two ways. First, it may provide autocrats with a new way to manipulate public opinion regarding sensitive domestic issues. Second, it has created confusion over what news is real.

The public's disbelief in mainstream media under authoritarian rule may translate into their disdain for mainstream media anywhere, including the United States. For example, many Vietnamese and Chinese citizens, at home and abroad alike, rely on The Epoch Times rather than U.S. mainstream media for news on the 2020 U.S. election. This may teach authoritarian governments that if they are able to allow alternative information without making the public aware that the sources come from the state, they may be able to manipulate public opinion on domestic issues in their favor.

Even some dissidents in autocracies are creating confusion over what information is real and what is not real. As a result of strict control of information, it may be challenging for some dissidents to discern real news from fake news coming from foreign sources. On the other hand, it is precisely because of their disdain for autocrats' control over information that some dissidents advocate spreading any news about the U.S. 2020 election, as a way to promote freedom of information. For instance, some dissidents in China are eager to provide alternative information about the election, even though they know it is false.

In a nutshell, Trump's presidency and the 2020 election are helping many authoritarian governments' domestic causes, at least in Asia. Trump's refusal to concede power provides a unique opportunity to show the public the weakness of American democratic institutions. In addition, the public's reaction to Trump's loss provides some Asian autocrats with two revelations that are important for their survival: that a vocal segment of the public desires a

leader who is very similar to an autocrat, and that many citizens are highly susceptible to misinformation and disinformation.

While a Biden's presidency may create stronger external pressures on authoritarian regimes, whether such pressures can outweigh domestic conditions is uncertain. History has taught us that with favorable domestic factors, many authoritarian governments are likely to survive even under strong external pressures.

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