

Information Management and Political Stability in Single-Party Regimes: A Comparative Study of China and North Korea, 2012–2022

Topic and Research Question

Contemporary authoritarian regimes such as China and North Korea have demonstrated remarkable political resilience despite internal and external challenges.

Scholars argue that authoritarian stability relies on three major mechanisms: legitimation, repression and co-optation. These mechanisms help regimes to justify their rule, suppress opposition and maintain elite cohesion.

However, in contemporary authoritarian governance, these mechanisms increasingly operate through information management. By controlling the flow of information and shaping the public sphere, authoritarian regimes reinforce their political stability.

In light of these developments, the thesis addresses the following research question:

Which techniques do single-party authoritarian regimes in China and North Korea apply to maintain political stability, with a particular emphasis on the role of information control?

State of the Art

Existing literature on authoritarian governance emphasizes the importance of controlling the public sphere and managing information in order to maintain political stability.

In this context, the public sphere plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, while media serves as a key instrument for disseminating information and influencing societal perceptions. In authoritarian contexts, media is often used to spread ideology, reinforce state narratives and suppress dissent.

With the development of digital technologies, authoritarian regimes have further expanded their capacity to regulate and manipulate information through censorship, surveillance and online propaganda.

In addition, scholars identify three main mechanisms of authoritarian stability: legitimation, repression and co-optation (Gerschewski 2013). However, while these mechanisms have been widely studied, the role of information management in operating and linking them remains under-researched.

Methodology and Approach

A qualitative comparative approach was chosen to examine how authoritarian regimes maintain political stability.

China and North Korea were selected as case studies, as they represent two different models of single-party authoritarian regimes while sharing similar political structures.

The analysis focuses on the period from 2012 to 2022, allowing for a systematic comparison of governance strategies under Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un.

The study is based on Gerschewski's three pillars of authoritarian stability: legitimation, repression and co-optation, which provide the analytical framework for examining the cases.

To apply this framework, the study proceeds in three steps:

- Identification of key mechanisms of authoritarian stability
- Analysis of selected political and ideological campaigns
- Comparative assessment of information management across cases.

Main Facts

This study examines six case studies in China and North Korea to analyze how single-party authoritarian regimes maintain political stability.

In China, the analysis focuses on three major political campaigns: the **anti-corruption campaign**, **poverty alleviation policies** and the management of the **COVID-19 pandemic**. These cases illustrate how the Chinese government uses large-scale campaigns to strengthen legitimacy, shape public narratives and respond to social and political challenges.

In North Korea, the study examines **ideological continuity** and **leadership cultivation**, **elite management and political loyalty**, as well as the **dual strategy of development and defense**. These cases show how political stability is maintained through strict

ideological control, elite discipline and centralized decision-making.

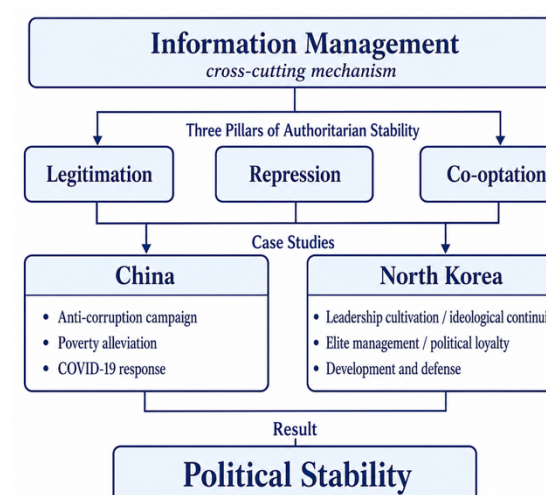
Across all six cases, the findings indicate that legitimation, repression and co-optation are not isolated mechanisms, but closely interconnected in practice. Information management plays a central role in linking these mechanisms by controlling the public sphere, regulating information flows and reinforcing regime authority.

Results

The analysis shows that both China and North Korea rely on information management to operate a combination of legitimation, repression and co-optation in order to maintain political stability.

In China, these mechanisms are implemented in a more **adaptive and campaign-based** manner. Political campaigns are used to strengthen legitimacy, respond to policy challenges and shape public narratives through information management.

In North Korea, the three mechanisms are more **rigid, ideology-centered, and leader-centered**. Information management primarily serves to reinforce ideological loyalty, suppress dissent and maintain elite cohesion.



Overall, the findings show that information management is not simply censorship. It functions as a cross-cutting

mechanism that connects the three pillars of authoritarian stability: legitimation, repression and co-optation. While China uses a more adaptive and institutionalized approach, North Korea relies on a more personalized, ideological, and coercive model.

The central finding is therefore that single-party authoritarian regimes survive not only by silencing dissent, but also by managing what people know, see, and believe.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at [utheses.univie.ac.at/detail/78566/](https://theses.univie.ac.at/detail/78566/).

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