

Bureaucratic Authoritarianism

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Bureaucratic authoritarianism is a concept first formulated by Argentinean political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell to characterize the civil-military dictatorships of Brazil (1964–1985), Argentina (1966–1973, 1976–1983), Uruguay (1973–1985), and Chile (1973–1990). The term has been applied to describe other Latin American and Asian authoritarian regimes, even if they do not necessarily share all of the same traits of their original South American counterparts.

O'Donnell identified a new type of political system in the original four countries, distinct from totalitarianism and previous Latin American populist and oligarchic authoritarian regimes with strong leaders or *caudillos*. O'Donnell acknowledged that the military had always played an important political role in the region since independence from Spain and Portugal. However, he argued that the wave of democratic breakdowns launched in the 1960s fostered a new kind of institutional involvement of the military in government.

The main characteristics of bureaucratic authoritarianism are a strong bureaucratic organization, technocratic decision-making, the exclusion and demobilization of popular sectors, and the repression of political dissidence, including political parties and labor unions.

In one of several formulations of the concept, O'Donnell describes nine elements of bureaucratic authoritarianism.

- 1 Domination by the great bourgeoisie.
- 2 The role played by coercive agencies in the achievement of social order and economic “normalization.”
- 3 Political exclusion of popular sectors previously mobilized.
- 4 The suppression of citizenship and political democracy.
- 5 The increase of inequality as a result of exclusion of popular sectors.
- 6 Higher transnationalization.
- 7 A shrinking of the nation, which has to be purged from some of its elements.
- 8 The systematic de-politicization of social issues, presented as technical.
- 9 The closing of democratic channels of access to the government and of the principle of popular representation. (O'Donnell 1982: 60–62)

Bureaucratic authoritarianism was seen as the result of a process of late modernization:

The term ‘bureaucratic’ suggests the crucial features that are specific to authoritarian systems of high modernization: the growth of organizational strength of many social sectors, the governmental attempts at control by ‘encapsulation,’ the career patterns and power-bases of most incumbents of technocratic roles, and the pivotal role played by large (public and private) bureaucracies. (O'Donnell 1973: 95)

The concept emerged in the context of modernization theory in the social sciences according to which higher socioeconomic development increases the likelihood of political democracy (Lipset 1960; see also O'Donnell 1973: 4; Valenzuela and Valenzuela 1978). Samuel Huntington (1968) questioned that assumption claiming that social modernization tends to destabilize the institutional order and may thus be a threat to democracy.

In a related argument, O'Donnell suggested economic expansion and changes in the social structure resulting from industrialization in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay would more probably lead to authoritarianism than to democracy.

These countries, O'Donnell argued, had exhausted the first, "easy" phase of industrialization based on the production of consumer goods for local markets – the "horizontal" import substitution industrialization ("vertical" industrialization, in turn, meant the import substitution of capital goods). During this first phase, newly mobilized popular groups coincided with populist politics and erratic economic policies (O'Donnell 1973). The military coups in Chile and Uruguay seemed to ratify this argument.

Most of the initial literature on bureaucratic authoritarianism addressed the causes for its emergence: divisions among industrial sectors, dependence on foreign capital, rising unemployment, governments unable to handle the demands of new actors, and the effect of the Cold War in reinforcing a praetorian tendency.

Later, the focus shifted toward analyzing differences among bureaucratic authoritarian regimes. In line with a general trend in political science to "bring the state back in" and consider political factors as independent variables, bureaucratic authoritarianism began to be understood as a particular form of the capitalist state. This shift resulted from criticism of O'Donnell's original formulation of bureaucratic authoritarianism as a dependent variable to be explained by economic and social configurations.

Some authors have questioned the use of the concept for regimes which distance themselves from the original model, such as Mexico, where one-party rule did not entail demobilization and was not led by the armed forces. Critics have challenged the

conceptual clarity of its different formulations – as regime subtype, political system, and form of state – as well as the broadness of meanings attributed to it. David Collier, in particular, suggested refining the study of bureaucratic authoritarianism (2001) by focusing on three interrelated dimensions: the political system, broad historical comparisons, and its contrast with prior political systems (Collier 1980; Remmer and Merckx 1982).

In spite of methodological and disciplinary challenges, bureaucratic authoritarianism remains one of the most relevant conceptual contributions of political science to the study of Latin American and comparative politics.

SEE ALSO: Authoritarianism; Democracy; Dependent and Independent Variables; Development Theory; Lipset, Seymour Martin

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