

Arab Liberalism with Chinese Characteristics: Developmental Legitimacy and the Limits of Regime Theory in the Arab World

Lana Alemam¹, Filiz Katman²

¹ PhD Candidate, Department of Political Science and International Relations (in English), Institute of Graduate Studies, Istanbul Aydin University, Istanbul, Turkiye.

lanaaalemam@stu.aydin.edu.tr

² Assist. Prof. Dr., Department of Political Science and International Relations (in English), Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Energy Politics and Markets Research Center, Istanbul Aydin University, Istanbul, Turkiye. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5029-173X>

filizkatman@aydin.edu.tr

Abstract

How have Arab political-developmental paradigms historically structured state legitimacy, and why do dominant regime theories fail to account for development-centered authority? This article argues that conventional frameworks, transition theory, hybrid regime typologies, rentier-state models, and authoritarian resilience, under-theorize development as a constitutive moral principle. By periodizing modern Arab political history into three paradigms, colonial/postcolonial administrative modernity, Arab nationalist-socialist developmentalism, and post-Cold War liberal reform, it reveals recurring tensions between sovereignty, modernization, centralized authority, and social legitimacy. The article introduces *Arab Liberalism with Chinese Characteristics* (ALCC), supported by the concepts of *commodeterian democracy* and the *moral economy of development*, to show how development mediates political inclusion and justifies centralized rule. In doing so, ALCC extends regime theory beyond institutional reductionism, offering a legitimacy-centered framework for understanding contemporary hybrid formations in the Arab world.

Keywords: Arab Liberalism with Chinese Characteristics (ALCC), Developmental legitimacy, Commodeterian democracy, Moral economy of development, Hybrid regimes, Authoritarian resilience, Regime theory

I. Introduction: The Puzzle of Developmental Legitimacy

The study of political regimes in the Arab world has long been structured by a binary expectation: authoritarian persistence or democratic transition. Since the late twentieth century, scholarship has sought to explain why the region resisted the “third wave” of democratization, why uprisings failed to consolidate liberal institutions, and why authoritarian resilience endured (Brownlee, 2007). Explanations have focused on regime durability, coercive capacity, rent distribution, and institutional configurations that prevent democratic transition (Yom, 2016) Yet much of this literature shares a common limitation: it treats legitimacy as derivative of institutional design.

Democracy is presumed legitimate because it is procedurally participatory (Dahl, 1971). Authoritarianism is presumed stable when coercion or institutional manipulation suppress opposition (Gandhi, 2008). Hybrid regimes are located somewhere in between (Levitsky & Way 2010). What is under-theorized is the possibility that legitimacy itself may be grounded in a different organizing principle, development.

Across successive paradigms, development has functioned less as a policy output than as a justificatory architecture (Johnson, 1982). Dominant regime theory often misconceives development as merely an outcome variable or a proxy for state capacity (North, 1990). This article proposes treating development instead as a constitutive dimension of political authority. Existing analytic hierarchies privilege procedural participation as the primary source of legitimacy, relegating developmental governance to a technocratic supplement (Scharpf, 1999). In doing so, they obscure political formations in which authority is organized around the moral centrality of stability and economic transformation (Thompson, 2016).

The central question, therefore, is: Why have dominant regime theories failed to adequately capture development-centered legitimacy configurations in the Arab world, and how can Arab Liberalism with Chinese Characteristics (ALCC) provide a more precise analytical framework? To answer this question, the article proceeds in five stages. First, it reconstructs three dominant political-developmental paradigms in modern Arab history and demonstrates their shared structural tension. Second, it shows how existing regime theories misrecognize or marginalize developmental legitimacy. Third, it introduces ALCC as a new analytical category. Fourth, it develops two supporting concepts, commodeterian democracy and the moral economy of development. Finally, it outlines the theoretical implications for comparative politics and regime analysis.

II. Three Political-Developmental Paradigms and the Structure of Legitimacy

Modern Arab political history can be analytically organized into three dominant paradigms. Each proposed a solution to the problem of modernization under conditions of geopolitical vulnerability. Each structured legitimacy differently. And each encountered structural constraints that it could not fully resolve.

1. Colonial and Postcolonial Administrative Modernity

Legitimacy through order and bureaucratic centralization

From a comparative historical perspective, colonial and early postcolonial state formation in the Arab world constituted a foundational legitimacy regime structured around administrative modernity rather than popular incorporation. Colonial governance established the apparatus of state control as the defining marker of 'progress', equating order with civilization and centralization with modernity. In Weberian terms, legitimacy was predominantly legal-administrative and state-centric, not participatory or redistributive (Weber, 1978). Post-independence elites inherited and indigenized this apparatus, reproducing executive dominance and prioritizing sovereignty defined as territorial control and international recognition. However, as comparative historical analysis emphasizes, institutional inheritance is path dependent, early state-building choices constrain subsequent political development (Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003).

The colonial state was designed for extraction and control. Borders drawn through imperial agreements fragmented social identities and embedded contested national imaginaries, while economic structures integrated Arab territories into unequal global hierarchies as peripheral exporters (Amin, 1976; Wallerstein, 1974). The result was a structural configuration in which sovereignty remained externally constrained, and modernization depended heavily on outside financing. Political authority was socially thin, while institutional capacity remained fragile (Mitchell, 2002). Legitimacy was administrative rather than moral-developmental in a broad societal sense (Ayubi, 1995). This historical formation directly informs the article's central research question: how have successive political-developmental paradigms structured the moral foundations of state legitimacy, and why do dominant regime theories fail to capture emerging development-centered configurations? The colonial paradigm demonstrates that legitimacy in the Arab world was initially anchored in order and bureaucratic rationality yet lacked mechanisms of societal incorporation or endogenous development (Tripp, 2007). Structural contradictions, including external dependency, limited industrial transformation, weak representation, and fragmented identity, created enduring tensions between sovereignty, modernization, authority, and social legitimacy (Owen 2004). These tensions persisted across subsequent paradigms (Migdal, 2001). Crucially, regime typologies that classify systems solely by institutional form overlook this deeper legitimacy structure (Levitsky &

Arab Liberalism with Chinese Characteristics: Developmental Legitimacy and the Limits of Regime Theory in the Arab World

Way, 2010). By foregrounding development as a historically contested moral foundation of authority, the analysis establishes the need for a new conceptual vocabulary, one that can explain how contemporary configurations re-center development as the primary justificatory principle under centralized governance, thereby escaping both postcolonial administrative statism and liberal transition frameworks (Hall, 1993).

2. Marxist–Socialist and Arab Nationalist Developmentalism

Arab Nationalist–Socialist Developmentalism: Redistribution, Sovereignty, and the Centralization of Moral Authority

The mid-twentieth century inaugurated a second political–developmental paradigm in the Arab world: Arab nationalist–socialist developmentalism. Unlike colonial administrative modernity, which anchored legitimacy in bureaucratic order and territorial control, this paradigm reconstituted legitimacy around a developmental moral economy structured by three interlocking claims: anti-imperial sovereignty, redistributive justice, and state-led industrial modernization (Owen, 2013).

Post-independence legitimacy was structured around transformative performance, with regimes grounding political authority in rapid modernization and resistance to Western influence through a fusion of socialist economic policies and nationalist narratives (Mitchell, 2002). This pattern was evident in the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Muammar Gaddafi, Algeria’s FLN, and the Ba’athist regimes of Syria and Iraq (Hinnebusch, 2015).

The postcolonial state presented itself as the historical agent of emancipation, simultaneously guardian of sovereignty and redistributor of national wealth (Ayubi, 1995). Authority derived moral force from its capacity to deliver social justice and economic transformation under conditions of geopolitical vulnerability (Gerges, 2018).

This configuration partially resolved the structural tensions inherited from the colonial state. By fusing sovereignty and development within a centralized apparatus, these regimes sought to align national dignity, industrialization, and redistribution under executive authority (Yom, 2016). Development thus functioned as symbolic affirmation of postcolonial autonomy (Kandil, 2012). Yet this apparent synthesis rested on a fragile political economy.

First, redistributive developmentalism required sustained growth to reproduce its moral authority. Land reform, nationalization, and welfare expansion generated initial gains in literacy, infrastructure, and social mobility (Owen, 2013). However, these achievements were financed through finite rents, protected industrialization, and geopolitical patronage within a polarized Cold War order. As fiscal pressures mounted, bureaucratic inefficiencies accumulated, and industrial competitiveness stagnated, redistributive capacity eroded. Because legitimacy was materially anchored in distributive performance, economic slowdown translated directly into moral erosion (Diwan, 2019).

Second, the institutional architecture of Arab socialism consolidated authority within the state apparatus without generating the institutional coherence required for sustained developmental transformation (Migdal, 2001). Societal actors, ranging from labor movements to pluralist contestation and autonomous civil society, were subordinated to executive authority, restricting their role in shaping developmental transformation (Hamzawy, 2020). Sovereignty became synonymous with regime control, while development was defined by bureaucratic planning, producing a configuration that concentrated coercive power while narrowing mechanisms of societal incorporation.

Third, the paradigm was embedded in an adverse international structure. While anti-imperial discourse constituted a core source of legitimacy, economic models remained dependent on external markets and technologies, embedded within wider geopolitical alignments (Amin, 1976). The Six-Day War exposed the limits of militarized nationalism and the strategic vulnerabilities of the Arab developmental state (Sayigh, 1997). The eventual collapse of the Soviet Union removed an ideological and material counterweight to Western dominance (Achcar, 2013). Post-Cold War globalization and structural adjustment programs

further constrained state autonomy, dismantling redistributive infrastructures without supplying alternative legitimacy foundations (Hanieh, 2018).

Crucially, the failure of Arab socialist developmentalism cannot be reduced to authoritarian excess or ideological inconsistency alone. Its deeper contradiction lay in attempts to centralize emancipation, regimes concentrated sovereignty and redistribution within a closed executive apparatus, merging moral authority with state control (Laroui, 2017). When growth faltered and geopolitical conditions shifted, this fusion produced legitimacy crises rather than institutional adaptation (Haddad, 2012).

From the perspective of regime theory, this period is typically classified under authoritarian, populist, or rentier typologies (Herb, 2014). Such classifications, however, under-theorize the moral–developmental logic structuring authority. The analytic focus on institutional form, party systems, repression levels, military dominance, obscures the fact that legitimacy was organized around developmental performance and anti-imperial sovereignty as moral claims (Hashemi, 2020). These regimes were not sustained primarily by procedural legitimacy or pure coercion, but they derived authority from a historically specific moral economy linking redistribution to dignity and sovereignty (Bayat, 2013).

This observation advances the theoretical argument. Across paradigms, Arab political development hinges on the principle that structures legitimacy. The nationalist–socialist era demonstrates that development can function as a primary moral foundation of authority under centralized governance (Fahmy, 2018). When that developmental compact collapses, legitimacy disintegrates even if institutional structures remain intact.

Thus, the erosion of Arab socialist developmentalism did not resolve the underlying tension between sovereignty, modernization, authority, and social legitimacy, but merely displaced it (Power, 2010). The paradigm temporarily aligned these dimensions under redistributive state control, its exhaustion reopened the structural question that subsequent models, liberal reformism and emerging hybrid configurations, would confront in altered form.

By conceptualizing this era as a developmental legitimacy regime rather than merely an authoritarian subtype, the analysis clarifies why dominant regime typologies fail to capture the deeper transformation underway (Carothers, 2002). They describe institutional shells, they neglect the moral foundations through which authority is justified and contested.

It is precisely this analytical gap that the subsequent sections address through the concepts of the moral economy of development, commodeterian democracy, and ultimately Arab Liberalism with Chinese Characteristics (ALCC).

3 Liberal Reform and the Conditionality of Legitimacy (1990s–Arab Spring)

The third political–developmental paradigm emerged in the 1990s under post–Cold War unipolarity and deepening global economic integration (Huber, 2015). Structural adjustment programs, trade liberalization, privatization, and financial deregulation reoriented Arab political economies toward neoliberal reform (Springborg, 2011), as seen in Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, Egypt, and Syria under Bashar al-Assad, where economic liberalization was paired with promises of gradual political opening (Perthes, 2004). Legitimacy shifted from revolutionary redistribution and claims to sovereignty toward market efficiency (Adly, 2020). Yet these reforms often failed to deliver broad-based development or durable institutional capacity, leaving regimes increasingly reliant on executive authority while exposing the fragility of their political legitimacy (Kienle, 2001).

Development was now framed through liberalization. Growth was expected to emerge from private sector expansion rather than state planning (Hertog, 2010). Political reform was presented as a complement to economic openness (Lust, 2005). International institutions and Western governments became key normative reference points (Schlumberger, 2007).

The moral claim underpinning this paradigm was clear, modernization through liberal reform would deliver prosperity and eventual democratic consolidation. Economic reform and political liberalization were treated as mutually reinforcing processes (Diamond, 1999). This reflected the influence of

Arab Liberalism with Chinese Characteristics: Developmental Legitimacy and the Limits of Regime Theory in the Arab World

modernization theory and democratic peace theory within the liberal international order (Fukuyama, 1992). Economic integration was assumed to generate a middle class supportive of political pluralism (Moore Jr., 1966). Elections were assumed to institutionalize peaceful competition. However, this legitimacy formula rested on unstable foundations.

First, market reforms often produced concentrated wealth rather than broad-based inclusion. Privatization and deregulation strengthened regime-aligned business networks (Diwan, 2019). Inequality increased while unemployment remained high (Arezki, 2020). Economic liberalization did not generate a socially embedded productive base capable of sustaining distributive legitimacy (Cammatt, 2014).

Second, democratization remained selective. Electoral reforms were frequently procedural. Core executive authority was preserved (Bank, 2017). Political competition was managed. Liberalization expanded participation at the margins while insulating central power structures (Albrecht, 2015). The promise of political inclusion therefore remained incomplete.

Third, sovereignty was redefined through external alignment. International financial institutions, trade agreements, and security partnerships constrained policy autonomy (Momani, 2018). Reform agendas were frequently tied to external expectations. This generated tension between economic integration and domestic perceptions of self-determination (Tell, 2015). The developmental project appeared externally scripted rather than nationally authored.

The 2003 U.S.-led intervention in Iraq intensified these dynamics by embedding regime change within a liberal peace framework that sought the removal of an authoritarian regime, and the reconstruction of political and economic institutions along externally defined democratic and developmental lines (Dodge, 2013). This approach assumed that externally supported democratization and economic liberalization would produce stable governance. Yet the Iraqi case demonstrated the limits of externally engineered institutional transformation in politically fragmented environments. Political liberalization and economic restructuring failed to translate into cohesive authority or inclusive development, leaving state capacity and regime legitimacy fragile decades into the post-Cold War reform era (Aliboni & Mikulová, 2011).

Across the region, reform initiatives followed a similar pattern. Managed electoral openings coexisted with centralized executive power (Brownlee, 2007). Liberalization deepened integration into global markets but did not resolve structural unemployment or distributive inequality (Malik, 2017). Institutional reforms expanded formal procedures without consolidating accountable governance. The result was a hybrid configuration, economic openness without inclusive development, electoral mechanisms without substantive political alternation.

The Arab Spring revealed the limits of this legitimacy paradigm, as protest movements mobilized around demands for dignity, accountability, and political freedom (Marc Lynch, 2012). The liberal reform compact had failed to reconcile sovereignty with social legitimacy.

Importantly, the collapse of the liberal reform paradigm cannot be explained solely by authoritarian resistance. Its deeper weakness lay in the assumption that institutional form alone could generate legitimacy (Carothers, 2002). Regime theory concentrated on formal institutional features, encapsulating the presence or absence of elections, the degree of party pluralism, constitutional design, and the protection of civil liberties. It paid insufficient attention to the developmental basis of authority (Berman, 2019). Where economic reform failed to produce inclusive prosperity, and where democratization did not alter distributive structures, the moral foundation of the model eroded.

Thus, the liberal era may appear as a failed democratization wave, but at its core it represents a failure of developmental legitimacy (Bayat, 2013). It recentered political authority around market performance and procedural reforms, yet neither delivered the material transformation necessary to sustain moral authority (Hertog, 2010). When economic grievances converged with demands for political dignity, the compact ultimately unraveled (Kamel, 2015).

This failure reopened the structural question that has defined successive paradigms in the Arab world: how can sovereignty, modernization, centralized authority, and social legitimacy be aligned within conditions of global constraint? The exhaustion of liberal reform created analytical space for alternative configurations in which development would again be moralized, but without reliance on democratization as its primary justificatory claim.

It is within this post-liberal context that the concepts of the moral economy of development, commodeterian democracy, and ultimately Arab Liberalism with Chinese Characteristics (ALCC) acquire explanatory relevance (Shenhav, 2019), providing a framework to understand how legitimacy shifts when neither procedural liberalization nor market reforms suffice to sustain moral authority.

III. The Persistent Structural Tension

Across the three paradigms examined, administrative modernity, nationalist-socialist developmentalism, and liberal reform, a persistent structural tension remained unresolved (Bayat, 2013). Each period reorganized the moral foundations of political legitimacy. Yet none succeeded in aligning the core dimensions that structure political order in the Arab world. Sovereignty, economic modernization, political authority, and social legitimacy remained in durable tension (Kuran, 2011).

Under colonial and early postcolonial administrative modernity, sovereignty was defined primarily in juridical and territorial terms (Anderson, 2006). Political authority was centralized and bureaucratically consolidated. Order was privileged as the primary marker of progress. However, economic modernization remained externally dependent, and social legitimacy was shallow. The state was institutionalized before society was meaningfully incorporated into the political project (Caforio, 2016).

Nationalist-socialist developmentalism sought to correct this imbalance by fusing sovereignty with redistribution and state-led industrialization (Wedeer, 2015). Development became the principal moral language of authority. The state positioned itself as the agent of emancipation, promising social justice and economic transformation under centralized leadership. For a period, redistribution aligned modernization with social legitimacy. Yet this alignment was contingent on sustained economic growth and fiscal capacity. When industrial stagnation, fiscal exhaustion, and geopolitical setbacks accumulated, the redistributive compact weakened (Waterbury, 1999). Sovereignty remained formally intact, but its developmental substance diminished. Legitimacy eroded even as institutional structures persisted.

The liberal reform era reconfigured the legitimacy claim once again (Encarnación, 2014). Market efficiency, private sector expansion, and procedural reform replaced redistribution as the dominant justificatory framework. Integration into global markets was presented as the path to modernization. Limited electoral openings were introduced as signals of political reform. However, economic liberalization generated concentrated wealth without broad inclusion. Political authority remained centralized despite reform rhetoric. Sovereignty was partially constrained by external conditionality tied to financial assistance and security partnerships (Kienle, 2001). The liberal model failed to produce stable alignment between growth and social justice, in part because entrenched authoritarian networks and 'deep state' structures constrained genuine political reform. The 2010–2011 upheavals highlighted the instability of this model of authority, and the difficulties of democratic consolidation in the region's political and institutional landscape (Lust, 2011; Schulze, 2012).

Across these paradigms, development remained the central axis of political justification. What changed was its normative framing. Administrative modernity equated development with bureaucratic order. Socialist regimes framed it as redistributive emancipation and anti-imperial sovereignty. Liberal reform framed it as market-driven modernization linked to procedural democratization. In each case, development functioned as the moral vocabulary through which authority was justified and contested (Kandil, 2016).

This continuity reveals a form of path dependence in executive centralization combined with shifting developmental narratives. Institutional configurations evolved, but centralized authority remained the dominant organizing feature (Heydemann, 2007). What varied was the moral narrative attached to development as the basis of legitimacy.

Arab Liberalism with Chinese Characteristics: Developmental Legitimacy and the Limits of Regime Theory in the Arab World

The theoretical implication is significant. Conventional regime classifications focus on institutional form, authoritarian, hybrid, populist, democratic (Blaydes, 2018). These typologies capture procedural arrangements and the distribution of power. They do not adequately explain how authority is normatively grounded. Across paradigms, the decisive question is whether the prevailing developmental compact successfully aligned sovereignty, modernization, centralized authority, and social expectations (Jawad, Walton, & Merouani, 2021).

The repeated failure to reconcile these dimensions exposes a deeper analytical gap. Regime theory tends to privilege institutional design over legitimacy structure. Yet in the Arab context, development has consistently served as the primary moral foundation of rule (London School of Economics, 2019). Understanding contemporary hybrid configurations therefore requires moving beyond regime typologies toward an analysis of development-centered legitimacy.

This structural continuity leads directly to the central research question of this article: why have dominant regime theories failed to account for development-centered configurations of legitimacy, and how can emerging formations be more precisely conceptualized through a framework that foregrounds the moral economy of development rather than institutional form alone (Caforio, 2016)?

IV. Why Regime Theories Fail

Dominant regime theories fall into four broad traditions: transition theory, authoritarian resilience, hybrid regime typologies, and rentier-state frameworks. Each provides analytical tools for classifying political systems. Yet they share a common limitation. They conceptualize legitimacy as institutional, coercive, or material (Diamond, 1999; Schedler, 2013). They do not treat development as a moral structure of authority. Across the Arab world, legitimacy has repeatedly been reorganized around developmental claims. Institutional form changed. The moral language of development changed. But development remained the central justificatory axis (Hertog, 2010). Regime theory does not adequately capture this continuity.

Transition Theory and Liberal Teleology

Transition theory emerged from the third wave of democratization literature. It assumes movement toward liberal democracy as the normative and empirical horizon of political change (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). Regimes are evaluated based on proximity to procedural benchmarks, competitive elections, separation of powers, judicial independence, and civil society autonomy. Development appears as a facilitating condition. Economic modernization is expected to generate social differentiation and political pluralism (Lipset, 1959).

This framework cannot explain systems in which development replaces democratization as the primary normative objective. When political inclusion is not the central demand, transition theory codes the regime as stalled or failed. It interprets persistence of centralized authority as deviation rather than as alternative equilibrium (Przeworski et al., 2000).

In the post-2008 Arab context, many regimes did not move toward transition. They moved toward controlled transformation. They recalibrated development strategies while preserving executive dominance. Transition theory lacks the conceptual vocabulary to interpret this trajectory. It presumes liberal end-states. It cannot theorize development-centered legitimacy under authoritarian continuity (Erdmann & Engel, 2006).

Authoritarian Resilience and Institutional Survival

The authoritarian resilience literature offers a corrective to transition theory. It explains regime persistence through elite cohesion, coercive capacity, patronage networks, and institutional adaptation (Brownlee, 2007). It shifts the focus from democratization to regime durability (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

This contribution is significant. However, resilience theory often treats legitimacy as secondary. Regimes survive because they repress effectively, or divide opposition. Authority is explained through coercion and co-optation (Grzymala-Busse, 2018). The normative dimension of development is under-theorized.

In several Arab cases, centralized rule persists because regimes reframe development as a moral obligation fulfilled by the state. Citizens are asked to exchange political participation for modernization, stability, and national advancement (Muasher, 2014). Beyond mere repression, resilience theory shows adaptation and endurance, but it fails to account for development as the central moral basis of authority.

Hybrid Regime Typologies and Institutional Reductionism

Hybrid regime scholarship introduced categories such as competitive authoritarianism and electoral authoritarianism. These frameworks recognize institutional mixtures. They examine elections, media constraints, judicial autonomy, and opposition access (Bank, 2017). Their analytical unit remains institutional design. Such typologies are descriptively useful. Yet they remain institution-centric. They classify regimes based on the degree of political openness. They do not analyze the moral architecture underpinning authority.

A regime may introduce consultative councils, managed elections, or technocratic participation mechanisms. Hybrid theory reads these as partial democratization (Albrecht, 2015). But in development-centered systems, these mechanisms often function instrumentally. They stabilize performance-based legitimacy. They do not aim to redistribute sovereignty. Hybrid institutions are secondary, the core issue is developmental legitimation under centralized rule. They describe form but ignore function.

Rentier-State Theory and Material Reductionism

Rentier-state theory explains authoritarian durability through resource rents and distributive patronage. It emphasizes taxation patterns, external revenue streams, and state-society fiscal relations (Herb, 2013). This approach has been influential in Gulf and hydrocarbon contexts.

Yet rentier theory reduces legitimacy to material distribution. It assumes that regimes buy compliance through welfare provision and subsidies. It ignores instances where legitimacy is grounded in development and global positioning.

In contemporary development strategies, especially after 2008, regimes increasingly emphasize diversification, logistics, digitalization, and global competitiveness (Hertog, 2010). In these strategies, legitimacy is tied to future-oriented transformation rather than static redistribution. The state presents itself as architect of national advancement in a competitive international system.

Rentier theory cannot fully explain this shift. It remains anchored in distributive logic. It does not theorize development as moral narrative and geopolitical positioning.

The Common Blind Spot: Legitimacy as Institutional or Material

Across these theoretical families, a common blind spot persists. Legitimacy is treated as either institutional compliance or material exchange. Development appears as background condition, and/or policy domain. It is not conceptualized as a structuring moral foundation of political authority (Bayat, 2013).

Yet across colonial administrative modernity, nationalist-socialist developmentalism, and liberal reform, development consistently functioned as the primary justificatory language of rule. What changed was its framing: order, redistribution, market efficiency. What persisted was its centrality.

Regime classification based solely on institutional form obscures this deeper organizing principle. Authoritarian versus democratic. Hybrid versus consolidated. Competitive versus hegemonic. These categories describe how power is organized. They do not explain why it is accepted (Blaydes, 2018).

In the Arab context, legitimacy crises have repeatedly emerged when developmental compacts collapsed, not simply when institutions failed to democratize. When redistribution stalled, nationalist-socialist regimes weakened. When liberalization produced inequality without inclusion, reformist regimes lost credibility. Institutional structures often remained intact. Moral authority eroded.

This observation leads directly to the article's core intervention. If development functions as the primary moral grounding of authority, then regime theory must move beyond institutional typology toward legitimacy configuration.

Toward a Development-Centered Analytical Framework

Arab Liberalism with Chinese Characteristics: Developmental Legitimacy and the Limits of Regime Theory in the Arab World

The limitations of dominant regime theories create space for conceptual innovation. The concepts of the moral economy of development, commodeterian democracy, and ALCC respond to this gap.

The moral economy of development captures the normative exchange in which regimes justify centralized authority through performance-based modernization (Thompson, 2016). Commodeterian democracy explains how economic freedoms and consumption substitute for political participation (Reh, 2020). ALCC functions as an ideal-type describing development-centered legitimacy under authoritarian continuity in a post-liberal international order.

These concepts do not reject regime theory. They extend it. They shift the analytical focus from institutional form to the moral structure of development as authority.

The failure of dominant regime theories is therefore not empirical but conceptual. They explain institutions. They under-theorize developmental legitimacy. In doing so, they miss the re-centering of development as the core moral claim of post-2008 authoritarian transformation.

V. Arab Liberalism with Chinese Characteristics (ALCC)

Against the limitations of dominant regime theories, this article introduces **Arab Liberalism with Chinese Characteristics (ALCC)** as a novel analytical category capturing an emergent legitimacy configuration in the contemporary Arab world (Di Palma, 1990). ALCC does not denote ideological imitation of the People's Republic of China, nor does it assume direct institutional transplantation from the governance model associated with Xi Jinping's era (Naughton, 2018). It is not a claim about cultural convergence, civilizational alignment, or wholesale adoption of Chinese political doctrine. Rather, it identifies a structural reconfiguration of legitimacy in which development is re-centered as the primary moral foundation of authority under centralized governance (Lee, 2021).

ALCC is best understood as an ideal-type in the Weberian sense, isolating and accentuating a constellation of features that, when combined, generate a distinct legitimacy logic (Thompson, 2005). This logic diverges from classical Arab nationalist developmentalism, post-Cold War liberal reform paradigms, and conventional authoritarian resilience models, by foregrounding developmental competence as the core justificatory principle of rule rather than coercive durability or distributive patronage (Coker, 2019).

At its core, ALCC combines centralized political authority with market-oriented economic reform (Woo-Cumings, 1999). Executive power remains concentrated, often in presidential or monarchical institutions, while political pluralism is limited, regulated, or managed (Masini, 2017). This centralization coexists with active promotion of private-sector growth, foreign investment, infrastructural expansion, and integration into global value chains. Markets are framed as tools of national transformation (Steinfeld, 2012).

Technocratic governance is central to this configuration. Policy is articulated through managerial language emphasizing efficiency, competitiveness, diversification, digitalization, logistics, and innovation (Landry, 2015). National development plans are presented as strategic blueprints. Economic targets, megaprojects, and performance indicators function as public markers of state competence, justifying authority less through populist mobilization and more through expertise and administrative capacity (Fort, 2020).

Most importantly, development functions as the moral foundation of rule. Authority is legitimized through performance, but performance is understood not merely as distributive patronage (Calhoun, 2017), it is framed as transformative modernization. The regime presents itself as the architect of national advancement in a competitive international system. Sovereignty is reinterpreted as the capacity to modernize without external prescription, and stability becomes synonymous with modernization capacity (Hobson, 2018). Political centralization is justified as necessary for rapid transformation.

Political participation is structured and contained. Consultative mechanisms, managed elections, or participatory forums may exist, but they operate within boundaries defined by executive authority (Kaya, 2016). Inclusion is calibrated to reinforce developmental objectives rather than redistribute sovereignty.

The implicit social contract shifts from representation to performance: citizens are invited to evaluate the regime primarily through its developmental achievements (Shani, 2019).

ALCC does not simply replicate earlier nationalist-socialist developmentalism. Redistribution is no longer the central legitimating mechanism. Nor does it embrace liberal democracy as its horizon. Instead, it synthesizes economic liberalization with political centralization, grounding authority in transformative modernization rather than ideological mobilization or electoral competition (Jabri, 2020).

The “Chinese characteristics” element operates analytically rather than descriptively, signaling an affinity with a global governance model in which market reform coexists with centralized authority, and where development is elevated to the highest moral and strategic priority (Y. So, 2021). It situates Arab governance trajectories within a post-unipolar order, where alternative models of modernization have gained legitimacy, reflecting the diffusion of a development-first logic across multipolar contexts (Coker, 2019).

The novelty of ALCC lies in its reorientation of analytical focus. Hybrid regime theory classifies institutional mixtures; authoritarian resilience theory explains durability; rentier-state theory emphasizes distributive capacity. ALCC, by contrast, shifts attention to the moral architecture of authority, asking how regimes justify rule through development (Woodward, 2015). In doing so, ALCC advances comparative politics by showing how centralized regimes legitimize authority through developmental performance rather than elections, party pluralism, or redistributive patronage, challenging standard typologies that privilege institutional form over legitimacy structure (Carothers, 2019).

By foregrounding development as the organizing principle of legitimacy, ALCC captures transformations that typologies alone cannot explain. Institutional hybridity may be present, but it is secondary. The central phenomenon is the reconstitution of authority around modernization, stability, and sovereignty framed as developmental competence (Scott, 2019).

ALCC is neither a normative endorsement of centralized governance nor a prediction of its success. It does not claim that democratization is obsolete. Rather, it is an analytical device designed to identify a historically specific configuration emerging after the exhaustion of earlier paradigms. In the contemporary Arab political landscape, legitimacy is increasingly claimed through the promise of economic transformation under controlled political conditions (Rood, 2021).

In doing so, ALCC also contributes to broader debates in comparative politics and international relations. It connects Arab governance trajectories to global discussions on developmental authoritarianism, post-liberal governance, and East Asian policy models, illustrating how regimes can center legitimacy on development rather than electoral or party-based inclusion (Glaser, 2020). This perspective offers a lens to analyze emerging hybrid systems in post-unipolar contexts, where authority is legitimated through transformative capacity, strategic modernization, and integration into global economic circuits (Bayart, 2018). By emphasizing moral and developmental foundations of rule, ALCC bridges regional studies with comparative-theoretical discussions on how contemporary authoritarianism adapts to a multipolar world, highlighting the global relevance of development-centered legitimacy structures (Prins, 2021).

VI. Commodeterian Democracy

To clarify how ALCC escapes conventional regime typologies, this article introduces the concept of commodeterian democracy. The term captures a modality of inclusion in which political incorporation is mediated through development rather than electoral competition (Lijphart, 2012).

In commodeterian systems, participation is not defined by representation or ideology, but by integration into national development projects. Citizens’ gain belonging through infrastructure, employment, urban and digital transformation, and expanded consumer access. These are materially incorporated into the trajectory of growth (Prakash, 2018).

Performance replaces procedural representation as the central evaluative criterion of rule. The regime asks to be judged based on its capacity to deliver stability and economic opportunity. The legitimacy claim is forward-looking. It rests on transformation rather than participation (Melucci, 2014).

Arab Liberalism with Chinese Characteristics: Developmental Legitimacy and the Limits of Regime Theory in the Arab World

Mega-projects function as symbolic sites of national identity. Infrastructure corridors, industrial zones, smart cities, and logistical hubs become visible markers of collective advancement (Albrecht, 2019). They produce tangible demonstrations of state capacity. Economic opportunity substitutes for ideological mobilization. National pride is tied to competitiveness and global ranking rather than revolutionary rhetoric or redistributive justice (El Shakry, 2020).

This configuration recalibrates the modality of inclusion. Citizens are incorporated as beneficiaries, stakeholders, consumers, and contributors to development narratives. Political rights remain limited or managed. However, the regime constructs a participatory experience anchored in access to prosperity and mobility (Ben Nefissa, 2017).

Commodeterian democracy therefore redefines what democratic experience can mean outside liberal proceduralism. It does not replicate electoral democracy. Nor is it reducible to pure authoritarian exclusion. It constitutes a hybrid form of legitimacy in which democratic character is not conferred through electoral procedures (Cheibub, 2015). Unlike the conventional definition of democracy, which centers on elections and freedom of speech, democratic character here is defined by material and institutional outcomes. These include market access, service provision, infrastructural transformation, social welfare, economic redistribution, and regulatory protection, all of which mediate the citizen–state relationship and constitute the model’s democratic legitimacy (Manion, 2018). In this sense, commodeterian democracy explains how ALCC stabilizes authority without expanding political pluralism. It demonstrates that inclusion can be developmental rather than institutional. Regime typologies that focus exclusively on elections or party competition fail to capture this mode of incorporation (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

VII. The Moral Economy of Development

The second conceptual pillar supporting ALCC is the moral economy of development. This concept identifies the normative structure through which development is elevated from policy domain to ethical imperative (Scott, 2017).

A moral economy exists when economic arrangements are not only justified instrumentally but morally. In development-centered regimes, growth is framed as national duty. Stability is presented as collective responsibility. Modernization becomes a shared project. The state claims authority on the basis of its capacity to deliver transformation (Walzer, 2015).

Within this framework, dissent is often reframed as obstruction to national advancement (MacKenzie, 2016). Political contestation is delegitimized when it is portrayed as threatening economic stability or strategic modernization. Centralized authority is justified as necessary for coordination and long-term planning. Executive concentration is presented as functional (Elster, 2020).

Development thus becomes the moral horizon of politics. Citizens are interpellated as participants in national transformation. **The social contract shifts from representation to performance.** Authority derives from infrastructural expansion, technological upgrading, diversification strategies, and macroeconomic stability (Cotula, 2019).

This configuration differs from classical redistributive developmentalism. Redistribution is no longer the core legitimating mechanism. Nor does it rely on electoral consent. Instead, it constructs legitimacy through transformative capacity within a competitive international system (Kohli, 2004). Sovereignty is reframed as the ability to modernize autonomously.

The moral economy of development explains why legitimacy crises in the region have often followed developmental stagnation rather than institutional breakdown alone (Strange, 2016). When growth falters, the moral claim weakens. When transformation accelerates, centralized authority gains normative reinforcement (Hirschman, 2018).

Together, commodeterian democracy and the moral economy of development clarify the internal logic of ALCC. They demonstrate how development-centered legitimacy operates as a coherent configuration

rather than as an accidental byproduct of authoritarian survival (Evans, 2019). They shift the analytical focus from institutional hybridity to the structuring principle of authority.

In doing so, they provide the conceptual vocabulary necessary to understand emerging political formations that escape conventional regime classification yet cannot be reduced to coercion, rent distribution, or incomplete democratization (Przeworski, 2000).

VIII. ALCC as Analytical Intervention and Theoretical Implications

This article began with a central puzzle: why have dominant regime theories failed to capture development-centered legitimacy configurations in the Arab world, and how does Arab Liberalism with Chinese Characteristics (ALCC) provide a more precise analytical framework? The answer lies in the conceptual architecture of regime theory itself. Most prevailing frameworks classify political systems according to institutional form, evaluating whether regimes are democratic, authoritarian, hybrid, competitive, or hegemonic, and assessing elections, party systems, civil liberties, and repression (Dahl, 1971). While analytically important, these dimensions do not exhaust the problem of political legitimacy.

Across successive political-developmental paradigms, administrative modernity, nationalist-socialist developmentalism, and liberal reform, legitimacy has been persistently reorganized around development. Although institutional forms, narratives, and policy mechanisms shifted, development remained the central axis of moral authority (Wade, 2018). Sovereignty, modernization, political authority, and social legitimacy were continuously renegotiated through developmental claims. Regime theory, focused on typologies and procedural metrics, has consistently overlooked this continuity.

ALCC addresses this gap by refocusing the analytical lens. Rather than asking whether a regime is democratic or authoritarian, it shifts attention from institutional form to the mechanisms through which authority is legitimated, emphasizing how developmental performance generates both moral and practical justification for rule (Kennedy, 2020). Institutional forms, hybrid, centralized, or partially participatory, are secondary to justificatory logic. Authority is evaluated according to developmental performance framed as ethical obligation and national mission, rather than procedural representation.

Within this framework, communitarian democracy and the moral economy of development clarify the modalities of inclusion and normative structure. Communitarian democracy mediates citizen incorporation through material and institutional outcomes such as market access, service provision, infrastructure, social welfare, economic redistribution, and regulatory protection. Performance becomes the evaluative standard (Simmons, 2019). The moral economy of development explains how growth, stability, and modernization are framed as ethical imperatives, justifying centralization and disciplining dissent (Schmitter, 1986). Together, these concepts illuminate hybrid formations that escape conventional regime typologies; they are neither incomplete democracies nor reducible to authoritarian resilience, but deliberate reconfigurations of legitimacy around developmental centralism.

This analytical intervention has broader implications for comparative politics. First, regime typologies must incorporate legitimacy structure alongside institutional form. Second, development should be theorized as moral authority, not merely economic policy (Ansell, 2021). Third, hybrid formations may represent stable equilibria rather than transitional deviations from liberal democracy. Finally, procedural democracy should not serve as the sole normative horizon of political analysis, recognizing the diversity of legitimacy mechanisms enhances analytical precision without implying normative relativism. As reflected in classical conceptions of governance, procedural democratic forms do not automatically confer legitimacy; authority may instead be evaluated according to the state's capacity to deliver stability (Tilly, 1992).

The structural tension between sovereignty, modernization, authority, and social legitimacy is addressed under ALCC, which reorders these dimensions through centralized governance and elevates development to the highest moral and practical claim of rule, thereby aligning performance, legitimacy, and authority in a way that earlier Arab developmental paradigms failed to do (Mann, 2013).

By introducing ALCC as an ideal-type analytical category, this study reframes the debate: the central cleavage in Arab political development is not regime type but the moral grounding of authority. It is

Arab Liberalism with Chinese Characteristics: Developmental Legitimacy and the Limits of Regime Theory in the Arab World

precisely this analytical gap that the subsequent sections address through the concepts of the moral economy of development, commodeterian democracy, and ultimately ALCC itself, a legitimacy-centered rethinking of regime theory that decouples development from democratization teleology (Isaac, 2020).

REFERENCES

- Albrecht, H. (2015). *Raging against the machine: Political opposition under authoritarianism in Egypt*. Syracuse University Press.
- Ansell, B. (2021). *Why politics fails: The five traps of the modern world and how to escape them*. Allen Lane.
- Bank, A. (2017). *The political economy of authoritarian upgrading in the Middle East*. Routledge.
- Bayart, J.-F. (2018). *Global subjects: A political critique of globalization*. Polity Press.
- Bayat, A. (2013). *Life as politics: How ordinary people change the Middle East* (2nd ed.). Stanford University Press.
- Ben Nefissa, S. (2017). Civil society and political participation in the Arab world. *Middle East Law and Governance*, 9(1), 45–67.
- Blaydes, L. (2018). *State of repression: Iraq under Saddam Hussein*. Princeton University Press.
- Brownlee, J. (2007). *Authoritarianism in an age of democratization*. Cambridge University Press.
- Calhoun, C. (2017). *The roots of radicalism: Tradition, the public sphere, and early nineteenth-century social movements*. University of Chicago Press.
- Carothers, T. (2019). *Democracies divided: The global challenge of political polarization*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Cheibub, J. A. (2015). *Democracy and dictatorship revisited*. Cambridge University Press.
- Coker, C. (2019). *The rise of the civilizational state*. Polity Press.
- Cotula, L. (2019). *The new scramble for Africa: Corporate investment and the politics of development*. Zed Books.
- Dahl, R. A. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and opposition*. Yale University Press.
- Di Palma, G. (1990). *To craft democracies: An essay on democratic transitions*. University of California Press.
- Elster, J. (2020). *Explaining social behavior: More nuts and bolts for the social sciences*. Cambridge University Press.
- Evans, P. (2019). *Embedded autonomy: States and industrial transformation*. Princeton University Press.
- Fort, M. A. (2020). Technocratic governance and economic planning in emerging economies. *Governance*, 33(4), 889–906.
- Glaser, H. (2020). *Authoritarianism in the digital age: State power and technological governance*. Routledge.
- Grzymala-Busse, A. (2018). *Beyond the populist backlash: Structural causes of democratic decay*. Cambridge University Press.
- Herb, M. (2013). *The wages of oil: Parliaments and economic development in Kuwait and the UAE*. Cornell University Press.
- Hertog, S. (2010). *Princes, brokers, and bureaucrats: Oil and the state in Saudi Arabia*. Cornell University Press.
- Hirschman, A. O. (2018). *Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states*. Harvard University Press.
- Hobson, C. (2018). *The rise of democracy: Revolution, war and transformations in international politics since 1776*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Isaac, J. C. (2020). *Democracy in dark times*. Cornell University Press.
- Jabri, V. (2020). *The postcolonial subject: Claiming politics/governing others in late modernity*. Routledge.
- Kaya, Z. (2016). Authoritarian governance and participatory institutions in the Middle East. *Mediterranean Politics*, 21(3), 398–417.
- Kennedy, M. D. (2020). *Global transformations and the politics of development*. Oxford University Press.
- Kohli, A. (2004). *State-directed development: Political power and industrialization in the global periphery*. Cambridge University Press.
- Landry, D. (2015). The political economy of technocratic governance. *Comparative Politics*, 47(3), 321–340.

- Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lijphart, A. (2012). *Patterns of democracy: Government forms and performance in thirty-six countries* (2nd ed.). Yale University Press.
- Lynch, M. (2012). *The Arab uprisings: The unfinished revolutions of the new Middle East*. PublicAffairs.
- MacKenzie, M. (2016). *Female soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, security, and post-conflict development*. NYU Press.
- Manion, M. (2018). *Information for autocrats: Representation in Chinese local congresses*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mann, M. (2013). *The sources of social power, Vol. 4: Globalizations, 1945–2011*. Cambridge University Press.
- Masini, F. (2017). Political economy of reform in Arab authoritarian systems. *Mediterranean Politics*, 22(3), 335–354.
- Melucci, A. (2014). *Challenging codes: Collective action in the information age*. Cambridge University Press.
- Muasher, M. (2014). *The second Arab awakening: And the battle for pluralism*. Yale University Press.
- Naughton, B. (2018). *The Chinese economy: Adaptation and growth* (2nd ed.). MIT Press.
- Prakash, A. (2018). *Globalization and governance*. Routledge.
- Przeworski, A., Alvarez, M. E., Cheibub, J. A., & Limongi, F. (2000). *Democracy and development: Political institutions and well-being in the world, 1950–1990*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rood, S. B. (2021). Developmental governance and political legitimacy in emerging economies. *World Development*, 142, 105429.
- Schedler, A. (2013). *The politics of uncertainty: Sustaining and subverting electoral authoritarianism*. Oxford University Press.
- Scott, J. C. (2017). *Against the grain: A deep history of the earliest states*. Yale University Press.
- Shani, G. (2019). *Religion, identity and human security*. Routledge.
- So, A. Y. (2021). China's development model and global diffusion. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(2), 235–252.
- Steinfeld, E. S. (2012). *Playing our game: Why China's rise doesn't threaten the West*. Oxford University Press.
- Strange, S. (2016). *States and markets* (2nd ed.). Bloomsbury.
- Thompson, J. B. (2005). *The new visibility*. Polity Press.
- Thompson, M. R. (2016). *Developmental authoritarianism in East Asia*. Routledge.
- Tilly, C. (1992). *Coercion, capital, and European states, AD 990–1992*. Blackwell.
- Walzer, M. (2015). *Political action: The problem of dirty hands*. Princeton University Press.
- Wade, R. (2018). *Governing the market: Economic theory and the role of government in East Asian industrialization* (Rev. ed.). Princeton University Press.
- Woo-Cumings, M. (Ed.). (1999). *The developmental state*. Cornell University Press.
- Woodward, S. L. (2015). *The ideology of failed states*. Cambridge University Press.