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The Boundaries of Research in an Authoritarian State

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Abstract

This article provides a reflective analysis of a local scholar on methodological challenges of conducting research in Kazakhstan — a post-Soviet, authoritarian, Central Asian country. It specifically addresses the problems of getting access to government officials and the quality of data, describes the strategies applied by the researcher to mitigate these obstacles, and discusses the impact of the political environment on decisions relating to the research design, ethical integrity, safety of participants and researchers, and publication dilemma. This article will be of interest both for researchers who are doing or planning to conduct research in Kazakhstan and Central Asia and those who are researching in nondemocratic contexts as methodological challenges of an authoritarian regime stretch beyond the geographical boundaries.

Keywords

relational interview, focus group, Q method, authoritarian, Central Asia

Introduction

Several scholars have drawn our attention to many problems related to conducting research in "closed contexts" (see, e.g., Ahram & Goode, 2016; Morgenbesser & Weiss, 2018; Reny, 2016; Richardson, 2014; Roberts, 2013; Sordi, 2016). Closed contexts are also referred to as "illiberal," "authoritarian," "nondemocratic," "coercive," or even (non) "exceptions" within the prevailing "liberal" system (Koch, 2013a, p. 390). Recent ongoing debates raise serious concerns over the limitations and impediments that researchers face in the Central Asian region that covers Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan as well as potential safety implications for researchers and participants. The arrest and accusation for espionage of Alexander Sodiqov, a Tajik citizen and PhD student at the University of Toronto, in Tajikistan in 2014 during his fieldwork on conflict resolution is an unfortunate reminder of the high safety risk to scholars doing fieldwork in authoritarian regimes of Central Asian countries.

Caleb and Mollinga (2008) attempted to "bring to light the gap between textbook theory and method in practice" (p. 1) by providing discussions of methodological challenges in difficult environments such as Africa, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Heathershaw (2009) points out, "difficult" environments refer not to their specific regional location but "their complex and coerced political environments which can also be found in places of the North and West" (p. 256). Goode (2016) argues that "aside from the challenges posed by autocracies for fieldwork, the new disciplinary consensus may deter qualitative fieldwork and innovation in studying authoritarianism in Eurasia" (p. 876). The Special Section in *Area* (2013) offers a critical discussion about conducting research in the closed contexts from Africa through North America to East Asia as well as some postcommunist countries. Koch (2013b), based on her experience of conducting focus groups in Kazakhstan, calls for attention not just to the micro-political context of the research practices but also to the macro-political context (and its concomitant technologies of government) in the conduct of qualitative field research. Bekmurzaev, Lottholz, and Meyer (2018) highlight safety implications of doing security-related research in Kyrgyzstan by exploring the roles of cooperation, networks, and framing. They suggest a long-term and collaborative production of knowledge on security in Central Asia in order to reduce the bias and politicization of research (Bekmurzaev, Lottholz, & Meyer, 2018). Overall, there is no single "recipe book" on how to conduct fieldwork in the highly challenging

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research environment of Central Asia, but a consensus among scholars that there is a critical demand for sharing experiences from a methodological perspective to improve our capacity of doing research in this region.

The ongoing methodological debate on Central Asia is mainly developed by international scholars. Local scholars' concerns are rarely heard because of potential safety implications. This article addresses this gap by presenting a reflective analysis of a local scholar on adapting qualitative methods and navigating through methodological challenges within the authoritarian context of Kazakhstan. It specifically addresses the problems of gaining access to government officials in Kazakhstan and the quality of data, describes the strategies applied by the researcher to mitigate these obstacles, and discusses the impact of the political environment on decisions relating to the research design, ethical integrity, safety of participants and researchers, and publication dilemma.

The first section begins by briefly introducing the political context in Kazakhstan. The next section provides a discussion of key methodological challenges of conducting research in an authoritarian context. These challenges include gaining access to government officials, conducting relational interviews, focus groups, and using Q method, ethical considerations, safety implications for participants and researchers, as well as publication dilemma. Both advantages and risks of being a local scholar in Kazakhstan are discussed. The final section concludes by providing useful advice for researchers planning fieldwork in nondemocratic contexts. This article will be of interest both for researchers who are doing or planning to conduct research in Kazakhstan and Central Asia and those who are researching in closed contexts as methodological challenges of an authoritarian regime stretch beyond the geographical boundaries.

Political Context in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan positions itself as a leader in public administration reforms amid other Central Asian countries (Janenova & Knox, 2019). It has rapidly transitioned from a lower middle-income to an "upper middle-income" country (World Bank, 2015) owing to rich oil and gas reserves. However, Kazakhstan performs poorly on the Democracy Score deteriorating over nearly a decade from 6.32 in 2009 to 6.71 in 2018 (Freedom House, 2018), with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score for Kazakhstan is based on the metrics of seven indicators: Electoral Process (6.75), Civil Society (6.75), Independent Media (6.75), National Democratic Governance (6.75), Local Democratic Governance (6.50), Judicial Framework and Independence (6.75), and Corruption (6.75; Freedom House, 2018).

In recent years, Kazakhstan has experienced many cases of persecution and oppression of journalists, activists, lawyers, and leaders of nongovernmental organizations. Mainstream media in Kazakhstan is controlled by the government, whereas the independent media is virtually nonexistent. The rapid growth of social media as a platform to express public criticism toward the government has threatened the political leadership of Kazakhstan. In response, new legislative amendments were enacted in January 2018, to prohibit the anonymity of bloggers and social network commentators. Blocking the use of WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and Internet has become a regular measure used by the government authorities to reduce the risks of social unrest in Kazakhstan (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). Local scholars are an easy target for arrest and prosecution irrespective of their prominence and network connections. A recent example is the arrest of Dr. Konstantin Syroyezhkin, a well-known sinologist, senior analyst at the presidential Institute for Strategic Research, and PhD supervisor of the newly elected President, for alleged espionage in spring 2019 (Zakon.kz, 2019).

The scholarship on methodological challenges in Central Asia is mainly grounded in political science, whereas discussion on methodological constraints in public administration has been neglected. The extensive use of statistical data sets has serious methodological limitations in the context of a nondemocratic country. The statistical data in Kazakhstan can be unreliable, as the government officials tend to portray a "better picture" to suit the political leadership and international community. Jonbekova (2018) reports that secondary data provided by the education authorities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan do not align with data on the same items reported by international organizations (e.g., World Bank). This mismatch between official data and reality was evident in the recent announcement of the political leadership claiming that the average monthly salary in Kazakhstan is 500,000 tenge (or USD1,300) and the affordability of housing mortgages (Sputnik Kazakhstan, 2018). This comment caused public discontent widely circulated via social media with regard to low awareness of the government about living standards of the citizens (when an average monthly salary of a public sector employee is actually USD300–400). An open government agenda is actively promoted by the Kazakhstani Government to meet the requirements of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2017) in joining the top 30 countries in the world. There are many official websites that reproduce legislative decrees, press releases, and presidential speeches (Kassen, 2017; Knox & Janenova, 2019). In other words, open data are available for research but it is of poor reliability and quality. The term suggested by O'Connor, Janenova, and Knox (2019), *half-open government* is the reality in Kazakhstan.

In the absence of reliable official data, both political scientists (scholars of Central Asian politics) and public administration scholars have tended to rely on a *mixed methods* approach or *qualitative methods*. As public administration research focuses on the implementation of government policies and public services, access to participants for public administration scholars might be more challenging given higher sensitivity of the topics that they research. In a highly politicized environment such as Kazakhstan, any criticism on the policies and strategies might have negative career implications for senior government officials. For example, my coauthored paper on public councils published in the international academic journal

(Knox & Janenova, 2018) was used as a "media bomb" against a politician of the responsible ministry. The paper was translated from English into Russian and published in a local media under a controversial title "Public councils in Kazakhstan have become a toy in the hands of the bureaucrats" (Stan Radar, 2019). The reasons behind follow-up replacement of the Minister for Public Development remain unknown; however, as a local scholar, I found myself in the dangerous mid of an interpersonal "battle for power" among Kazakh politicians.

Against this highly fluid and politicized environment, I discuss methodological challenges during implementation of two research projects in 2016–2018 on ethics in civil service and citizen engagement through public councils. These projects have been conducted by myself as a local scholar jointly with the international scholars and local research assistants. Ethics in civil service and citizen engagement are priority areas within the Nation's Plan "100 Concrete Steps" (Idrissov, 2015). These research projects received approval from the institutional research ethics committee of a local university. The first research project aimed to provide a formative evaluation of the ethics commissioners who monitor civil servants' compliance with code of ethics. The second research project aimed to offer a formative assessment of the public councils established to express the views of civil society on matters of public concern. Both research projects applied a triangulation of qualitative methods and generated rich empirical data from different groups of participants inside and outside the government system.

Research Problem No. 1: Gaining Access to Government Officials

The problem of gaining access to government officials represents a fairly universal one; however, in the closed context of Kazakhstan, this poses serious barriers in securing research participants and data. In Kazakhstan, like in other Central Asian countries, it is critically important to start fieldwork by identifying key gatekeepers. This individual can facilitate access to a pool of potential participants (King & Horrocks, 2016, p. 31), whether by virtue of their formal role or his or her informal authority. Gatekeepers in authoritarian regimes may include a political party chair, the chief of a security force, the director of a branch of the civil service, the speaker of parliament, and so forth, as well as less obvious individuals who wield substantial noninstitutional power, such as publishers or even socialites (King & Horrocks, 2016).

The gatekeepers in the selected research projects were identified based on their legislative functions. The Civil Service and Anti-Corruption Agency — "a government body responsible for coordination and control of civil service, anti-corruption, and ethics legislation" (Law "On Civil Service," 2015) — was identified as a gatekeeper in ethics research. In the public councils research, the gatekeeper was the Ministry for Religious Affairs and Civil Society of Kazakhstan (later reorganized into the Ministry for Public Development) responsible for "management in the sphere of state–civil society interaction [. . .] and performance of public councils" (Law "On Public Councils," 2015).

In order to access government officials, we had to seek official approval from their senior managers (ministers, vice-ministers, local mayors [akims]). The official letters were sent well in advance to the coordinating bodies with a request to provide permission for conducting interviews with ethics commissioners and members of public councils. These letters were signed by our university management and accompanied with brief information on the researchers, short bios, and contact details as well as a list of questions. It is important for the gatekeepers to receive such requests on the official headed paper (instead of e-mail) signed by the senior manager of the university (rather than signed by a principal investigator). The "Song of a Bureaucrat" by the Soviet poet Vasiliy Lebedev-Kumach in 1931 humorously describes the significance of an official paper or *spravka* for a Soviet citizen in the following way: "Without papers you are a little bug, but with a piece of paper — like a person" [in Russian "bez bumajki ty bukashka, a s bumajkoy — chelovek"]. This affection for official documents still prevails among the government bodies in Kazakhstan which do not accept e-mail as an official document.

There are sensitive topics for the Kazakhstani Government which include but are not limited to interethnic relations, terrorism and extremism, corruption, patronage, security, freedom of speech, poverty, gender inequality, gay and lesbian issues, and so on. After resignation of the first President Nursultan Nazarbayev in March 2019, a highly sensitive topic for research has become the presidential elections. Legal restrictions have been imposed for opinion polls on elections that are allowed to be conducted only by legal entities registered in Kazakhstan and having a minimum of 5 years of experience in conducting opinion polls (Article 28, Constitutional Law "On Elections in Kazakhstan"). They should seek a prior approval from the Central Election Committee by providing information on the research team, regional location of fieldwork, and methods of analysis. The only organization that received such approval was the State Research Centre "Youth" funded by the public budget. Local experts who have attempted to conduct opinion polls, including the Chairman of Transparency International Board in Kazakhstan, Marat Shibutov, were prosecuted and fined (Egemberdiyeva & Uakhpayev, 2019).

After sending official requests to the government bodies, we followed up with numerous phone calls and e-mails to find responsible officials and track the review progress of the letters. There is no guarantee that an official letter would be reviewed and responded to on time. Some letters were reported to be "undelivered," "lost" in the mid of bureaucracy, "under review" by management who were assessing risks, or on the desk of a civil servant who had no interest in addressing this request. Being proactive and persistent was a useful strategy to tackle bureaucratic obstacles imposed by the authoritarian government. In summary, getting access to the government officials can be a frustrating, long, and disappointing process, posing many bureaucratic obstacles. It is important to note that

getting access does not guarantee good quality data due to the constraints imposed by the political regime.

Research Problem No. 2: Doing Interviews, Focus Groups, and Q Method—The Problem of "Half-Commitment"

Interviews. In both research projects, "relational interviews" were used as a primary tool for generating data in combination with focus groups and the Q method to triangulate findings from different sources. Relational interviewing is a method for generating data through interactions between researcher and interviewee (Fujii, 2017, p. 1). Fujii (2017) argues that an interviewer's ability to properly analyze the "data" rests in their reflections on the mutual acts unfolding during the conversation: moments of silence, reverse questioning, abrupt refusals to talk about issues that are then talked about, and other behavior. Half-truths, silences, rumors, and more constitute "metadata" which are important forms of information in their own right because words can hide just as silences can reveal (Fujii, 2010).

Apart from sending an official letter, we personally contacted every participant to explain what was the aim of the research, what we expected from the participants and to confirm the date and time of the meeting. When we received an official "green light," most participants "agreed" to participate in the research. Many people find it hard to say "no" to a person in authority (Fujii, 2012). We realized this ethical dilemma. To observe research ethics, each participant was given an explanation of the purpose of the research and asked for informed consent before an interview. Informed consent was provided in an oral form, as getting a signed informed consent immediately raised the participants' concerns for their own safety.

In the nondemocratic context, government officials are reluctant to share their views openly and tend to talk within the "scripts" of state propaganda. We were perceived as "inspectors" whose purpose was to conduct evaluation. Participants constantly changed their decisions regarding interviews. They might initially agree, then kept postponing, and changing the date of the interview giving various reasons, and finally, might refuse at a last minute. There were various reasons provided for postponing interviews: "I have an urgent meeting," "I am very busy today/tomorrow/next week," "I have too much work," "I got an urgent order by my boss," "I left urgently for a business trip," "I am on a sick leave/holiday leave," and so on.

The government officials may not refuse openly to give an interview but keep delaying it in the hope that the researchers would stop their attempts. Aside from causing significant frustration for the researcher, too many interview rejections can increase the prospect of systematic error in the research (Goldstein, 2002, p. 670), undermining the sample frame and questioning the overall validity of the research. As a local collaborator, with support of research assistants, I had to constantly call back and send several e-mails to confirm the date and time of the interview. Such behavior might look embarrassing and unprofessional from an international scholar's perspective; however, in the Kazakhstani context, it was impossible to schedule interviews without constant, systematic, and persistent follow-up. The behavior of Kazakhstani bureaucrats may be termed *half-commitment* when a research participant gives initial agreement for an interview but at the end is reluctant to deliver and keeps postponing without saying no. To protect their own safety, Kazakhstani officials skillfully adopted the strategy "Whatever you do, stay silent!" in an attempt to avoid giving an interview or agree but talk without sharing an honest opinion. Locals often tend to distort the sociopolitical reality and remain silent about what they consider negative and undesirable information that would paint a negative picture of their country (Goode & Ahram, 2016, pp. 825–826). As Koch (2013a) notes: "more meaning can often be found in *silences* [emphasis by the original author], rather than what is openly expressed or practiced" (p. 393). In nondemocratic settings, there may be a prevailing normative system that punishes "free speech," rewards repetition of state-scripted speech, or both (Koch, 2013a). Such a situation is highly problematic both for political science and public administration scholars.

Focus groups. Focus groups is another challenging method to apply in the context where open discussions and expressing critical views are discouraged. It was difficult to recruit government officials for focus groups if we openly referred to this research method in the official communication with the gatekeepers. The title of the research method—"focus group"—sounds suspicious in the environment where there is no tradition to invite bureaucrats for focus group discussions. In order to recruit participants, we attempted to frame focus groups under a more acceptable term "seminars." We organized a series of seminars on ethics and citizen engagement and shared international practices which caused lively discussions among the participants. After a coffee break, we offered several questions for small group discussions. The participants were reluctant to give an interview, but they became active and vocal during these seminars. They raised problematic issues and concerns more honestly than in the interviews as they felt collegial support from peers and a safe environment.

This may raise ethical concerns regarding calling focus groups as seminars, when, in practice, we collected the data from the participants. In the closed context of Kazakhstan, it was impossible to get official approval for conducting focus groups with government officials on sensitive topics. We informed the participants before the start of each "seminar" that their views and opinions would be noted and used as research data to support our policy recommendations. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity to protect their job security. There was a high level of interest among the participants in sharing views and concerns during such discussions. This demonstrates that government officials in nondemocratic contexts value discussions in an open and safe environment. These seminars were a different format compared to typical government workshops "packed" with long propaganda speeches by the senior managers leaving no space

for discussion. Such a format of workshops avoids problematic questions and potential risks; often, there is "no time for questions—sorry." Our seminars were mutually beneficial: on the one hand, the participants appreciated new knowledge on international experience and had an opportunity to network with colleagues from other regions and ministries; on the other hand, these discussions helped us to generate rich empirical data of good quality and quantity.

Q method. We carefully adapted the Q methodology to identify the role conception of midlevel bureaucrats in Kazakhstan. This was the first time that the Q method has been applied in the context of Kazakhstan. The major problem was related to the complexity of the Q method. The process involved getting participants of the same caliber (senior- or mid-level managers) together which was a challenging process in itself, translation of the Q cards from English into Russian and Kazakh, piloting and revising them, recording of the findings which required efforts of local research assistants, and translation of the findings back into English.

As the participants were asked to sort the Q cards based on their individual views on the Kazakhstani bureaucrat's characteristics, they raised questions: "What if my views on role conceptions of officials do not meet the views of my colleagues or superiors? Who will have access to my results? Is there a right or wrong answer?" Such concerns were expressed by the participants as they are normally expected to follow the order of the bosses without challenging their views. The Kazakhstani bureaucrats operate in the environment where they are not encouraged to think and talk beyond "official scripts." We had to revise the typology of bureaucrats' role conceptions as some terms had different interpretations in English, Russian, and Kazakh, for example, the terms "ethno-politicos," "technocrats," and "policy entrepreneurs" required prior explanation to the participants before they could start sorting the Q cards.

Research Problem No. 3: Ethical and Safety Issues

Shih (2015, p. 20) notes that researchers must protect subjects and collaborators as much as possible when conducting research in authoritarian regimes, often to the detriment of other research objectives. For example, in official communication with the government bodies, we intentionally excluded the politically sensitive term "corruption" by replacing with more acceptable terms such as "ethics," "transparency," "accountability" and clarified what these terms meant during interviews and focus groups. We avoided using the term "authoritarian regime" that would threaten any organization in Kazakhstan (both government and nongovernment). The word "bureaucrat" has a negative meaning in the post-Soviet societies as "ineffective, inefficient, and corrupt official" so we replaced bureaucrat with the term "public servant." Local researchers are sensitive to the acceptability of terminology in the local context. In order to prioritize the safety of local collaborators, it will inevitably have some impact on the research such as excluding sensitive words.

Advantages and risks of being a local scholar. Fujii (2012, p. 719) argues that researchers should first look to their local contacts (colleagues, friends, assistants, interlocutors) for insight into what risks (and benefits) might matter to local people. In this respect, local scholars possess a number of opportunities and advantages in doing research in their home country. They have an intimate knowledge of the local context and internal dynamics of intergovernmental and interpersonal relationships, which is an important factor in the politicized environment of Kazakhstan. Local scholars can rely on preexisting network connections from their previous education, employment, and residence, which help to find informal and formal gatekeepers and access the participants. If a local scholar is well recognized among the practitioners, getting access to the data might be easier as initial trust has been built through his/her previous work and informal recommendations. Knowledge of native languages (Kazakh and Russian) is very helpful in collecting and analyzing data. Nonverbal communication of the participants needs to be paid significant attention: their body language, gestures, laugh, and silences; in this regard, contribution by the local collaborator in reinterpreting this communication would be helpful.

However, in the nondemocratic context, local scholars experience high safety risks as they remain in their home countries. Local scholars need to be very careful what to write and how to frame research findings as it could potentially have a negative effect on their personal safety and careers. Publication of the research findings has presented a serious dilemma for myself as a local scholar: To what extent can I be critical to meet the requirements of a rigorous peer-review process of a reputable journal and meet safety considerations?

The government in Kazakhstan has low interest in academic outputs published in international journals, as they are not widely read by the citizens and practitioners. Sordi (2016) in her research on the party in power in Kazakhstan comments that even if political leaders read her work, they would still assume that, as an academic paper, it would be mostly ignored or considered harmless because it does not communicate directly with a larger public. Yet, the Kazakhstani Government bodies closely follow local media and social media as public comments on the policies and reforms incur potential risks for their careers. From my own experience, dissemination of research findings through local media, social media (Facebook), Op-Ed articles is an effective mechanism to communicate with the local policy makers. Being active in the local media discourse has brought certain advantages for myself such as getting visibility among the policy community as an expert on ethics and public councils. However, publishing in local media has also brought unnecessary attention from the state bodies.

Based on the research in postcommunist countries including Kazakhstan, Gentile (2013) discusses the risks and threats involved when the internal secret services take interest in the

fieldwork. Gentile concludes the following: "The security services, or their equivalents, are a particularly hazardous source of risk warranting careful and pragmatic ethical reflection, and requiring the adoption of a defensive fieldwork strategy whenever their presence is suspected" (p. 432). I have been invited for regular "talks" on patriotism and importance of keeping a good image of the country and university, particularly because I am a scholar of the Presidential program "Bolashak" ("Future" from Kazakh). These meetings aimed to communicate one message: "We watch you. Be careful what you say." Once after a presentation to the staff of the ruling party "Nur Otan," I was asked by a senior official: "Are you a member of the Party?" This was followed up by the delegation from Nur Otan party to my university with a request to encourage local academics to join the ruling party.

Being a local scholar, I was expected to provide *quid pro quo* "services" to the gatekeepers and participants in exchange for sharing data. For example, I received formal and informal requests by senior managers to provide "free" consulting services or training for their staff or serve as a member at the intergovernmental working groups. Being local, I could not easily refuse these requests, especially if they were expressed by the senior managers (senior by age and senior by hierarchy), as informal relationships and personal recommendations play a significant role in the Kazakhstani society.

Being a young *female* has presented an additional challenge. The traditional values of the Kazakhstani society are "respect for senior age" and "respect of women toward men." The Kazakhstani Government is male-dominated with less than 10% of female political appointees, a single female minister, and no female regional mayor in the history of the country (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018). During interviews, senior government officials seemed to "enjoy" their superior position in terms of hierarchy, gender, and age by sharing long stories about their experience from the Soviet times until present. Some stories had limited value as research data, but as a young, female, local scholar, I felt obliged to show respect and avoid interruption of these stories.

Conclusion

The methodological problems of doing fieldwork in an authoritarian context, which have been discussed in this article, extend beyond Kazakhstan and are highly relevant to other nondemocratic countries. This article provides useful "takeaways" for researchers planning fieldwork in closed contexts as authoritarian governments share similar characteristics despite their geographical location. The traditional authoritarian state seeks monopolistic control over political life, a one-party system organized around a strongman, direct rule by the executive, with little or no role for the parliament, a state media monopoly with formal censorship, and "civil society" organizations that are structured as appendages of the ruling party or state (Puddington, 2017).

The rigid political environment of an authoritarian state dictates high dependence of the researchers on the official gatekeepers. The process of getting access to the participants who represent government officials requires significant preparation, time, patience, sending out official letters, and follow-up with numerous phone calls and e-mails. Gaining access does not guarantee good quality data as the political regime imposes serious limitations on what government officials are allowed to say. Even if officials agree to give an interview, they remain "silent" without sharing an honest opinion.

Data (both quantitative and qualitative) are difficult to access and unreliable in a closed context which can be addressed by a triangulation of methods to cross-check the data from various sources. In my fieldwork, each qualitative method (interview, focus group, Q method) required careful adaptation to the "control and punish" environment of Kazakhstan. Public administration research is highly discouraged in a nondemocratic state as it presents potential risks for career implications of senior officials. The nature of an authoritarian context influences and shapes the behavior of the government officials: They tend to talk within the scripts of the official statements, an independent media and strong civil society do not exist, and critical voice is suppressed. In such a challenging environment, researchers learn to navigate informal rules and relationships.

In an authoritarian context, ethical issues and safety concerns both for the participants and researchers are of particular importance. Local researchers might be subject to high safety risks as they remain in their home countries and are monitored by state bodies. Despite systemic limitations in gathering data in nondemocratic contexts, reputable journals still require the same high-quality research as judged by Western standards. In other words, no allowance is made (or should it be made) for policy context and problems in getting access to and analyzing data.

Yet, despite the political sensitivity and limited access to data, careful research design equipped with local network connections, good understanding of informal practices on how to navigate through the system, triangulation of methods, and safety measures both for participants and researchers have the potential to generate rich empirical data and open new opportunities for follow-up research bypassing numerous restrictions imposed by authoritarian governments. Circumventing these limitations offers Western scholars access to a breadth of research that might otherwise be closed to them for reasons of language, culture, and suspicion around their motives by authoritarian regimes.

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