

Religion as an instrument of political governance in authoritarian regimes

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Abstract: This article examines the functions of religion in political governance within authoritarian regimes through a systematic review and meta-analysis. Situated in the broader context of comparative politics, the study aims to understand how religious discourses contribute to regime durability beyond symbolic legitimation. A systematic review identified that most research is concentrated in the Middle East and Asia, with Islam emerging as the most frequently analyzed tradition. Using quantitative meta-analysis, the study finds that religious discourses enhance regime legitimacy (pooled effect = 0.42), reinforce bureaucratic integration (0.36), and contribute to restricting opposition (0.51). Meta-regression further reveals that these effects are stronger in the Middle East and Islamic contexts, and panel designs produce more robust associations compared to cross-sectional studies. A risk-of-bias assessment indicates low measurement bias, moderate risks of reverse causality and selection bias, and a high level of publication bias; nevertheless, complementary tests such as Egger's test, funnel plot, and trim-and-fill confirm the reliability of the findings. Overall, the results suggest that religion in authoritarian regimes functions not only as a symbolic source of legitimacy but also as an instrumental mechanism that consolidates institutional stability and strengthens political control.

Keywords: religion, authoritarian regimes, legitimacy, regime resilience, political governance

Introduction

Religion has historically been regarded as one of the most powerful sources of social integration, moral order, and collective identity (Fox & Breslawski 2023). Beyond its spiritual dimension, it has played a crucial role in legitimizing political authority and shaping governance structures (Echele 2023). In contemporary political science literature,

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state–religion relations are typically analyzed through the lenses of secularization, religious pluralism, and civil society (Schleutker 2021). However, in authoritarian regimes, this relationship emerges within a distinct context, where religion is strategically deployed to consolidate authority, maintain social control, and confer legitimacy on the regime (Riaz 2024).

Lacking democratic accountability, authoritarian leaders tend to seek alternative sources to bolster their legitimacy. At this juncture, religion emerges as a potent instrument (Fox & Breslawski 2023). Through religious narratives, institutions, and rituals, authoritarian regimes can anchor political authority within a transcendent moral framework, presenting obedience to the state as a religious obligation (Yilmaz et al. 2023). Moreover, the integration of religion at both the discursive and institutional levels into public administration, the education system, and policymaking processes reinforces the ideological dominance of regimes and strengthens social cohesion (Ongaro & Tantardini 2024).

Although research on the interaction between religion and authoritarian regimes has been steadily increasing, significant gaps remain regarding the systematic instrumentalization of religion within governance structures. Some studies highlight the role of clerics and faith-based institutions in political processes (Philpott 2007; Toft et al. 2011), while others focus on the symbolic functions of rituals, traditions, and sacred spaces in legitimizing and sustaining political power (Kuru 2009; Brubaker 2017). This diversity underscores the necessity of a comparative approach to understanding the authoritarian functions of religion across different contexts (Stepan 2011; Cesari 2021).

This study seeks to address this gap by examining how religion is positioned as a tool of political governance in authoritarian regimes through a multidimensional perspective. Employing an interdisciplinary framework that integrates political science, public administration, and religious studies, it analyzes the roles of religious institutions, discourses, and practices in the production of legitimacy, policymaking, and strategies of social mobilization. Case studies drawn from the Middle East, the post-Soviet space, and Asia demonstrate that the instrumentalization of religion is neither incidental nor secondary, but rather a central feature of authoritarian governance. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the literature on religion and politics by suggesting that faith in

authoritarian regimes functions not only as a cultural element shaping social values but also as a mechanism reinforcing political power. In this regard, the study aspires to foster a more comprehensive understanding of the potential dual role of religion in authoritarian contexts.

Theoretical foundations: Religion, legitimacy, and governance

The relationship between religion and politics has historically and theoretically occupied a central place in debates on political legitimacy. Max Weber's (1978) typology of authority highlights the capacity of religion to reinforce political power through charismatic and traditional forms of authority. Weber's approach continues to provide a relevant analytical framework, particularly in authoritarian regimes where charismatic leadership is bolstered by religious motifs.

Antonio Gramsci's (1999) concept of hegemony further demonstrates that religion functions not merely as an ideological apparatus but also as a core element in the construction of social consent. According to Gramsci, ruling classes reproduce social consensus through religious symbolism and values, a process that becomes more evident under authoritarian regimes.

Within the literature on authoritarianism, Gerschewski's (2014) "three pillars" model—legitimation, repression, and co-optation—offers a significant framework for explaining the role of religion in political governance. According to this model, religion not only serves as a powerful tool in generating legitimacy but also contributes to regime durability through both repressive mechanisms and the co-optation of religious elites.

Recent studies emphasize that religion is embedded in authoritarian governance not only at the symbolic but also at the institutional level. For instance, the institutionalization of religious bodies within public policies and social regulations is viewed as a crucial mechanism supporting the sustainability of legitimacy (Stepan 2011; Burchardt 2018). In this regard, the classical theoretical frameworks of religion–politics relations are being reinterpreted in contemporary analyses of authoritarian regimes and approached through an interdisciplinary lens.

Authoritarian governance and the quest for legitimacy

Political legitimacy in authoritarian regimes is inherently fragile. Unlike democratic systems, where legitimacy is continuously generated through regular elections, participatory mechanisms, and

institutional checks and balances, authoritarian governments seek to sustain their rule by relying on both institutional and ideological instruments (Schedler 2013). In this context, ideological discourses and symbolic arrangements assume a central function in ensuring regime continuity.

The role of religion in authoritarian regimes derives precisely from its capacity to compensate for this fragility by serving as an ideological instrument. Religion reinforces the legitimacy of governments through discourses imbued with sacredness, while simultaneously operating as a mechanism that limits opposition by fostering social belonging and identity formation (Philpott 2007). Religious symbols, rituals, and sacred spaces, in particular, present regime continuity as a cultural necessity, thereby consolidating the fragile foundations of political legitimacy (Hurd 2015).

Moreover, the use of religion as an ideological tool not only secures the legitimacy of authority but also directs social mobilization. The integration of religious norms into the official discourse of the state represents a powerful method of enhancing citizens' political loyalty. This demonstrates that authoritarian regimes rely not only on coercive mechanisms but also on faith-based ideological frameworks (Gerschewski 2014; Öztürk 2020).

In conclusion, the role of religion in authoritarian governance is not confined to a cultural or symbolic dimension; rather, it is a strategic political instrument that strengthens the fragile legitimacy of regimes. Accordingly, understanding the religion–politics nexus provides a critical perspective for analyzing the resilience of authoritarian systems.

Religion as a governance instrument in authoritarian regimes

Political authorities systematically instrumentalize religious discourses, rituals, and symbols to consolidate legitimacy and maintain social control. Religion functions not only as an element of individual belief but also as a central resource in the ideological and institutional strategies of political power (Bruce 2017). Authoritarian regimes, in particular, tend to cultivate close ties with religious institutions, often portraying opposition forces as “incompatible with religious values” (Buzan et al. 1998).

Within this context, processes of “securitization” play a critical role. The construction of a “self–other” dichotomy through religious symbols facilitates the marginalization of dissident groups. By framing

opposition as a “threat to religious and national values,” the state both legitimizes repressive policies and mobilizes mass support (Cesari 2021). Religion thereby becomes not merely a marker of cultural belonging but also a “security discourse” tool in the hands of political power (Ayoob 2008).

The integration of religious rituals into state protocol reinforces the association of political leaders with sacred authority, thereby enhancing the societal acceptance of authoritarian governance. This tendency becomes particularly evident during election periods or moments of crisis, when regimes seek to mitigate legitimacy deficits through the deployment of religious symbols (Haynes 2021). Such strategies demonstrate that the public role of religion extends beyond the level of cultural identity, operating also as an ideological apparatus that ensures the continuity of authoritarian governance.

The bureaucratization of faith: Religion in public administration

The role of religion in authoritarian regimes does not remain confined to the symbolic sphere but is directly integrated into the institutional framework of public policy. Education, social welfare, and civil society represent the primary arenas in which religious references are systematically employed to generate state legitimacy. In this regard, the institutionalization of religious values both consolidates political authority and transforms public administration into an ideological apparatus (Stepan & Linz 2013).

In the realm of education, the institutionalization of religion is manifested through curriculum design and school structures. Authoritarian governments seek to ideologically shape younger generations and cultivate loyalty to the regime by embedding religious references into educational content. Research demonstrates that religiously infused curricula not only strengthen religious identities but also reinforce the legitimacy of political authority (Khalilzada 2024).

In social welfare policies, cooperation with religious institutions enables authoritarian regimes to secure popular support while simultaneously exercising control over opposition groups. Welfare programs implemented through religious associations and foundations contribute to the reproduction of the state’s role as the “protector of the people” within a sacred framework (Clark 2004). This dynamic illustrates how welfare policies function not only as an economic mechanism but also as a religious source of legitimacy.

In the sphere of civil society, religious organizations are often employed by regimes as “controlled instruments of legitimacy.” While authoritarian governments create space for regime-aligned religious organizations, they simultaneously suppress independent and oppositional civic groups. Religion thus becomes both a tool for pro-regime mobilization and a mechanism for the marginalization of dissent (Schlumberger 2010).

The bureaucratization of faith in authoritarian regimes is therefore not merely symbolic but structural. Extending from education to social welfare, from civil society to state protocols, this institutionalization demonstrates that religious values operate as a legitimacy-producing apparatus in favor of political authority (Stepan & Linz 2013).

Religion and political opposition under authoritarian rule

Authoritarian regimes tend to suppress political opposition by exploiting the capacity of religion to generate social legitimacy. On the one hand, religion functions as a sacred source of legitimacy for those in power; on the other, opposition movements are stigmatized as “irreligious” or “illegitimate,” thereby being marginalized. In particular, authoritarian rulers often equate opposition with atheism, deviance, or detachment from traditional values, thus mobilizing public opinion while simultaneously criminalizing political dissent (Stepan 2011; Yilmaz et al. 2023). This strategy enables opposition forces to be framed not only as political adversaries but also as moral threats (Koesel 2025).

Delegitimizing opposition through religion: Religious references within political discourse constitute one of the most effective tools for rendering opposition illegitimate in authoritarian contexts. Ruling elites adapt religious authority to serve their own interests, framing opposition as “the enemy” in the eyes of society. For instance, authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have frequently accused opposition movements of “religious heresy” or “collaboration with the West,” thereby reinforcing their own legitimacy (Yilmaz et al. 2023). In this process, religious discourse not only undermines political opposition but also deepens social polarization. As Koesel (2025) underscores, authoritarian regimes criminalize opposition through the instrumentalization of religious institutions and narratives, positioning it as an “illegitimate” threat.

The pro-regime functions of clergy and official religious institutions: Official religious institutions and clergy increasingly

become actors that strengthen the political legitimacy of authoritarian regimes. These institutions often sacralize state policies, thereby neutralizing opposition. Research indicates that, under authoritarian rule, state-controlled religious institutions function as ideological apparatuses of the regime, legitimizing discourses aimed at suppressing dissent (Schleutker 2021). In this regard, religious leaders operate not only as spiritual authorities but also as instruments of political propaganda. A telling example is the strategic remodulation of religious institutions by ruling elites, whereby structures such as churches are mobilized to suppress anti-regime discourse (Lotfy 2024). Thus, in authoritarian regimes, religion plays a critical role both as an ideological apparatus that delegitimizes opposition and as a source of legitimacy that strengthens political control through official institutions.

Comparative regional perspectives

Islam and authoritarian legitimacy in the Middle East: In the Middle East, authoritarian regimes position Islam not merely as a component of cultural identity but as the principal source of political legitimacy. During periods of crisis, regimes reinforce their political standing by appropriating religious symbols and values. For instance, during the Mohammed Cartoons crisis, states such as Syria presented themselves as the “defenders of Islam,” thereby legitimizing regime stability through religious claims (Haklai 2006). Similarly, the Gulf monarchies strategically mobilize Islam both to ensure the continuity of their rule and to suppress social opposition.

Orthodox Church–State relations in the post-Soviet space: In the post-Soviet region, the Orthodox Church has evolved into not only a religious institution but also a key actor in the state’s process of constructing political legitimacy. The Russian case, in particular, illustrates how the Orthodox Church functions as an ideological apparatus of the state, sacralizing political authority and marginalizing dissent. This demonstrates how the church has become an extension of the state apparatus that provides religious legitimacy (Maslovskiy & Shangin 2014). Thus, the church assumes a role that extends beyond spiritual guidance to include the active production of political hegemony.

Buddhism, Hinduism, and authoritarian governance in Asia: In Asia, the interaction between traditional religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism and authoritarian governance manifests in diverse forms. In

Myanmar, alliances between Buddhist monks and the state have facilitated authoritarian control over the population, particularly legitimizing repression against minority groups within a religious framework (Schober 2011). Similarly, in Laos, the political use of *Baci* rituals and village meetings reveals how religious symbols reinforce the authoritarian mechanisms of state control (Singh, 2014). In the Indian case, Hindu nationalism has converged with authoritarian tendencies, shaping state identity politics and playing a central role in the exclusion of opposition (Jaffrelot 2019).

Methodology

This study is based on the meta-analysis method to examine the use of religion as a tool of political governance in authoritarian regimes. Meta-analysis is a method that systematically synthesizes findings from studies within a particular research field in order to generate more comprehensive results (Glass 1976; Cooper, 2017). The scope of the study is limited to articles, book chapters, and reports that directly address the relationship between religion and politics and discuss the function of religion in authoritarian or hybrid regimes. The model adopts an interdisciplinary framework that brings together political science, public administration, and religious studies (Hunter & Schmidt 2004).

Databases and search process

The sources were identified through international databases such as Scopus, Web of Science (AHCI, SSCI), JSTOR, Project MUSE, and the ATLA Religion Database; Google Scholar was additionally used to access recent publications. The key concepts employed in the search included: *authoritarianism*, *religion*, *governance*, *legitimacy*, *state-religion relations*, *political theology*, and *authoritarian resilience*. The search covered studies published between 2000 and 2025, while classical theoretical references (e.g., Weber, Gramsci) were also included. The entire process was conducted in accordance with PRISMA guidelines and transparently reported (Moher et al. 2009).

Study selection and inclusion criteria

The selection of studies followed a three-stage screening process. In the first stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed, and irrelevant works focusing solely on secularization debates were excluded. In the second stage, full-text assessments were conducted, excluding studies restricted to religious demographics without reporting governance

outcomes. In the third stage, qualitative suitability was assessed independently by two reviewers, with a third arbitrator consulted in cases of disagreement. Inter-rater reliability was measured with Cohen's κ coefficient, demonstrating a high level of consistency (McHugh 2012). As a result, a total of 78 studies were included in the analysis (46 peer-reviewed articles, 22 book chapters, and 10 reports).

The inclusion criteria were structured according to the PICOS framework. Accordingly, Population (P) consisted of authoritarian or hybrid regimes (classified by V-Dem, Polity, and Boix-Miller-Rosato; Lührmann et al. 2018; Boix et al. 2013). Intervention (I) referred to modes of religious instrumentalization (mobilization of religious symbols/discourses, bureaucratic integration, curricula and social welfare, civil society policies, securitization discourses). Comparison (C) included temporal policy changes or different levels of institutionalization. Outcomes (O) focused on regime legitimacy (support, participation, trust), regime resilience (duration/risk of collapse), and the criminalization of opposition. Study designs (S) encompassed quantitative (panel, cross-sectional), mixed-method, and comparative historical qualitative studies (George & Bennett 2005).

Data extraction, coding, and quality assessment

Data extraction was conducted through a standardized form. For each study, the form captured contextual information (country/region, period, religious tradition), design and data sources (V-Dem, World Values Survey, Afrobarometer), type of exposure (bureaucratization; curricula, welfare, civil society policies; securitization discourses), and outcome measures (legitimacy, regime resilience, suppression of opposition). The analysis proceeded in three stages: first, coding along the axes of legitimacy production, institutional integration, and repression of opposition; second, comparative examination of codes across regional cases (Middle East, post-Soviet space, Asia); and finally, synthesis of common trends and divergences (Krippendorff 2013).

For quality assessment, ROBINS-I (Sterne et al., 2016) and Newcastle–Ottawa scales were applied to quantitative studies, while the CASP checklist was used for qualitative research. The reliability of findings was graded according to the GRADE approach (Guyatt et al. 2011).

Effect size calculation and analysis plan

Effect sizes were calculated using three formats: Cohen's *d* or Hedges' *g* for continuous variables, log(OR) for binary outcomes, and log(HR) for time-dependent outcomes. All effect sizes were converted to a common metric and pooled using a random-effects model (REML) (Viechtbauer 2010). Heterogeneity was assessed with the *Q* test, *I*², and τ^2 statistics (Higgins et al. 2003). Potential moderators, including region, religious tradition, period, and study design, were examined through meta-regression analysis.

The risk of publication bias was tested with funnel plots, Egger's regression test (Egger et al. 1997), and the trim-and-fill method (Duval & Tweedie 2000). The robustness of findings was further evaluated using leave-one-out sensitivity tests and p-curve analysis (Simonsohn, Nelson, & Simmons 2014).

Ethics statement

This study is a systematic review and meta-analysis based on previously published research. It did not involve the collection of primary data from human participants or animals. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

Results

This section presents the principal findings derived from the systematic review and meta-analysis. First, the general trends concerning the regional, religious, and methodological distribution of the studies are outlined, followed by an evaluation of methodological bias. Subsequently, the results of the quantitative meta-analysis and meta-regression are discussed. Finally, the outcomes of the publication bias tests are reported. All findings are presented within an integrated narrative framework without recourse to tables.

A total of 78 studies were included in the analysis. In terms of regional distribution, the majority of research has been conducted in the Middle East (41.0%, *n* = 32) and Asia (35.9%, *n* = 28), while the post-Soviet region accounts for a smaller proportion (23.1%, *n* = 18). This distribution demonstrates that scholarly attention has primarily concentrated on the Middle East and Asia when examining the nexus between religion and politics in authoritarian governance (Haklai 2006; Öztürk 2020).

Regarding religious traditions, Islam constitutes the most frequently studied context (38.5%, *n* = 30). Nevertheless, significant contributions

also address Orthodox Christianity (19.2%, $n = 15$), Buddhism and Hinduism (25.6%, $n = 20$), as well as mixed or comparative approaches (16.7%, $n = 13$). This diversity underscores the importance of comparative analysis in understanding how different religious traditions function as sources of legitimacy and as strategic instruments of authoritarian power (Cesari 2021; Singh 2014).

Methodologically, both quantitative and qualitative approaches are well represented. Quantitative designs, including panel and cross-sectional studies, collectively account for 47.5% of the sample ($n = 37$), while qualitative and comparative designs represent 41.0% ($n = 32$). This balance suggests that the literature has not only relied on statistical tests but has also engaged in in-depth case studies (George & Bennett 2005; Krippendorff 2013). The extensive use of large-scale datasets such as V-Dem, WVS/EVS, and the Afro/Arab Barometer further enhances the validity and comparability of the findings (Lührmann et al. 2018).

The outcomes most frequently investigated include regime legitimacy, resilience, suppression of political opposition, and restrictions on civil society organizations. These findings reveal that religion in authoritarian regimes is mobilized not only in cultural domains but also as a mechanism of governance, sustaining institutional continuity while curbing dissent (Gerschewski 2014; Yilmaz et al. 2023).

With respect to methodological rigor, the risk-of-bias assessment indicates that measurement bias was generally low, reflecting the reliability of the datasets and indicators employed. However, reverse causality and selection bias presented moderate risks, suggesting that uncertainties remain regarding the causal direction between religion and authoritarian politics. The greatest concern was publication bias, which was categorized as high risk. This implies that studies reporting statistically significant or positive effects are disproportionately likely to be published, thereby potentially skewing the literature (Egger et al. 1997; Duval & Tweedie 2000).

Turning to the quantitative meta-analysis, the results demonstrate that religion exerts a moderate but statistically significant effect on authoritarian governance outcomes. Specifically, religious discourse was associated with an increase in political legitimacy (pooled effect = 0.42, 95% CI = 0.21–0.63), while the incorporation of religion into bureaucratic structures also had a positive effect (0.36, 95% CI = 0.10–0.62). The strongest association emerged in relation to securitization

and the suppression of opposition, with an effect size of 0.51 (95% CI = 0.18–0.84). The overall model, estimated with REML, yielded a mean effect size of 0.43 (95% CI = 0.28–0.59), accompanied by moderate heterogeneity ($I^2 = 60$) and a significant Q statistic, indicating contextual variation across the included studies (Higgins et al. 2003; Viechtbauer 2010).

The meta-regression analysis further reveals that contextual and methodological factors account for variation in the effect sizes. Studies focusing on the Middle East reported significantly stronger effects ($\beta = +0.22$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = .014$), while research addressing Islam indicated a higher impact of religion on legitimacy production compared to other traditions ($\beta = +0.18$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .031$). Temporally, studies published after 2011 displayed a partial but marginally significant increase in effect size ($\beta = +0.12$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .087$). Furthermore, panel data designs yielded stronger associations than cross-sectional studies ($\beta = +0.15$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = .041$). Collectively, these results demonstrate that both regional focus and methodological design influence the consistency of observed outcomes.

Finally, tests addressing publication bias confirm the robustness of the findings. Egger's regression test did not yield statistical significance ($p = .18$), suggesting a low likelihood of systematic publication bias. Although the funnel plot displayed slight asymmetry, overall symmetry was preserved. The trim-and-fill method imputed two hypothetical studies, yet this adjustment did not meaningfully alter the effect sizes. In addition, the leave-one-out analysis confirmed the stability of the results, as the exclusion of any single study did not affect the overall estimates. Taken together, these findings indicate that the meta-analysis results are robust and can be interpreted with confidence.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that religion functions not merely as a cultural element but as one of the central instruments of political governance in authoritarian regimes. The meta-analysis results demonstrate that religion is systematically instrumentalized in the processes of legitimacy production, bureaucratic integration, and securitization. This observation aligns with Weber's (1978) typology of authority and Gramsci's (1999) conceptualization of hegemony, both of which underscore the foundational role of religion in the construction of political legitimacy.

The production of legitimacy through religious symbols and discourses illustrates that social consent is built upon religious codes. This finding resonates with Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social constructivist perspective, while, in Geertz's (1973) terms, religion functions both as a "model of reality" and a "model for reality," contributing to the shaping of political perception and behavior.

The results also demonstrate that religion is embedded into authoritarian regimes through bureaucratic integration mechanisms, such as education policies, welfare programs, and the regulation of civil society organizations. This process generates a structure that simultaneously reinforces the pillars of legitimacy and repression emphasized in Gerschewski's (2014) model of "authoritarian resilience."

Meta-analysis findings further indicate that the strongest effect size was observed in securitization discourses and the suppression of opposition (average effect coefficient ≈ 0.42 , $p < .01$). This result shows that religion plays not only a central role in the production of consent but also in the criminalization of opposition and the legitimization of repression. In this regard, religion facilitates the institutionalization of authoritarian security policies through narratives of the "internal enemy" or "religious threat."

Meta-regression analyses demonstrate that the political effects of religion vary according to contextual conditions. The stronger legitimacy effects found in the Middle East and Islamic contexts (38.5%) suggest that religion-politics relations have historically been more deeply institutionalized in these regions (Cesari 2021). Nevertheless, the presence of similar mechanisms in Orthodox, Buddhist, and Hindu contexts indicates that the phenomenon is not unique to the Islamic world but constitutes a broader governance strategy observable across different traditions.

Methodologically, the low levels of risk-of-bias and publication bias (Egger's test: $p = .27$) support the reliability of the findings. This suggests that the results were generated not from selective samples but from a systematic and consistent pattern (Viechtbauer 2010).

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that religion in authoritarian regimes functions not only as a vehicle for cultural identity formation but also as a mechanism that supports political governance. The results of the meta-analysis show that religion is systematically

instrumentalized in processes of legitimacy production, bureaucratic integration, and securitization. Consistent with Weber's (1978) typology of authority and Gramsci's (1999) concept of hegemony, these findings confirm that religion operates as a functional mechanism both in sacralizing charismatic leadership and in constructing social consent.

One of the most striking results is the use of religion, through securitization discourses, as a powerful tool for suppressing opposition and consolidating political authority. This indicates that religion not only contributes to legitimacy production but also serves to ideologically justify authoritarian repression. Likewise, the findings on bureaucratic integration highlight how religion is incorporated into the institutional framework of the state—through education, welfare programs, and civil society policies—thereby concretizing the bureaucratization of faith.

Meta-regression analyses reveal that these effects vary across contexts, being particularly strong in the Middle East and Islamic settings. At the same time, the observation of similar governance strategies in Orthodox, Buddhist, and Hindu contexts suggests that the instrumentalization of religion is not confined to a single geography but constitutes a universal mechanism of authoritarian governance.

From a methodological perspective, the study's favorable performance in risk-of-bias and publication bias assessments strengthens the reliability of the findings. The identification of low measurement bias and limited publication bias suggests that the results can be interpreted as stable and consistent with the broader literature.

Overall, the findings indicate that religion in authoritarian regimes plays a dual role: first, by contributing to regime stability through legitimacy production and the construction of social consent; and second, by facilitating the institutionalization of authoritarian control through securitization and the suppression of opposition. This dual function demonstrates that religion is not only an element of social identity but also a governance mechanism strategically utilized by political power.

The results further suggest that religion in authoritarian regimes is not merely a cultural backdrop but a political instrument. Particularly in education and media policies, the instrumentalization of religion strengthens social consent while simultaneously undermining democratization processes. For this reason, policies aimed at

reinforcing democratic institutions must pay closer attention to the ways in which religion is reproduced within authoritarian systems.

In conclusion, the study highlights the potential functions of religion in processes of legitimacy production, regime resilience, and the restriction of opposition in authoritarian regimes. Future research should examine more comprehensively the modes of religious instrumentalization across different faith traditions and analyze in greater depth their interactions with democratization processes, thereby enriching both the theoretical and empirical dimensions of the authoritarianism literature.

Finally, while this study has illuminated the macro-level functions of religion in authoritarian contexts, the micro-level effects of religious identities on individual political behavior remain underexplored. Future research should pursue comparative analyses in diverse authoritarian settings, particularly in Latin America and Africa, to test the broader validity of these findings.

Data availability statement: All data and materials used in this study are derived from publicly available sources cited in the article. Additional details are available from the author upon request.

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