

**ERRN**

Electoral Regulation  
Research Network



MELBOURNE LAW SCHOOL



**ELECTORAL REGULATION RESEARCH  
NETWORK/DEMOCRATIC AUDIT OF AUSTRALIA JOINT  
WORKING PAPER SERIES**

**A SYNOPSIS ON THE DEAKIN WORKSHOP ON AUTHORITARIANISM  
(SEPTEMBER 2018)**

Dr. Zim Nwokora (Deakin University)

**WORKING PAPER NO. 48 (OCTOBER 2018)**

## Abstract

This paper outlines the agenda for the Deakin Workshop on Authoritarianism held at Deakin University in September 2018, co-sponsored by ERRN.

\*\*\*\*\*

On Friday, September 21, Deakin University hosted a workshop on: “Kinder, Gentler and Smarter Autocracies? Human Rights and Political Participation under Authoritarianism.” The workshop was co-sponsored by the Alfred Deakin Institute and the Electoral Regulation Research Network and involved approximately 20 scholars and students based in the Melbourne area. Three external participants, Professor John Keane from the University of Sydney, Dr. Carolien van Ham from UNSW (Sydney) and Dr. Ferran Martínez i Coma from Griffith University (Brisbane), were also invited to contribute their expertise. Workshop papers were circulated prior to the day and participants were also provided with several background papers to inform their thinking and the workshop discussions.

The day began with a fascinating public lecture by Professor John Keane, a prominent democratic theorist and Director of the Sydney Democracy Network. The lecture explored the connections between various political regimes that together represent what Professor Keane described as the “new despotisms.” Included in this class are the regimes of countries such as China, Iran and Russia. The new despotisms are not totalitarian dictatorships, but rather operate by “softer” and “smarter” means. For example, they are not openly violent and repressive; they see the value of building and maintaining public consent; they aim to cultivate the “good life” and thus allow their citizens considerable freedom, particularly in the economic domain; and they seek to legitimate their actions through law.

Professor Keane explained that these regimes pose a challenge for theorists because, while they clearly are not “democratic,” they fit uneasily in the old-fashioned containers of “autocracy” and “dictatorship.” The new despotisms also pose a serious practical challenge, for various reasons. First, because they appear to be reasonably stable and functional. As Professor Keane noted, anybody predicting the imminent demise of the Chinese Communist Party, even if the economy slows down in China, is likely to be proven wrong. Secondly, the new despotism appears to be an attractive model for countries with an unsettled regime form and which therefore “could go either way.” Thirdly, there are signs that some of the attributes and tactics of the new despotism—including its reliance on plutocracy and the production of lies for public consumption—may be creeping into public life in seemingly well-established democracies, such as the United States and Australia.

A lively discussion followed Professor Keane’s lecture, with the audience posing questions about how we should understand the new despotisms and what to do about them. The remainder of the workshop explored some of the themes raised in Professor Keane’s lecture, as well as other issues relating to the theory and practice of authoritarianism in the contemporary environment.

Panel 1, chaired by Professor Ihsan Yilmaz (Deakin), explored “Governance under Authoritarianism.” The panel featured the following papers:

- (1) Professor Baogang He (Deakin) on “Smart Authoritarianism through Public Deliberation.”

- (2) A/Professor Ben Isakhan (Deakin) and Mr Pete Mulherin (Deakin) on “Democracy and Decentralisation in Iraq: A Constitutional Right or Illegal Division.”
- (3) Dr. John Morss (Deakin) on “Authoritarian Regimes and How they Interrelate: Perspectives from International Law.”
- (4) Dr. Zim Nwokora (Deakin) on “Economic Growth in Fluid Polities: Evidence from Africa.”

These papers received discussant feedback from Dr Ferran Martinez i Coma (Griffith) and Dr. Shiri Krebs (Deakin).

Panel 2, chaired by Dr John Morss (Deakin), discussed “Elections and Government Turnover under Authoritarianism.” The panel featured the following papers:

- (1) Dr Dara Conduit (Deakin) and Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh (Deakin) on “Evaluating Public Opinion Research in Authoritarian Climates: An Examination of Voter Polling in the Lead-Up to the 2017 Iranian Presidential Election.”
- (2) Dr Ferran Martinez i Coma (Griffith) on “Invalid Voting in Autocracies.”
- (3) Dr Carolien Van Ham (UNSW) on “Legitimacy and Regime Breakdown across Autocracies and Democracies.”
- (4) Dr Sam Wilkins (U. Melbourne) on “Throw Which Bums Out? Subnational Turnover, Accountability Politics and Authoritarian Survival in Museveni’s Uganda.”

These papers were discussed by Dr Carolien van Ham (UNSW) and Dr Zim Nwokora (Deakin).

Panel 3, chaired by Dr Amy Nethery (Deakin), examined “Religion and Authoritarianism” and featured the following papers:

- (1) Professor Ihsan Yilmaz (Deakin), Dr. Savas Genc (Heidelberg) and Mr. Matthew O’Rourke (Monash) on “Instrumentalist use of Islam by Authoritarianists in Turkey.”
- (2) Dr. Galib Bashirov (Florida International University) on “Religion and Authoritarianism in Azerbaijan.”
- (3) Dr James Barry (Deakin) on “Religion and Authoritarianism in Iran.”
- (4) Dr Zahid Ahmed (Deakin) on “Military, Islam and Authoritarianism: A Comparative Analysis of Bangladesh and Pakistan.”

Feedback on these papers was provided by Dr Dara Conduit (Deakin) and A/Professor Ben Isakhan (Deakin).