



When Social Capital Sustains Authoritarianism: A Comparative Analysis of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan

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Abstract: Why do some authoritarian regimes remain politically durable despite leadership transitions, economic pressures, and sustained international criticism? Existing scholarship has generally explained authoritarian resilience through coercive institutions, executive dominance, elite management, patronage, and restrictions on political competition.[4,16,18,21,26,32] This article argues that these explanations understate the role of informal social relationships in reproducing political order. Drawing on theories of Social Capital and Social Liability, it compares Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan to examine how family ties, patronage networks, community relationships, and state-regulated religious institutions simultaneously generate social support and constrain political behavior. These networks provide trust, reciprocity, information, and access to resources, but they also create obligations, reputational exposure, dependence, and pressures for conformity. The political consequences of social capital are therefore contingent upon the institutional environment in which social networks operate. Where formal state institutions align with informal systems of social organization, networks that might otherwise facilitate collective action may instead increase the social costs of dissent and reinforce political compliance. Although Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan differ in political openness, international integration, and the intensity of state regulation, both demonstrate how authoritarian authority may become embedded in everyday social relationships. By integrating political sociology, network theory, and comparative authoritarianism, the article offers a framework for explaining how social capital can contribute to authoritarian resilience.

Keywords: authoritarianism, authoritarian resilience, social capital, social liability, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, informal networks, patronage, Islam, political sociology

INTRODUCTION

Authoritarian regimes differ substantially in institutional structure, economic capacity, ideological orientation, and international position. Nevertheless, many remain politically durable despite economic instability, leadership succession, domestic dissatisfaction, and external criticism. Explaining this durability has become a central concern in the comparative study of authoritarian rule. Existing scholarship emphasizes executive dominance, coercive institutions, elite cohesion, patronage, institutional manipulation, and restrictions on political competition as principal mechanisms of authoritarian survival.[4,16,18,21,26,32] These approaches have significantly advanced understanding of how authoritarian governments maintain power. They devote less attention, however, to the social relationships through which political authority becomes embedded in everyday life.

The present study argues that authoritarian resilience depends not only on formal state institutions but also on informal social networks that shape access to resources,

distribute opportunities, influence reputation, and structure individual calculations of political risk. Families, patronage relationships, workplaces, religious communities, neighborhood networks, and trusted personal connections generate cooperation and mutual assistance. At the same time, they create reciprocal obligations, dependencies, reputational exposure, and pressures to avoid conduct that may threaten the interests of relatives, employers, patrons, or community members.

This argument builds on the concept of **social capital**, commonly understood as resources embedded in social relationships that facilitate cooperation, information exchange, influence, and collective action.[5,6,20,28,29] Social capital scholarship has often emphasized the productive consequences of trust, civic engagement, reciprocity, and network access.[6,27,39] Yet dense networks may also exclude outsiders, impose excessive obligations, constrain autonomy, and punish deviation from accepted expectations.[38,33,34] The political significance of social capital therefore cannot be determined independently of the institutional environment in which networks operate.

The concept of **Social Liability** captures these constraining dimensions of network membership.[14,15] Social liability refers to the obligations, dependencies, reputational costs, and social sanctions generated by relationships that also provide valuable resources. The same family, professional, religious, or patronage network that offers protection and opportunity may discourage political dissent when one member's actions threaten the security, status, or material interests of others. Social capital and social liability are therefore not opposing conditions. They are complementary outcomes produced by the same network structures.

These dynamics are especially important under authoritarian rule. Individuals considering political criticism or collective action do not evaluate only the likelihood of arrest, prosecution, or direct punishment. They may also consider whether their behavior could affect employment, educational opportunities, family reputation, professional relationships, or access to administrative institutions. Political dissent can therefore impose social and economic costs extending beyond the individual. Informal networks may consequently reinforce political order even without continuous state intervention.

The article examines these mechanisms through a comparison of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. Both states emerged from the Soviet Union in 1991, both have Muslim-majority populations, and both developed centralized presidential systems characterized by restricted political competition and substantial state influence over religious institutions.[7,8,21,23,24,36] Both also possess economies shaped significantly by hydrocarbon resources and political systems in which patronage and personal relationships remain influential. [21,23,36,37]

The cases nevertheless differ in analytically useful ways. Turkmenistan maintains a more closed political system, a narrower civic sphere, and more comprehensive administrative control over public organization and religious life.[36-38] Azerbaijan is more deeply integrated into international markets and institutions and permits comparatively greater economic and social openness, while continuing to restrict opposition activity, independent media, civil society, and autonomous religious organization.[21,36-38] These similarities and differences permit examination of whether the proposed relationship between social capital, social liability, and authoritarian resilience operates across distinct degrees of authoritarian closure.

The study therefore employs a **most-similar systems comparison**. The two cases share important historical, institutional, economic, and religious characteristics but differ in the intensity of state control and political openness. This design does not establish causation through statistical testing. Instead, it allows the paper to identify recurring sociological mechanisms and examine whether informal networks perform comparable political functions across two related but nonidentical authoritarian systems.

Religion provides one important illustration. Islam remains culturally and socially significant in both countries, yet religious institutions operate within regulatory frameworks established by the state.[24,35-39] Officially recognized religious institutions may strengthen community solidarity and moral obligation while remaining administratively constrained. Under these conditions, religion can generate social capital without necessarily producing autonomous political organization. It may instead become integrated into a wider structure of regulated social order.

The central proposition of the article is that **authoritarian resilience is strengthened when formal political institutions align with informal systems of social organization**. State institutions establish legal, administrative, and coercive boundaries. Informal networks reinforce those boundaries through dependence, reciprocal obligations, reputational sanctions, and concerns about collective consequences. Political compliance is therefore not only imposed from above. It is also reproduced horizontally through the social relationships that organize everyday life. The article makes three contributions. First, it integrates network sociology with comparative scholarship on authoritarian resilience. Second, it advances the Social Capital and Social Liability framework by showing that social capital is politically contingent rather than inherently democratic. Third, it demonstrates through the comparison of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan that informal networks can complement formal authoritarian institutions across different levels of political closure.

The next section develops the theoretical framework and distinguishes social liability from related concepts such as coercion, patronage, and informal institutions. The article then examines Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan separately before comparing the mechanisms through which family relationships, patronage networks, and regulated religious institutions reinforce political order. The discussion identifies the conditions under which social capital is more likely to sustain authoritarianism, followed by a conclusion addressing the framework's broader comparative implications.

SOCIAL CAPITAL, SOCIAL LIABILITY, AND AUTHORITARIAN RESILIENCE: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Research on authoritarian resilience has traditionally emphasized institutional explanations for regime durability. Scholars have highlighted the importance of executive dominance, coercive institutions, elite cohesion, patronage, institutional adaptation, and selective political inclusion in maintaining authoritarian rule.[4,16,18,21,26,32] These approaches have substantially advanced understanding of authoritarian governance by explaining how regimes organize political authority and manage opposition. However, they generally focus on the relationship between the state and society while devoting comparatively less attention to the sociological processes through which citizens themselves reproduce political stability through everyday social interactions.

The analysis suggests that authoritarian resilience depends not only on the capacity of governments to coerce or co-opt citizens, but also on the structure of informal social relationships that shape political behavior. Families, kinship systems, patronage relationships, workplaces, neighborhood communities, and religious organizations create durable networks through which information, trust, resources, and social expectations circulate. These networks influence how individuals evaluate political choices and often shape behavior independently of direct state intervention.

The concept of **social capital** provides an important foundation for understanding these relationships. Coleman defined social capital as resources embedded within social relationships that facilitate coordinated action, while Putnam emphasized the importance of trust, reciprocity, and civic engagement in promoting institutional effectiveness.[6,39] Burt demonstrated that network position creates strategic advantages through brokerage and access to information, whereas Lin emphasized the resources individuals obtain through social connections.[5,27] Collectively, this literature demonstrates that informal relationships constitute valuable social resources that facilitate cooperation, reduce uncertainty, and strengthen community cohesion.[5,6,20,28,29].

Yet the literature has also recognized that social capital possesses important constraints. Portes argued that dense networks often generate obligations, exclusionary practices, and restrictions on individual autonomy.[28] Woolcock similarly observed that highly cohesive networks may discourage innovation and reinforce conformity when social expectations become excessively demanding.[33,34] These observations suggest that social capital should not be understood exclusively as a positive social resource. The same relationships that facilitate cooperation may also constrain independent action.

This article develops that insight through the concept of **Social Liability**. [14,15] Social liability refers to the obligations, dependencies, reputational risks, reciprocal expectations, and informal sanctions generated through participation in trusted social networks. It is not the opposite of social capital. Rather, it represents an inseparable dimension of the same network structures. Trust creates obligations. Reciprocity produces expectations of future behavior. Membership within families, religious communities, workplaces, and patronage networks generates both opportunities and constraints. Individuals therefore receive benefits from social relationships while simultaneously assuming responsibilities toward other members of those networks.

The distinction between **patronage**, **coercion**, and **social liability** is important. Patronage concerns the distribution of material resources and political opportunities through personal relationships.[11,21] Coercion relies upon the state's capacity to impose legal or physical sanctions.[4,16,32] Social liability operates differently. It functions through informal expectations, reputational concerns, reciprocal obligations, and the desire to preserve valuable social relationships. Individuals frequently comply with social expectations not because they fear immediate punishment by the state, but because they seek to protect family members, maintain employment, preserve community standing, or avoid jeopardizing future opportunities.

Under authoritarian conditions these mechanisms acquire particular political significance. Political dissent rarely affects only the individual expressing opposition. Public criticism may expose relatives, employers, business partners, or members of the same religious community to unwanted official attention. Consequently, individuals often

internalize political caution because the perceived costs of dissent extend well beyond legal sanctions. Governments benefit from these dynamics because informal social networks reinforce political stability without requiring continuous coercive intervention.

Religion illustrates these processes particularly well. Religious institutions generate social capital by strengthening trust, moral authority, and community solidarity.[2,32] Where religious organizations operate within state-regulated institutional frameworks, however, these same networks may also reinforce political order by encouraging lawful conduct, social cohesion, and respect for established authority while limiting opportunities for independent political mobilization.[24,33,36, 38] Religion therefore demonstrates how social capital and social liability may coexist within the same institutional environment.

The central theoretical proposition advanced here is that **the political consequences of social capital are contingent upon institutional context**. Social capital is neither inherently democratic nor inherently authoritarian. In democratic political systems, networks of trust frequently facilitate civic participation, voluntary association, and collective action. Under authoritarian conditions, many of the same network characteristics may instead strengthen political conformity by increasing the social costs associated with dissent. Whether social capital promotes democratic participation or authoritarian stability therefore depends upon the institutional environment in which social relationships are embedded.

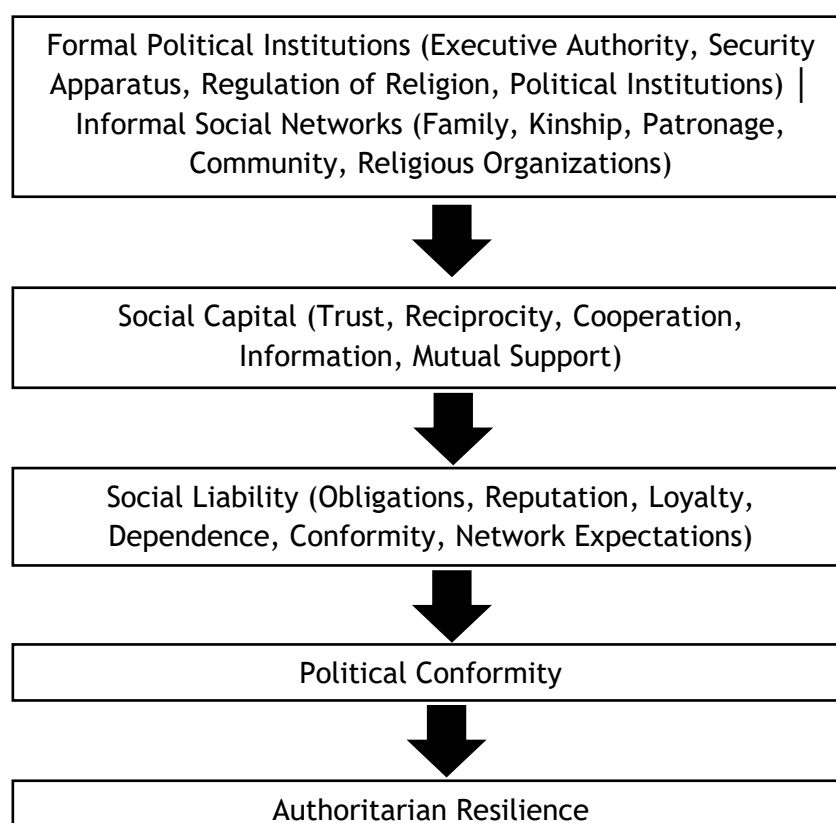


Figure 1

This perspective extends existing theories of authoritarian resilience by integrating political sociology with social network analysis. Rather than viewing authoritarian durability

solely as the product of coercive institutions or elite bargaining, it demonstrates that political authority is also reproduced through ordinary social relationships. Families, patronage systems, workplaces, neighborhood communities, and regulated religious institutions become mechanisms through which political order is reinforced in everyday life.

Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan provide appropriate comparative cases for examining this proposition. Although they differ in political openness, international engagement, and the intensity of state regulation, both exhibit dense informal social networks operating alongside highly centralized political institutions. The following section examines whether these common sociological mechanisms help explain authoritarian resilience across two related but distinct authoritarian settings.

- **Proposition 1:** The political consequences of social capital depend upon institutional context.
- **Proposition 2:** Social liability increases when social networks become embedded within state-regulated institutions.
- **Proposition 3:** Authoritarian resilience is strengthened when formal political institutions and informal social networks reinforce one another.

Taken together, these propositions suggest that authoritarian resilience should be understood as a multi-level phenomenon. Formal institutions establish the legal and administrative framework of political authority, while informal social networks shape how citizens interpret political incentives, obligations, and risks. The interaction between these two levels constitutes the central theoretical framework advanced in this article.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: TURKMENISTAN AND AZERBAIJAN

Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan provide appropriate cases for examining the relationship between social capital, social liability, and authoritarian resilience. Both emerged as independent states following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, both possess Muslim-majority populations, both developed highly centralized presidential systems, and both maintain significant state oversight of religious institutions and political competition.[7,8,21,23,24,36] These shared characteristics create an appropriate basis for comparison. At the same time, the countries differ in the degree of political openness, international integration, economic diversification, and administrative control, allowing assessment of whether the proposed theoretical framework applies across different authoritarian environments.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan represents one of the most centralized political systems in the post-Soviet region.[36-38] Executive authority dominates political life, political competition remains extremely limited, and independent civil society organizations operate under extensive legal and administrative restrictions.[36-38] Religious institutions are similarly regulated through state registration and official oversight, limiting their capacity to function as autonomous political actors.[24,36,38]

Formal institutions, however, explain only part of the country's political stability. Informal social organization continues to shape access to employment, economic opportunity, local influence, and administrative resources. Family relationships, kinship ties, regional affiliations, and patronage networks remain important mechanisms through which trust is established and resources are distributed.[7,23,36] In many situations, these personal relationships function more effectively than formal bureaucratic procedures, reinforcing the importance of trusted social networks in everyday life.

These networks generate substantial social capital by facilitating cooperation, reciprocal assistance, and information sharing. At the same time, they also generate social liability. Individuals who openly criticize political authorities may expose relatives, colleagues, or patrons to unwanted official attention, reducing future opportunities for the broader network. Political behavior therefore becomes a collective rather than purely individual calculation. Maintaining family reputation, preserving trusted relationships, and protecting future opportunities frequently encourage political caution independently of direct state coercion.

Religion reinforces these dynamics. Islam remains an important element of cultural identity and community life, yet religious organizations function within regulatory structures established by the state. [24,35-39] Religious institutions therefore strengthen community cohesion and moral authority while operating within institutional boundaries that discourage independent political mobilization. Rather than competing with state authority, religious networks frequently become integrated into broader patterns of social stability.

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan presents a somewhat different authoritarian model. Although political competition is less restricted than in Turkmenistan, executive authority remains dominant, opposition parties encounter significant institutional barriers, and international organizations continue to report restrictions affecting elections, media freedom, and civil society organizations. [35-38] Political stability has been maintained not only through formal institutions but also through long-standing systems of patronage and elite cooperation.

Informal personal networks occupy a particularly important position within Azerbaijan's political economy.[21,23] Access to government employment, commercial opportunities, and administrative influence frequently depends upon trusted interpersonal relationships. Patronage networks reduce uncertainty, facilitate access to resources, and reinforce cooperation among political and economic elites. These relationships constitute important forms of social capital because they provide information, influence, and opportunities unavailable through formal institutional channels alone.

Participation in these networks simultaneously produces social liability. Individuals benefiting from patronage relationships often have strong incentives to avoid political behavior that might jeopardize established ties or damage family reputation. Public criticism of government policies may carry consequences extending beyond the individual, affecting professional advancement, business opportunities, or the standing of relatives and associates. Consequently, political conformity is reinforced through reciprocal obligations embedded within informal social relationships rather than through coercion alone.

Religion illustrates a similar interaction. Azerbaijan defines itself constitutionally as a secular republic, yet the state maintains significant authority over the registration, administration, and supervision of religious organizations.[38] Official oversight limits the emergence of autonomous religious institutions while allowing Islam to continue serving important cultural and social functions. Religious communities therefore generate social capital without necessarily becoming independent centers of political organization.

Comparative Discussion

The comparative analysis demonstrates that Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan differ principally in the intensity of authoritarian governance rather than in the underlying sociological mechanisms supporting political stability. Turkmenistan relies upon more comprehensive administrative regulation and narrower political space, whereas Azerbaijan permits greater economic openness and broader engagement with international institutions. Nevertheless, both governments benefit from informal social networks that reinforce political authority through reciprocal obligations, reputational concerns, and dependence upon trusted relationships.

Table 1: Comparative Characteristics of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan

Dimension	Turkmenistan	Azerbaijan	Theoretical implication
Political openness	Very limited	Limited	Different degrees of authoritarianism
Executive authority	Very high	High	Strong centralized state
Patronage networks	Extensive	Extensive	Reinforce political loyalty
Family and kinship networks	Strong	Strong	Generate social capital
Regulation of religion	Extensive	Extensive but comparatively restrictive	Integrates religion into governance
Civil society	Highly restricted	Restricted	Limits independent mobilization
Social liability	High	Moderate to high	Raises social costs of dissent
Outcome	Stable authoritarianism	Stable authoritarianism	Informal networks complement formal institutions

The findings support the central theoretical proposition advanced in this article. Authoritarian resilience cannot be explained solely by coercive institutions, elite bargaining, or executive authority. It also depends upon the interaction between formal political institutions and informal systems of social organization. Social capital strengthens cooperation, trust, and access to resources, while social liability increases the perceived social costs of political dissent. Together these complementary processes contribute to political stability by embedding authoritarian governance within the ordinary relationships that organize everyday social life.

The comparison further suggests that social capital is politically contingent rather than politically neutral. The same network structures capable of facilitating civic engagement in democratic settings may reinforce political conformity when embedded within authoritarian institutional environments. Understanding this interaction broadens existing theories of authoritarian resilience and demonstrates that informal social organization deserves greater attention within comparative political analysis.

DISCUSSION: SOCIAL CAPITAL AS A CONTEXT-DEPENDENT POLITICAL RESOURCE

The comparison of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan demonstrates that authoritarian resilience cannot be explained solely through coercion, institutional design, elite cohesion, or patronage. Although these factors remain essential components of authoritarian governance, they do not fully explain how political stability is reproduced within everyday society. The evidence presented here suggests that informal social networks constitute an additional mechanism through which authoritarian regimes reinforce political order.

The principal theoretical contribution of this article is the proposition that **the political consequences of social capital are contingent upon institutional context**. Much of the classical literature associates social capital with trust, civic engagement, collective action, and democratic participation.[5,6,20,28,29] These outcomes are well established within democratic political environments where voluntary associations frequently strengthen accountability and citizen participation. However, the present analysis suggests that social capital should not be viewed as inherently democratic. Rather, its political effects depend upon the institutional environment within which social relationships operate.

This argument is developed through the concept of **Social Liability**. [14,15] Participation in dense social networks produces not only trust and reciprocity but also obligations, dependencies, reputational risks, and expectations of loyalty. Individuals embedded within family networks, patronage systems, workplaces, or religious communities often evaluate political behavior according to its consequences for the wider network rather than solely for themselves. Under authoritarian conditions, these obligations increase the perceived costs of political dissent by extending political risk beyond the individual actor.

The findings therefore suggest that authoritarian governments benefit from two mutually reinforcing systems of governance. The first consists of formal political institutions, including executive authority, security services, administrative regulation, and legal restrictions on political competition.[4,16,18,21,26,32] The second consists of informal systems of social organization that encourage cooperation, regulate behavior, and reinforce expectations of political conformity. Together these systems reduce the need for continuous coercion because many individuals voluntarily avoid behaviors that could threaten valuable social relationships.

This perspective also refines existing theories of patronage. Patronage is often understood primarily as an exchange of political loyalty for material resources or administrative benefits.[11,21] While that relationship remains important, the present analysis suggests that patronage functions within broader networks of trust and reciprocal obligation. Political stability therefore depends not simply upon material exchange but upon the social relationships through which obligations are created and maintained. Social liability provides the mechanism linking those relationships to political behavior.

Religion further illustrates the interaction between formal institutions and informal social organization. In both Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, Islamic institutions contribute to community cohesion, moral authority, and social trust while operating within regulatory frameworks established by the state.[24,35-39] Religious organizations therefore generate social capital while simultaneously reinforcing broader systems of political order. The political significance of religion lies not only in formal institutional regulation but also in its capacity to strengthen the informal networks through which social expectations are reproduced.

Although Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan differ in the degree of authoritarian control, the comparison suggests that both exhibit similar sociological processes. Variation exists primarily in the intensity of state regulation rather than in the underlying mechanisms linking social relationships to political stability. This finding indicates that the proposed framework may extend beyond these two cases and may prove useful for examining other authoritarian and hybrid political systems where family structures, patronage, and regulated religious institutions continue to shape political behavior.

The article does not argue that social capital invariably strengthens authoritarianism. Rather, it proposes that social capital is politically contingent. Under democratic institutional conditions, networks of trust may facilitate civic participation, collective action, and governmental accountability. Under authoritarian conditions, the same network structures may instead increase the social costs of dissent and reinforce political stability through obligations, reputational concerns, and reciprocal expectations. The institutional environment therefore shapes the political consequences of social relationships.

Future research should examine this proposition across a broader range of authoritarian and hybrid regimes. Comparative studies incorporating Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and other regions could evaluate whether similar relationships between social capital, social liability, and authoritarian resilience operate across different cultural and institutional settings. Network analysis, survey research, qualitative interviews, and mixed-method approaches would also allow more systematic evaluation of the mechanisms proposed here.

By integrating comparative politics, political sociology, and social network theory, this article advances a broader understanding of authoritarian resilience. Rather than treating informal social networks merely as background conditions, it demonstrates that they constitute an integral component of political order. Authoritarian stability is maintained not only through institutions that govern society from above but also through the ordinary social relationships that organize everyday life from within.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the social foundations of authoritarian resilience through a comparative analysis of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. Existing scholarship has largely explained authoritarian durability through coercive institutions, executive dominance, patronage, elite cohesion, and restrictions on political competition.[4,16,18,21,26,32] While these factors remain central to understanding authoritarian governance, they do not fully explain how political stability becomes embedded within everyday social life. This

article has argued that informal social networks constitute an additional mechanism through which authoritarian regimes reproduce political order.

The paper's principal theoretical contribution is the integration of **Social Capital** and **Social Liability** into the study of authoritarian resilience.[14,15] Rather than treating social capital as an inherently positive resource associated primarily with civic engagement and democratic participation, the article argues that its political consequences are contingent upon institutional context. Networks that generate trust, reciprocity, cooperation, and access to resources may also create obligations, dependencies, reputational concerns, and expectations of loyalty that discourage political dissent. Under authoritarian conditions, these complementary processes reinforce political stability by increasing the social costs of opposition.

The comparison of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan demonstrates that although the two political systems differ in the degree of political openness and administrative control, they share similar sociological mechanisms. Family relationships, patronage systems, religious communities, and other informal networks reinforce formal political institutions by embedding political authority within ordinary social interactions. Political compliance therefore emerges not only through state coercion but also through the reciprocal obligations that characterize everyday social relationships.

More broadly, the findings suggest that social capital should be understood as a **context-dependent political resource** rather than as an inherently democratic phenomenon. [5,6,20,28,29] In democratic institutional settings, social capital frequently facilitates civic participation, voluntary association, and collective action. In authoritarian environments, however, the same network structures may reinforce political stability by increasing the reputational, social, and economic costs associated with dissent. Understanding this variation contributes to broader debates concerning authoritarian resilience, informal institutions, and political sociology.

The concept of **Social Liability** offers a framework for explaining this transformation. It highlights how informal obligations generated through trusted social relationships can become politically consequential without requiring continuous state intervention. This perspective complements rather than replaces institutional explanations of authoritarianism by demonstrating how formal political authority and informal systems of social organization operate together to sustain regime stability.

Although the analysis has focused on Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, the theoretical framework has broader comparative implications. Future research should evaluate whether similar interactions between social capital, social liability, and authoritarian resilience operate in other post-Soviet republics, Middle Eastern states, African authoritarian regimes, and hybrid political systems. Comparative qualitative research, survey analysis, and social network methods may further refine and test the propositions advanced here.

Taken together, these findings suggest that authoritarian resilience is sustained not only through institutions that govern society from above but also through the social relationships that organize everyday life from within. Recognizing this interaction broadens existing theories of authoritarian governance and demonstrates that understanding political stability requires greater attention to the sociological foundations of state authority.

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