

Boundary Marking: Censorship and Self-censorship in China and Singapore

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Abstract

In most authoritarian countries, fear of repression and government reprisal makes self-censorship a necessary feature of public discourse. Yet, while the ubiquity of self-censorship is well established, the means by which it is induced are not. At times, there are sharp red lines demarcating what can and cannot be discussed. At others, limits on discourse are left vague or undefined. Why are the limits on some topics clearly marked but ambiguous on others? Likewise, how do perceptions about what is ‘out of bounds’ impact public discourse? This paper clarifies the concept of self-censorship by introducing a three-tier typology of boundary zones that contemporary autocracies impose on public discourse. It also describes three mechanisms through which autocracies communicate and signal to the public these boundary zones. We illustrate these typologies and communication mechanisms through a qualitative review of authoritarian limits on three crucial political topics — corruption, foreign policy, and the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities — in two prominent but institutionally distinct authoritarian information environments: China and Singapore.

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1 Introduction

With the exception of a few isolated autocracies,¹ contemporary authoritarian systems operate in increasingly open and dynamic information environments. Whether it be social or traditional media, netizen or journalist, the potential for anti-regime criticism, and the possibility that such criticism snowballs in into mass dissent is simply far greater than at any point in the past (Gainous et al. 2018; Reuter and Szakonyi 2015; Tucker 2007). In response, modern authoritarian states must devise new ways of controlling and censoring discourse (Svolik 2012). At the same time, however, authoritarian states are keen not to stifle discourse entirely, as they recognize both the informational (Lorentzen 2014) and economic (Brady 2008) gains from open discourse and rapid information flow. Likewise, societal actors are often quick to find ways around state imposed constraints (Xu and Albert 2014). As a result, incumbent regimes and their critics are in a constant contest, negotiating, probing, breaching, backtracking, and realigning the contours of civil discourse and information flow (Deibert et al. 2012; Ruijgrok 2017).

Yet, the intensity and frequency of this overt contest obscures a deeper, more pernicious form of discourse suppression, that resulting from self-censorship, which occurs anytime an individual or organization chooses not to reveal their political opinions and preferences, whether it be on a survey, on social media and print, or even in daily conversation. As such, self-censorship bears strong parallel with Kuran’s theory of “preference falsification,” whereby an individual’s public statements diverge from their private preferences. When it comes to self-censorship, however, individuals not only temper their public statements, they avoid certain topics entirely, whether in public or in private (Gomez 2000). For instance, recent scholarship on the behavior of academics and publishers reveals that they often self-censor, even when they face no direct pressure to do so (Chestnut Greitens and Truex 2018). Which such sprawling influence, it is unsurprising that authoritarian regimes would seek to harness and calibrate a culture of self-censorship (Link 2002).

Broadly applicable concepts can, unfortunately, can be hard to work with analytically. Is politically motivated self-censorship different from that induced by social pressure? Does self-censorship in an authoritarian setting differ from self-censorship in a liberal one, where voice is legally and institutionally protected? In this paper, we theorize self-censorship as an individual choice in response to an uncertain risk of sanction. This formulation is applicable to either a political or social setting; a liberal or an authoritarian one. For the purposes of this paper, we apply it to the case of political expression under authoritarianism, where a single actor—the regime—wields power to both define limits on expression and repress those who cross

¹North Korea and Cuba being to of the most notable examples.

them. If, for example, a journalist does not publish a story involving a subject that the regime has marked as being clearly off limits, they are not self-censoring insofar as that topic was known to be out of bounds with certainty. However, if that same journalist avoids a topic simply because it *might* be off limits, they are self-censoring insofar as their sensitivity is perceived in response to uncertainty.

But what are the determinants of uncertainty, both real and perceived? While there is no finite set of variables that one could offer in response to this question, suffice it to say that those in positions of power enjoy a preponderance of influence in not only setting up and policing boundaries of discourse, but also in calibrating levels of uncertainty about where these limits are located. Specifically, we distinguish between three types of discourse boundaries. The first involves marking out *red* zones for topics that are overtly sensitive. *Red* zones leave little uncertainty about repression, resulting in predictably high levels of self-censorship that is observationally difficult to distinguish from censorship.² The second involves carving out *safe* zones. These boundaries clearly locate safe topics that citizens are free to express their political opinions on. There is low uncertainty about the low probability of repression in *safe* zones. The third concerns cultivating *gray* zones, a blurred middle ground encompassing topics which are known to be sensitive but for which the probability of repression is perceived with high uncertainty. In addition, we explore three different types of autocratic communication signaling discourse boundaries, and consider how these types of autocratic communications are partially conditioned by institutions and repressive capacity.

Empirically, we explore our argument through case studies of public discourse on sensitive topics in two prominent authoritarian regimes, China and Singapore. Unsurprisingly, the case studies show that different types of autocratic regimes employ and communicate the boundaries of expression uniquely on different topics, resulting in varying propensities for self-censorship. Corruption is a no-go red zone in Singapore, but a gray one in China. Foreign policy and human rights are a no-go in China, but are generally safe to discuss in Singapore. Discussions about the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities is a clear red zone in China, but a gray one in Singapore.

We hope to make several contributions in this paper. First, by clarifying self-censorship from a behavioral perspective, we hope to forestall concept stretching in future research. Our definition reveals that not all forms of self-censorship are truly self-imposed. Relatedly, our definition suggests that a culture of self-censorship cannot be reduced to preference falsification, as it not only biases public opinion but also delimits the range of topics explored in public discourse. Empirically, our study sheds light on how contemporary

²Our logic similar to equivalence of threat of force and use of force in the IR literature. For instance, we need not observe the use of nuclear weapons in order to estimate their coercive force.

authoritarian regimes balance between the twin imperatives of procuring information while tempering dissent. In particular, we show how patterns of self-censorship help authoritarian regimes tread the line between free-all-criticism on the one hand, and a completely silent citizenry on the other.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. We begin by introducing the three boundaries for everyday political discourse, elaborating on their most significant conceptual and theoretical differences. We then explicate the variety of institutional mechanisms through which autocratic governments communicate these boundaries, taking care to highlight variation in autocratic control over the mass media, in particular. Finally, we describe how the Singaporean and Chinese governments empirically establish the grey, red, and safe boundary spaces in the topical areas of corruption, foreign policy, and the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities. A short conclusion summarizes this article’s most salient insights and suggests potential future research agendas.

2 Boundaries for Political Expression

The limits on free expression in China and Singapore are most easily described through the metaphor of sport. In Singapore, people refer to government restrictions on political expression as “out-of-bound markers” or “OB markers” for short (Cheong 2013; George 2000; Tan and Mahizhnan 2008), a golfing terminology, whereby colored flags designate areas considered to be out of bounds. In China, the sport of reference is table tennis—the bounds represented by the white lines on the “edge” of the court (Jernow 1994; Stern and O’Brien 2012).

In both instances, should the player’s ball find itself outside the limits, players lose points or face possible disqualification. Similarly, if journalists, opinion makers, or civilians cross those bounds of public discourse, they may be professionally ostracized or face legal prosecution. Importantly, however, playing near the edge can have its advantages. Here tennis is the more apt analogy, where hitting a ball as close to the edge as possible is a great way to get it past your opponent. Likewise, skirting the boundaries of political expression in a repressive authoritarian system can make the difference between media stardom and a lengthy prison sentence. Hence, the cat and mouse game played by Chinese journalists and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is commonly referred to as a game of “edge-ball” (*da ca bian qiu*) (He 2008; Stern and O’Brien 2012).³

³The root of this terminology comes from the story of famed editor who built the *World Economic Herald* into the most incisive media outlet in China during the 1980s, by skillfully navigating the boundaries of sensitive topics Jernow (1994, pp. 14-19).

The sporting metaphor, though vivid and darkly amusing, is in some respects poorly-suited to convey the nuance of discourse suppression in authoritarian settings. In particular, the notion that the boundaries on political expression are clearly marked, whether as lines on a court or flags planted on the golf course, belies the fact that the limits on expression are rarely explicit, and hardly ever written down. Instead, the public must approximate these bounds from what they can glean from the statements of leaders, propaganda slogans, and the pages of the state-run press. Perry Link likens this ambiguity to a “giant anaconda wrapped around the chandelier;” ready to pounce at anytime but with little indication as to when or even why. Similarly, in *Fog of Censorship*, He Qinglian underscores precisely this ambiguity, not the censors themselves, as the prime impediment to free expression in China. Indeed, in both Singapore and China, journalists, scholars, and lawyers have repeatedly called upon authorities to provide a clear map of where markers lie. Unsurprisingly, authorities in both countries have proven reluctant to do so.

To better understand the nuance of boundaries, how they are drawn, and how they are perceived, we introduce a three-tier typology of the boundary spaces restricting mass political expression in autocratic regimes. First, and consistent with the sporting metaphors, authoritarian regimes oftentimes mark off red no-go zones for certain topics that are strictly closed for political discussion. These are topics that the authorities have deemed vital for political legitimacy, and are deeply invested in shielding from criticism. When individuals breach the bright red lines demarcating these zones, by casting aspersions on or criticizing the government, there is a high probability of state-sponsored repression. This can include arbitrary arrest by the police, or legal harassment with investigations, criminal charges, eventual prosecution, and incarceration. The long, drawn-out process of a humiliating criminal trial is oftentimes favored for dealing with insiders who turn against the regime (Shen-Bayh 2018). When faced with an almost certainty for repression, a high degree of self-censorship among the citizenry is par for the course.

Nevertheless, autocratic regimes do not always restrict all forms of political discussion, all the time. There are particular sets of topics that reside in clear safe zones. They constitute the second type of boundary space of political discourse. Indeed, autocratic governments may even be interested in encouraging discussion on these topics because they can gain information about public dissatisfaction and respond accordingly (Gueorguiev and Malesky 2019; Lorentzen 2013). In these zones, it is widely recognized that citizens are very unlikely to encounter repression, no matter the criticism directed towards the government. Thus, self-censorship is likely to be low.

In between red and safe, there exists an undefined gray zone, bounded by blurred lines. The relationship between gray zones and self-censorship is less intuitive than red or safe zones. While a general relaxing of autocratic controls from red to grey can induce a greater volume of political expression on a given topic, the

ambiguity of repression can also encourage risk-averse individuals to self-censor because they are uncertain of the consequences of exercising their freedom of speech (Gueorguiev et al. 2018). Correspondingly, whether individuals are risk-averse or risk-taking is highly dependent on individual attributes, such as one’s social status, and whether state-initiated repression for vocalizing dissent is a salient issue in the public’s mind (Ong 2019). Regardless, we can expect that the equilibrium level of self-censorship for topics with blurred lines is likely to be higher than safe zone topics, but lower than topics with red lines.

Table 1: Summary of Boundary Spaces

Boundary Space	Boundary Markers	Repression Probability	Repression Uncertainty	Level of Self-Censorship
Red zones	Bright red no-go lines	High	Low	High
Gray zones	Ambiguous blurred lines	Ambiguous	High	Medium
Safe zones	No restrictions	Low	Low	Low

From the perspective of the regime, establishing such a gradation of boundary spaces offers instrumental advantages, akin to those attributed to selective censorship (King et al. 2013). For instance, carving out *safe* zones gives the regime unfiltered access to public sentiment (Gueorguiev and Malesky 2019). Alternatively, cultivating ambiguity in *gray* zones encourages self-censorship from a generally risk-averse public (Gueorguiev et al. 2018; Ong 2019). Finally, marking out *red* zones insures that certain topics are avoided entirely (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011). To reap the rewards of self-censorship, therefore, the regime can easily assign different boundary spaces to different topics of interest.

3 Communicating Boundaries

In this section, we review the ways in which the zones and boundaries for public discourse are communicated by autocratic regimes and inferred by the mass public. As Table 1 implies, the regime can influence the boundary space along two dimensions. First, it can signal to the public and media representatives the relevant topics that invite certain repression, those that are safe, while leaving undefined those that reside in the foggy middle. Second, the regime can also increase or decrease the level of uncertainty over repression. To understand how these signals are communicated, we focus our inquiry on the modes of communication. In general, we can distinguish between three types: (1) public or private announcements, (2) passing legal

regulations, and (3) guided publication. Finally, we consider how institutional structure and capacity help explain the ways by which authoritarian regimes tailor and communicate boundaries.

Before we proceed, it is important to first stress that the state’s ability to cast topics into one zone or another is partially constrained by its repressive capacity and institutional architecture—factors with important implication for self-censorship behavior. First, a regime’s ability to cast items in the “red” is contingent on its capacity to credibly and forcibly enforce that zone. For instance, despite President Putin’s desire to control the media in Russia, his administration has been relatively impotent in preventing critics, like Alexei Navalny, from posting corruption accusations and documentaries on social media and YouTube, both of which are readily available in the country. As a result, discussions of corruption often make it into the mainstream press as well. Instead, repression against critical discourse in Russia is often outsourced and indiscriminate (Taylor 2011), and thus consistent with gray zone uncertainty. If Putin’s censors wanted to enforce a bright red line on such criticism, they would have to either shut off the internet or create an internal Russian Intranet, options that are being readily explored (Soldatov 2019).

This is not to say that high repression capacity states always deploy red zone censorship. Regimes with the capacity to fully enforce red zones likely have the ability to coerce and silence selectively and surgically. Armed with such capabilities, a powerful information control apparatus can increase the risk of repression without placing topics in the *red* zone, thereby inducing self-censorship without giving up the illusion of openness (Gueorguiev et al. 2018). The implication here is that the range of topics which fall into the “gray” zone could be a function of limited capacity or deliberate obfuscation by a surgically repressive state. In both instances, the observable implication is greater levels of self-censorship at the aggregate level, but with somewhat different expectations concerning individual provocateurs who can test the boundaries in the former, but not the latter. We return to this issue when we explore censorship patterns within China and Singapore in the case study section.

Like repression capacity, legal-rational institutions also help parameterize the state’s ability to cast topics into one category or another. Generally speaking, strong legal-rational institutions ought to reduce uncertainty outright, by delineating not only the boundaries of protected speech, but also the scope and process by which the state can exercise repression. Even when the state tries to cloud its actions in ambiguity by referencing opaque laws and statutes to justify their actions, such as a “state’s secrets” or “anti-sedition,” a strong legal-rational foundation offers members of the public and the media mechanisms for appeal and clarification that reduce uncertainty over time. By contrast, when legal-rational institutions are weak and pliant, ambiguity lingers as topics shift from red to safe and back again without clear indication as for how and why. As a result, authoritarian states that are keen on advancing legal-rational institutions for other,

often economic motives, are careful to hobble their applicability to the issue of speech and censorship. In the case study section, we point to examples of legislative foot-dragging and forced disappearances as two possible maneuvers.

3.1 Modes of Communication: Announcement

The simplest and most common way to convey that certain topics are off limits or permissible for political discussion is to announce it. Announcements can be made either in public or in private, either proactively or in response to the actions of specific organizations or individuals. At times, public announcements about the limits of political criticism may be prompted by an activist breaching a particular boundary. At other times, an over-eager journalist asking inconvenient questions on specific topics may prompt private declarations within a media organization by the autocracy. In either case, the key objective is for an autocrat to be crystal clear in signaling the high probability of repression if further criticisms continue.

When there are clear “red” lines that the regime does not want crossed, they can make it abundantly clear that such topics are not open to negotiation. For instance, it is widely known that discussion of separatist activities and government operations in Darfur, the Blue Nile and South Kordofan regions of Sudan are not to be approached by the domestic media, and that those who do will be promptly arrested. Likewise, the brutal murder of Jamal Khasjoggi inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul is widely seen as a royal message that personal attacks on the Saudi Crown Prince by other Saudi’s will not be tolerated. Alternatively, if there is a topic that the regime would like debated and discussed in the open, it can place it in the safe zone by formally soliciting public input, or what was called “prompted criticism” during the Soviet-era (Fitzpatrick 1996; Inkeles and Geiger 1953).

These examples, however, concern relatively general and slow moving targets. In the age of 24hr news cycles and social media, authoritarian censors must be far more nimble. In China, for instance, propaganda authorities are said to issue daily, sometimes hourly, guidance on sensitive topics (Miller 2018; Stern and O’Brien 2012; Zhao and Wusan 2007, p. 307). As it happens, these directives are often leaked and outside organizations, like the *China Digital Times*, has archived them for transparency. Figure 1 illustrates 9000 of these topics issued between 2011 and 2013, with larger font signifying the frequency with which a topic was highlighted as sensitive. The term “加油” (*jia you*) refers to increases in gas prices, “法拉利” (*falali*) refers to a deadly car accident involving a Ferrari carrying the son of prominent Chinese politician, “茉莉花” is the Chinese term for the “Jasmine” revolution movement. More recent announcements include guidance on how to handle tweets from American President Donald Trump.

without hyping,’ ‘publish but under small headlines,’ ‘only on back pages,’ ‘close the comment boxes,’ and ‘downplay as time passes.’⁵ Likewise, although the Chinese state has coercive capacity at the central level, sub-national governments and authorities have their own, which can and often are activated against critical voices (Ong 2018). In conjunction, discretion in how information is controlled and how criticism is repressed serves to increase levels of uncertainty in the Chinese case (He 2008).

3.2 Modes of Communication: Regulations

An alternative to announcements is to pass legal provisions to demarcate *red zones* that restrict the freedom of speech. For instance, in Russia a 2013 regulation called the “Lugovoi Law” authorizes the prosecutor general or his deputies to immediately block access to media that “disseminates calls for mass riots, extremist activities, or participation in unsanctioned mass public events.”⁶ It should be noted, that a similar prohibition on the discussion of collective action events operates in China, though there is no obvious legal regulation explaining that this is the case (King et al. 2013, 2014). Legal announcements can also signal that a topic has entered the *safe* safe zone for discussion. For instance, policymakers can specify issues on which the regime is interested in soliciting public feedback as part of a legal policy drafting process. One prominent example of this is the practice of Notice and Comment consultation in China (Gueorguiev and Malesky 2019; Truex 2014), a practice we elaborate on in the next section.

Although legal provisions are most useful in marking off *red zones*, they can be instrumental in prosecuting *gray zone* tactics as well. For instance, legislation passed by a regime-controlled legislature is likely to be vaguely worded. The ambiguity in the precision of what constitutes an offence when critical speech is made gives authorities the discretion to decide who and when to target for prosecution and repression. In so doing, autocracies signal to the masses that the regime considers particular topics of political discussion to be not so sensitive as to impose a blanket ban on the topic, but sensitive enough that they retain the prerogative to shut down critical speech at any time if necessary.

Insofar as legally sanctioned restrictions and repression on political speech involve questions of law, specialized regulatory agencies are delegated with the powers to write new legal regulations and to enforce those regulations. Singapore’s Info-communications Media Development Agency (IMDA), for example, regulates all political speech on the Internet via a license scheme and an Internet Code of Practice.⁷ If and when

⁵We know this thanks to Xiao Qiang and the work done by his organization, China Digital Times, to collect and organize censorship directives. For further discussion and source material, see (Xiao 2011).

⁶See: <http://398-fz.rkn.gov.ru/>

⁷See IMDA “Class License Registration for Internet content Providers” at <https://www.>

activists become too critical online, these agencies have the powers to order Internet Service Providers to restrict access and take down the critical speech. Of course, prosecutors in an autocratic regime's legal agencies also retain the powers and prerogative to target and harass critics of the government by invoking the law.

The degree to which authoritarian governments rely on regulation is contingent on both the strength of the legal system and enforcement capacity. Though these qualities may in most instances coincide with one another, they can at times function in opposition. For instance, a strong legal system inevitably makes boundaries clearer than an informal threat, even if a regulation is written with deliberate ambiguity in so far as it offers individuals the opportunity to use legal means for clarification. Singapore, for instance, enjoys strong legal institutions and media are governed under the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (NPPA). Though the act leaves ample room for discretion on the part of authorities, the legal process offers individuals opportunities for recourse, which have at times been used to force the government to clarify why certain individuals were prosecuted and how. This is also perhaps why China, with the largest media market in the world, lacks a press law outright.⁸

3.3 Modes of Communication: Guided Publication

The third mode of communication occurs through guided publication. This mode of communication is intimately tied to uncertainty. Put simply, when there is uncertainty about the boundaries to expression and zones of repression, individuals and organizations naturally look for cues from those they see as privy to those limits and gradations.

In authoritarian regimes, the privilege of knowing the boundaries naturally rests with those in greatest proximity to those in power. In the case of media, for instance, it is not uncommon, for example, that authoritarian governments own stakes in the mass media organizations and to assign top personnel within those organizations. Singapore's top two media organizations - Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) and MediaCorp - are indirectly own by the government through government-linked corporations (Cheong 2013; George 2012; Rajah 2012; Tey 2008). In China, the extent of government control is both more pervasive and more nuanced, as practically all broadcast and print media must be licensed under a state-affiliated press, though these associations, like that of a distant cousin's, can be many steps removed. When an association is clear,

mda.gov.sg/regulations-licensing-and-consultations/licensing/licences/class-licence-scheme/class-licence-registration-for-internet-content-providers, last accessed March 13, 2019.

⁸A Chinese press law has been in draft for decades, but public proposal has been released.

however, as in the case of the Straits Times in Singapore or the People's Daily in China, the topic choices of such outlets serves as a barometer for all the rest.

In the Chinese case, for instance, provocative outlets like Caixin have boundary pushing stories ready and waiting, such that if the official press mentions a topic, they pounce on it with extensive and in-depth investigative journalism. The thinking, according to Caixin editor Hu Shuli, is that the official press have a better sense of the boundaries, and that they would not go near a topic if it was indeed in the red. From that perspective, any reference in the official press represents an opportunity.⁹

Importantly, in this type of environment, access to clear and timely guidance can be a valuable asset. In particular, in a media market that is sterile and rife with propaganda, investigative journalism, inside scoops, and pointed opinion sells and gets re-posted. For those on the inside, guidance on how to approach such matters often comes in the form of internal media (Dimitrov 2017). It can also come through a daily phone call, along with follow-ups if necessary).¹⁰ By contrast, those on the periphery are left to glean what they can from the official media's coverage, general instructions (typically delivered by email to the editor's desk), or simply through their own prior experiences (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011, p. 445).

Different mediums, of course, represent vastly different information control challenges and the challenge of guiding content on traditional print, radio, and television may seem like a cakewalk when juxtaposed against the chaos of social media. The Chinese state's management style in the latter case has, unsurprisingly, been much more proactive. As of 2017, for instance, government departments and officials had set up over 160,000 social media accounts, each dedicated to steering the conversation within their respective jurisdictions.¹¹ The government has also tried to tilt the playing field by only allowing 'official' accounts, on viral social networking hosts like WeChat, to disseminate public forum content.¹² Similarly, in Singapore, the PAP has invested significantly in its online social media communications. Most governments ministers have their own personal Facebook and Instagram accounts where they issue and share official and non-official statements. The government also has a "Factually" website, where it puts up articles specifying the official position on controversial topics, thus guiding political discourse on those topics.¹³

⁹See Osnos 2009, also author's discussion with Hu Shuli, July 2009.

¹⁰Corresponding author's discussion with Xiao Qiang, director of China Digital Times.

¹¹See: <https://goo.gl/SfWya3>.

¹²See: <https://goo.gl/MQCcBP>.

¹³Last accessed on April 11, 2019 at <https://www.gov.sg/factually>.

4 Case studies

To further illustrate the three categories of boundary zones and the three forms of communicating those boundaries outlined in the previous sections, we conduct a qualitative review of sensitive subject areas in China and Singapore which fall loosely into “red zone”, “safe zone” and “gray zone” boundary spaces. Of specific focus to our study is how the authorities in both countries signal the nature of boundaries, as well as how journalists, publishers and the mass public react to them. Table 2 below summarizes the topics and the respective zones which they are allocated to in the two countries. Recall that our primary dependent variable of interest is self-censorship - a decision by citizens to not express their political opinions and preferences. We should expect citizens’ propensity to express their political views correspond to the boundary spaces as summarized in Table 1.

Before proceeding, a methodological note on the comparison between Singapore and China is in order. Despite the obvious differences in size between the two countries - Singapore has 5.6 million people squeezed in some 700 square kilometers of land, while China has about 1.3 billion people spread across almost 10 million square kilometers - political scientists have nevertheless sought to compare and contrast their robust, autocratic political systems (Ho 2018; Liu and Wang 2018; Ortmann and Thompson 2018). Critically, for us, both countries are broadly described as authoritarian states, with highly censored public discourse environments. That said, the state and legal infrastructure in both countries offers useful variation for our theory. Singapore has a highly centralized bureaucracy developed on a legal-rational principles (Chong 2010; Rajah 2012). China, in contrast, has a highly complex and decentralized bureaucracy (Xu 2011), and censorship regime (Miller 2018). Differences in bureaucratic organization between the two countries should engender variation in how boundaries and repression for political expression are communicated, and how citizens perceive those signals. We should expect that Singapore adopt a more legal-rational approach for demarcating boundaries and imposing repression for everyday discourse, while China resorts to more discretionary and arbitrary forms of announcements and arrest.

4.1 Corruption

Corruption is ubiquitous across regime types and across countries at various stages of development. In autocratic regimes, growing corruption is a particularly destructive development. It undermines citizen trust in the regime, corrodes state infrastructural power, and precipitates regime collapse. Autocracies therefore seek various means to stem and reduce corruption, such as creating and empowering independent anti-corruption agencies, encouraging citizens feedback on corruption, increasing transparency on bureaucratic

activities, and raising the salaries of public officials to reduce the incentives for corruption.

In China, the Chinese Communist Party actively encourages citizens to report on corrupt activities and officials (Pan and Chen 2018). Even as early as the 1990s, the Chinese government established whistle-blower protection statutes, to encourage citizens to report on corruption, and in 2013, the Central Disciplinary Inspection Commission (CDIC) established a centralized, online reporting platform where individuals could submit anonymous tip-offs.¹⁴ Seen from this perspective, the Chinese stance on political discourse on corruption might be seen as a “safe zone” for citizens and journalist. At the same time, certain types of corruption-related criticism has been forcefully suppressed. In particular, discussion of official’s wealth and family relations has been routinely punished, and some outlets have lost their license to circulate content in the Chinese market for challenging those limits.¹⁵ Moreover, because of China’s decentralized coercion environment, local officials and state-affiliated enterprises have retaliated against critical voices.¹⁶ As a result, reporting on corruption in China continues to be a high risk affair, with journalists typically waiting on cues from the CDIC, which provides daily reports on new investigations, before publishing their exposes.

Surprisingly, the Singaporean perspective on corruption is quite different. Although the authorities maintain a strict anti-corruption stance similar to the Chinese, it adopts a red boundary zone position on any discussion surrounding corruption. Beyond factual reporting covering corruption trials in the courts or based on government statements, very little further discussions on corrupt activities is tolerated. Moreover, government repression over the breaching of the red lines has typically taken the legal-rational route. Either the government prosecutes the perpetrator under some existing law, or members of the government undertake defamation suits against the offender.

Consider two very recent episodes of state-initiated prosecution of corruption allegations, for example. In the first case, The Online Citizen (TOC), an online news website, published a letter in September 2018 from one of its readers alleging “corruption at the highest echelons of government.” Subsequently, in December 2018, the TOC editor and author of the letter was charged with criminal defamation.¹⁸ The government declared that the charges were necessary because “the allegations go to the core of the integrity and reputation of leaders and the Government, and this is something that we cannot take lightly.”¹⁹

¹⁴see: <http://tiny.cc/xhgahy>

¹⁵For instance, see the cases of the Bloomberg and the New York Times.

¹⁶For instance, in July of 2013, Li Jianxin, an anti-corruption vigilante, was knifed and doused with sulfuric acid in his native Huiyang, an coastal district China’s southern Guangdong province, after reporting on corruption by local officials and a prominent family in Huiyang.¹⁷

¹⁸See “TOC editor and author of article about MP Seah Kian Peng to be charged with criminal defamation.” The Straits Times. December 12, 2018. Last accessed on January 30, 2019 at <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/toc-editor-and-author-of-article-about-mp-seah-kian-peng-to-be-charged-with-criminal>.

¹⁹“Why authorities’ actions are necessary: Amrin.” The Straits Times. December 13, 2018. Last accessed on January 30,

Similarly, in the second case, a now defunct news website, The States Times Review, published an article alleging that the Singapore government and the Prime Minister were targets of investigation in relation to the 1MDB scandal that had emerged in neighbouring Malaysia in 2015. The government quickly worked with Singaporean internet service providers to block the website and article from access and also issued a “take-down order” to the website to remove the article because it “undermined public confidence in the integrity of the Singapore Government and is objectionable on grounds of public interest.”²⁰ Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong himself also began a defamation lawsuit against a prominent blogger Leong Sze Hian. The lawsuit alleged that Leong defamed the Prime Minister by linking and sharing the article on his personal Facebook page, even though Leong shared it without any additional commentary.²¹ Clearly, any hint of alleged government corruption is out-of-bounds for political discussion.

Why the Chinese and Singaporean authorities would approach political expression surrounding corruption so differently deserves some further attention. The differences may be due to the varying stages of development in which the respective dominant parties find themselves. In Singapore, the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) prides itself on being non-corrupt. Indeed, the country is one of the least corrupt in the world, according to Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index.²² In fact, the Singaporean government justifies paying its Ministers and civil servants the highest public sector salaries in the world by claiming that high salaries deter corruption. Thus, any insinuation that any members of the government are corrupt quickly erode the very bases of legitimacy that underpin PAP’s dominance.

4.2 Foreign Policy

Autocracies are not only invested in managing political expression around domestic topics closely tied to their governing legitimacy. They are also frequently committed to managing mass political discussion and protests surrounding foreign policies in order to achieve foreign policy objectives (Weeks 2008; Weiss 2014). For instance, recent research suggest that autocracies can use local media outlets to disseminate propaganda to shape mass public opinion (Wang and Womack 2019). To be sure, not all autocracies adopt

2019 at <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/why-authorities-actions-are-necessary-amrin>.

²⁰“States Times Review refuses to take down article linking PM Lee with 1MDB” ChannelNewsAsia. November 10, 2018. Last accessed January 30, 2019 at <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/states-times-review-refuses-remove-article-pm-lee-1mdb-10912976>.

²¹“Blogger Leong Sze Hian fights back against Singapore PM Lee Hsien Loong’s libel suit, wins support from leader’s brother Lee Hsien Yang.” South China Morning Post. December 27, 2018. Last accessed on January 30, 2019 at <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/2179689/singaporean-blogger-fights-back-against-prime-ministers>.

²²“Singapore rises to third place in annual ranking of least corrupt countries” The Straits Times. Jan 29, 2019. Last accessed on March 14, 2019 at <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapore-rises-to-third-place-in-annual-ranking-of-least-corrupt-countries-global-study>.

the same approach in their international relations (Weeks 2014). The Singapore and Chinese authorities exhibit significant variation in utilizing their control over the mass media to impose subtly differences in boundary spaces for political discussion over foreign policy.

In Singapore, citizens, local newspapers and media organizations are free to report and debate about the country's foreign policies. The government does little to stifle reporting about the positions of Singapore's adversaries as well as its own positions. What it may do is to robustly rebut some views that it deems to be deviating from its own preferred and ideal points.²³ But differing views does not invite overt repression nor legal harassment from the authorities.

Consider Singapore's relations with its closest neighbour Malaysia. Since the return of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad as Malaysia's Prime Minister after his coalition's victory in May 2018, Singapore-Malaysia relations have once again soured. Multiple bilateral disputes have returned, including but not limited to disputes over airspace, territorial waters, a water provision agreement, and railway link construction. Despite these multiple disputes, however, the Singapore government has not sought to bind political expression and debate. Multiple news outlets freely report and discuss the intricacies of the arguments and counter-arguments of both countries. Mahathir's comments are frequently reported and discussed by the country's newspapers, while letters to the editor concerning relations of both countries continue to be published. There appears to be no instructions to curb bona-fide reporting and public discussions.

In contrast, discussion of foreign policy in China has traditionally been a red zone. Newspaper editors, for instance, are routinely warned not to reprint Trump's tweets on China, nor to over-analyze Xi Jinping's trips overseas. Of course, Xinhua carries an official version of China's foreign policy position, but the discussion typically ends there. The best explanation for why China's leaders are so allergic to foreign policy discourse is that they feel insecure domestically and vulnerable to nationalistic critiques (Shirk 2008). Indeed, some of China's foreign policies, like spending hundreds of billions in foreign investment and aid, might prove rather unpopular given that many parts of China remain underdeveloped and impoverished. Interestingly, however, we are starting to see some evolution with regard to foreign policy in China. Recently, for instance, we saw the Foreign Investment Law opened for public consultation. Before that, the Xi administration also sought public input when responding to tariffs imposed by the US. Such developments suggest that Chinese officials see some value in allowing public discussion on foreign policy matters, and that we might see more foreign

²³See Kishore Mahbubani's op-ed "Qatar: Big lessons from a small country." The Straits Times. July 1, 2017. Last accessed March 14, 2019 at <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/qatar-big-lessons-from-a-small-country>, as well as "Minister Shanmugam, diplomats Bilahari and Ong Keng Yong say Prof Mahbubani's view on Singapore's foreign policy 'flawed'." The Straits Times. July 2, 2017. Last accessed March 14, 2019 at <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/prof-kishore-mahbubanis-view-on-singapores-foreign-policy-deeply-flawed-ambassador-at>.

policy issues move into the grey zone, or even into temporary safe zones.

4.3 Treatment of Ethnic and Religious Minorities

Finally, given that both China and Singapore have significant ethnic and religious minorities, one would expect that autocracies in both regimes strictly control the discourse surrounding them. After all, minority agitators who allege government maltreatment can quickly snowball into substantial protests against regime. Yet we observe significant variation in discussing inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations across both countries.

In Singapore, ethnic Chinese are the ethnic majority, making up 74.3% of the local resident population.²⁴ Ethnic Malays constitute 13.4% of the local resident population, while ethnic Indians are just over 9%. The latest available statistics also reveal that nearly 44% of all Singapore residents profess believing in Buddhism/Taoism, about 19% follow Christianity and the same number have no religion, while 14% follow Islam and 5% follow Hinduism.²⁵ Given this kaleidoscope of ethnicities and religions squeezed into an island only about 5% of the area of metropolitan Los Angeles, the authorities recognize that inter-ethnic and inter-religious friction and conflict are inevitable. They have thus sought to implement and institutionalize numerous policies to preserve societal peace and harmony, such as the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) in public housing estates.²⁶ In particular, the EIP mandates that no ethnic group can exceed their stipulated proportions in each public housing block and neighbourhood, thus eliminating ethnic enclaves throughout the country.

Nevertheless, the Singaporean government also recognizes that controversial discussions and criticisms concerning these policies may arise from time to time, especially when they attempt to change some of these policies. When Singapore sought to change the institution of the elected Presidency to specifically reserve the position for ethnic minority candidates, for example, there was an uproar.²⁷ Many Singaporeans disagreed with the government's approach and criticized the government severely.²⁸ Because implementing

²⁴See "Table A1.3 Singapore Residents by Age Group, Ethnic Group, and Sex, June 2018" in Population Trends 2018. Department of Statistics Singapore. Last accessed April 11, 2019 at <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/population/population2018.pdf>.

²⁵See "Religion Among Age 15 Years and Over." in Highlights of GHS2015. Department of Statistics Singapore. Last accessed April 11, 2019 at https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/visualising_data/infographics/ghs/highlights-of-ghs2015.pdf.

²⁶"Ethnic Integration Policy is Implemented." National Library HistorySG. Last accessed April 11, 2019 at <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/d8fea656-d86e-4658-9509-974225951607>.

²⁷"How Singapore elected a president without a vote." CNN. Last accessed on April 11, 2019 at <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/11/asia/singapore-race-presidential-election/index.html>.

²⁸"Reserved presidential election was the right thing to do: PM Lee Hsien Loong." The Straits Times. Last accessed April 11, 2019 at <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/reserved-presidential-election-was-right-thing-to-do-said-pm-lee-hsien-loong>.

a *red* boundary zone policy on discussions surrounding inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations is nearly impossible in a diverse any tiny city-state, and also not in the self-interest of the regime, the government has generally allowed for discourse on the topic among the public.

Yet, a general policy of allowing discourse does not mean that citizens have complete freedom to criticize the government on this topic. Some Singaporeans who have accused the government of bias against the ethnic Malay or Indian minority have faced private or public rebukes and professional sanctions for their comments.²⁹ A most recent case involved Sangeetha Thanapal, a PhD student in Australia who coined the term “Chinese privilege” in the country. In a Facebook post in April 2018, Thanapal labelled Singapore a “terribly racist country” and a “Chinese supremacist state” among other claims.³⁰ When she returned to Singapore in January 2019, she was investigated and subsequently issued a “stern warning” by the police for “an offence of promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion or race” under Section 298A of the Penal Code.³¹ Materially, Thanapal faced no legal consequences under a “stern warning.” But the public manner in which she was investigated exemplifies punishment by example.

The vague catch-all phrasing of “promoting enmity” in Section 298A that the government has relied upon in this instance also succinctly demonstrates the high uncertainty and ambiguity in which critics encounter in this gray zone. Exactly what comment constitutes “promoting enmity” depends heavily on the sensitivity of the prosecutorial authorities. Furthermore, not only do they have to contend with the vagueness of any potential offense, they also encounter high uncertainty about the severity of the repressive consequences that they may have to suffer. The Attorney General’s Chambers has the discretion to simply issue a stern warning, as in Thanapal’s case, or prosecute the critic in court in which the judge may order a fine or imprisonment of up to three years. While theoretically those found guilty have the right of appeal, it is an arduous and draining process that few have the gumption for.

As a result these multiple ambiguities, self-censorship about the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities (*gray zone*) is typically higher than discussions about foreign policy (*safe zone*) but lower than that of corruption (*red zone*). Citizens are less likely to discuss the topic as compared to foreign policy, but more likely to talk about it as compared to corruption.

In China, discussion of ethnic issues, especially those that overlap with separatism, are bright red zones? That means, factual reporting only. No discussion. Indeed, the only time we observe much discussion of

²⁹SG1 Personal communication.

³⁰“Activist Sangeetha Thanapal receives stern warning from authorities after calling Singapore ‘a terribly racist country’” The Online Citizen. Last accessed April 11, 2019 at <https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2019/01/30/activist-sangeetha-thanapal-receives-stern-warning-from-authorities-after-calling-singapore-a-terribly-racist-country/>.

³¹“Police warn activist over racist remarks.” The Straits Times. January 30, 2019.

issues related to ethnicity is during the annual legislative sessions, when symbolic representation of ethnic religious minorities is put on full display. These discussions, however, are most focused on how the regime's policies are helping minority regions grow and develop. No mention is given to repressive policies, such as the widespread use of mandatory education and internment camps for China's Muslim, Uighur population. Information on these topics instead comes from foreign press, relying on unnamed sources of satellite images. Likewise, there is little discussion over the resources devoted to developing minority communities, or the quota's in place for helping minority students enter universities, both of which might be criticized by the Han majority. Instead, the handling of ethnic and religious minorities in China occurs in the red zone. When needed, the regime has enforced this red-zone through blunt measures, such as cauterizing internet access to Xinjiang's internet following ethnic riots in 2009. Today, it relies on extensive surveillance and tracking of religious groups and any individuals who discuss matters of religion. In order to avoid having to clarify why and how critical voices are silenced, the state has taken to disappearing lawyers and journalists who speak out on this issue.

The variation in regime attitudes towards discourse on ethnic and religious minorities may be attributed to their respective histories as well as geographical size. The Singapore government has widely acknowledged that differing ideological orientations towards how to manage race relations was the key reason behind its independence from neighbouring Malaysia. Whereas the Malaysians wanted a Malay-dominated political system, Singapore insisted on a race-neutral meritocracy (Lau 1998; Sophe 1974). Close contact among people of different faiths and ethnicities in a tiny island also inevitably creates controversies from time to time, which cannot be simply shut down or ring-fenced. In China, however, the vast expanse of geographical territory and the outward placement of religious and minority groups overlaps with issues of sovereignty and separatism. As such the regime, is unwilling to tolerate any risk and therefore any critical discourse. Moreover, the fact that China is over 90 percent Han Chinese means that the broader population is generally willing to look the other way on these issues.

5 Concluding Discussion

In April 1, 2019, the Singapore Government introduced the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill (POFMA).³² The new legislation would classify any statement as a false statement if it was "false or misleading, whether wholly or in part, and whether on its own or in the context in which

³²Last accessed on April 11, 2019 at <https://www.parliament.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/protection-from-online-falsehoods-and-manipulation-bill10-2019.pdf>.

it appears.” Offenders found guilty of communicating false statements would then be subject to a fine not exceeding US\$35,000 or be liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 5 years, or both. As it is currently framed, POFMA would classify everything and anything mentioned on the Internet as belonging to a *gray* zone. Just like Section 298A of the Penal Code, because POFMA’s vague and “catch-all” formulation means that what statement is false or misleading will ultimately be decided by the government authorities, uncertainty over legal harassment and prosecution will be raised. Likewise, China has passed numerous statutes criminalizing the production or re-distribution of unverified information. Even more perniciously, China requires individuals to provide extensive personal information for engaging on the Chinese Internet, allowing the state to easily and surgically target individuals. Consequently, the primary effect of such regulatory moves will be to raise the level of self-censorship among the broader public. This is how modern autocracies entrench themselves and frustrate democratization.

As things stand at the time of writing, multiple countries around the world have already passed similarly vague legislation, or are at least following in Singapore’s footsteps. Places such as Vietnam, Turkey, and Poland are crafting new laws or are using colonial-era laws to silence dissent and raise levels of self-censorship, particularly on the Internet (Ong 2019). Having a crystal clear understanding of how self-censorship occurs and the means through which it is induced, regardless of whether it is via the legal route or other means, will equip political scientists with the necessary conceptual and theoretical tools to continue studying this important contemporary phenomena.

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