

Buying Time: Temporary Concessions & the Politics of Economic Reform in Authoritarian Regimes

How do authoritarian regimes implement unpopular economic reforms without triggering destabilizing unrest? Prevailing theories suggest that governments must either repress dissent, concede through meaningful policy reversals, or ignore unrest and risk backlash. I introduce the concept of temporary concessions: short-term, strategic policy reversals later re-implemented to demobilize protest while maintaining reform and regime stability. I argue that regimes deploy temporary concessions when repression is costly or externally constrained, and ignoring protest risks escalation. By disrupting protest momentum and introducing a collective action problem among protesters, temporary concessions make demobilization the individually rational choice. Evidence from subsidy reforms in Jordan and Egypt, combined with a nationally representative survey experiment, shows that these tactics defuse unrest even when citizens doubt their durability, challenging prevailing models of authoritarian responsiveness and resilience under economic liberalization.