

Researching Climate Obstruction in Authoritarian and non-Democratic Contexts

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Introduction

On 1 July 2025, the CSSN [Working Group on Climate Obstruction in Authoritarian and Non-Democratic States](#) held a special online meeting to discuss the challenges encountered when conducting research on climate obstruction in restrictive environments. In a wide-ranging discussion which drew on experiences in a large number of states (from Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Eurasia), invited speakers were asked to reflect on methodological and research design issues, data collection and fieldwork, and research ethics. Working group members also shared their insights, contributing to a rich exchange of practical lessons and recommendations. Given the challenges involved and the relative lack of research on climate obstruction in authoritarian and non-democratic regimes, the group agreed to share key highlights from the discussion. Our aim is to contribute to a broader conversation about how researchers can understand and research climate obstruction in challenging environments.

Understanding the dynamics of climate obstruction in authoritarian and non-democratic regimes requires examining both theoretical and practical considerations. Scholars working in these contexts often face risks that do not arise in more democratic settings, such as the potential for government surveillance, restrictions on fieldwork and access to information, and ethical dilemmas surrounding the safety of local collaborators and interviewees. This guide focuses on how the political context influences research design, data collection and analysis, and ethical decision-making.

The purpose of this guide is to share knowledge and assist scholars, policy experts, and activists who may want to undertake such research on climate obstruction in similar environments.

Why understanding climate obstruction in authoritarian and non-democratic contexts matters

Climate change is one of the most pressing global challenges of our time, but addressing it is far from straightforward, particularly in authoritarian and non-democratic regimes. While such regimes vary

significantly in their political and institutional forms, geographical vulnerabilities, economic priorities, social challenges, and levels of repression, they are commonly characterised by centralised control, limited political freedoms, and restricted civil society engagement. These features create distinct barriers to meaningful climate action. In many such contexts, these regimes share one key feature: a restrictive presence of the state in many aspects of life. This includes the formulation and implementation of climate policies and the space available for civil society action (or, in many cases, the lack thereof). Climate action in these regimes is often hindered by political interference, close connections between political and economic elites in the energy sector, suppression of dissent, and limited avenues for public participation and academic debate, all of which complicate efforts to address climate issues effectively. Understanding how authoritarian and non-democratic regimes contribute to or obstruct climate change mitigation and adaptation is essential for developing more effective national and international strategies.

Overarching themes

Ensuring participants' safety and ethical responsibilities

Problem: Ensuring the safety of research participants is a priority for any researcher working within restrictive political settings. This includes navigating politically sensitive topics (or knowing where the 'red lines' are in each context, see text box) which have the potential to impact on researcher and/or participant safety. These include political leadership, security issues, or sensitive topics such as fossil fuels and corruption (discussed in detail below.) In many cases, researchers reported that participants were willing to speak and have names recorded, but this raised some issues for researchers.

Some of the 'red lines' identified by researchers working on climate obstruction:

- Gender roles
- Top leadership personalities
- High-level corruption
- Military action
- Religion
- Economically sensitive industries
- Ethnically or linguistically diverse populations

The long timelines of academic publication could lead to problems, as it created uncertainty about whether the content would remain safe to publish later given that an authoritarian regime's level of and targets of repression may change over time. There are ethical considerations regarding the idea that participants may be free and willing to speak at the point of interview, but they lose that freedom after they have spoken; relevant particularly if there is a regime change.

Solutions:

- Anonymity and discretion are essential. Even structured interviews or informed consent procedures, standard in democratic contexts, were sometimes inappropriate or impossible, particularly when dealing with local officials or those unfamiliar with Western research norms.
- Verbal consent and indirect questioning were often used to reduce risks, and researchers stressed the importance of adapting methods in real-time to local expectations and sensitivities.
- Given time frames around academic publishing and the dynamic nature of many of the regimes in question where the situation can change quickly, it is often advisable where possible to go for maximum anonymity even if the participants are relaxed about disclosing their identities.

- Data triangulation can be a feasible option to not only reduce bias but also minimise the risk of identifying the respondent.
- University and funder ethics processes cannot be compromised, but there was a strong recognition of the need for these bodies to give greater consideration to researcher expertise and prior experience in the field, and where appropriate, adjust procedures to allow them to explain what adjustments could be made in non-democratic settings.
- connections between political and economic elites in the energy sector, suppression of dissent, and limited avenues for public participation and academic debate, all of which complicate efforts to address climate issues effectively. Understanding how authoritarian and non-democratic regimes contribute to or obstruct climate change mitigation and adaptation is essential for developing more effective national and international strategies.

Data safety

Problem: Related to the need to ensure participant safety was the challenge of securing the data itself. In some instances, storing sensitive data, especially on cloud servers or in jurisdictions vulnerable to surveillance, raised ethical questions for researchers. In addition, decisions around whether to record interviews, anonymisation of interviewees, data storage, and dissemination must account for possible future regime changes or crackdowns. Researchers noted the importance of anticipating not just current conditions but how authoritarian dynamics might shift over time and retrospectively endanger participants.

Solutions:

- Upload and store interview notes and audio recordings on password-protected, encrypted virtual drives and/or university server in home country.
- Delete any stored copies of files from personal devices/laptops while travelling on fieldwork, or at home.
- In some cases, it may be appropriate to bring a separate laptop for interview notes and recordings that would never be connected to the internet. The files would still be stored in the same way (i.e. encrypted, password-protected disk image, .dmg), but the added layer of security is that the machine would never be connected to the local network/internet.
- Use of VPNs was widespread amongst researchers to access blocked sites, but also to protect against hacking of local files or file transfers.

Researcher identity

Problem: Where researchers are located, both geographically and institutionally, shapes their access to information. Those working inside authoritarian regimes face distinct constraints and risks compared to researchers based abroad. In some cases, being a foreigner was an advantage; in others, especially when associated with Western institutions, it could raise suspicion. These challenges can be especially acute in regimes that have foreign agent or foreign influence laws that penalize citizens' engagement with non-domestic actors. Identity, including gender and nationality, also shaped how researchers were perceived and what kind of data they could access. These dynamics were often layered, shifting depending on the country, topic, or moment.

Solutions:

- There was a shared sense that working in these contexts required careful balancing of academic goals with responsibility to participants and to the broader ethics of knowledge production.
- This includes reflecting on one's own positionality, recognising the privileges and limits of being an 'outsider', and remaining attuned to how political shifts, both in authoritarian contexts and in the researcher's home country, can shape the work.

Making contact and establishing trust

Problem: Access to state institutions, private companies, or civil society actors was sometimes limited or tightly controlled. Researchers described operating in environments of mistrust, where building rapport took time, patience, and often personal networks rather than formal channels. Fieldwork required flexibility, sustained presence, and in many cases, long-term relationship building that could not be rushed.

Solutions:

- If conducting a series of interviews, accept that data collection will potentially happen over a longer period, follow up interviews (e.g. online) considered particularly important in these contexts. The importance of allocating sufficient time and resources to navigate these constraints; both to build trust and to allow for unplanned changes
- Formal requests via email (e.g. for interviews) were often ineffective or even counterproductive, especially without pre-existing relationships. Snowball sampling via trusted contacts was seen as most effective. Further, using alternative types of secure communication platforms depending on the context (e.g., Signal, Telegram etc) is essential.
- Semi-structured interviews and participant observation tended to be more productive than structured formats.
- Personal introductions and informal venues (e.g., shared meals) in some settings can help build rapport and trust. Following interviewees' preferences for communication platform and location of interview allows for their local knowledge to guide your engagement, enhancing trust.
- Unexpected dynamics can arise, such as comments before an interview can derail it, highlighting the need for sensitivity to context, culturally and politically.

Framing of climate obstruction and the issue of 'red lines'

Problem: How research questions are framed can affect access and risk, and understanding this is critical for navigating political sensitivities around 'climate obstruction' in authoritarian contexts. Certain climate topics, like renewable energy, or climate adaptation, are often perceived as less contentious and may be more acceptable to state authorities than topics directly criticising government policies, such as fossil fuel dependence, and obstruction.

A related point was the need for researchers to be aware of red lines (see also above) in different contexts. For example, in some countries, criticising the government or exploring climate change through the lens of state corruption may be dangerous. Further, combining specific words (such as energy/water/climate and security in Central Asia, where these issues are highly politicised) can also lead to issues, and researchers should craft their questions in interviews or on surveys with an awareness of these local sensitivities. In China, discussions framed around 'ecological civilisation' are generally more welcomed than those which directly highlight government actions and policy. In Southeast Asia, where authoritarianism has experienced a resurgence, discussions on climate policy

involving clientist politics should be toned down and reframed as part of a broader development agenda.

Solutions:

- Discuss with scholars working in the region or activists which topics should be approached very carefully.
- Avoid red lines if possible.
- Reframe topics/questions.
- Approach sensitive topics by disclosing that you understand the complexity.

The changing nature of authoritarian regimes and impact on research

Problem: Authoritarian regimes are dynamic and change over time. These shifts can significantly affect the feasibility of conducting research, level of access, the type of fieldwork, where and when. For example, as political regimes become more repressive, access to key officials or research sites that were previously open may become impossible.

Solutions:

- Researchers must be prepared for these changes and be flexible enough to adjust their strategies and methods accordingly.
- In some cases, this meant a pivot to alternative locations and/or topics, including making contact with interviewees outside of the country. For example, in the Russian context, a focus on exile communities or transnational activist networks. In addition, scholars have interviewed activists and policy experts attending international climate conferences or other key events.
- At other times, changing the level of analysis may allow for continued research in an authoritarian regime. For example, focusing on subnational or city-level climate governance rather than national policymaking, can be an effective strategy.
- Further, the data source may need to change, with an emphasis on document analysis when in-country interviews became impossible, or quantitative data (see below). In other words, there are alternatives if in-country research becomes too sensitive or impossible to conduct safely.
- Overall, it is important to be open to methodological flexibility and resilience, including the willingness to revisit past assumptions, change topics, or reorient the research altogether.

Quantitative research challenges

Problem: Quantitative data and methods (i.e. surveys, country-produced data, web-scraping, etc.) are invaluable in the study of climate obstruction, and as noted above, can sometimes help overcome the challenges associated with conducting interviews in authoritarian regimes. However, such data, especially when not gathered through fieldwork, can present significant challenges. There is solid evidence that authoritarian regimes tend to overreport key macroeconomic indicators such as GDP growth¹, raising concerns about the reliability and validity of official data. In some contexts, this pattern of data manipulation likely extends to other areas of key relevance to climate policy, including emissions reporting and energy statistics.

Solutions:

¹ See for example, Christopher S. P. Magee, John A. Doces, Reconsidering Regime Type and Growth: Lies, Dictatorships, and Statistics, *International Studies Quarterly*, Volume 59, Issue 2, June 2015, pp. 223–237

- When working with quantitative datasets that are key sources of data in climate research (e.g., GDP, emissions), researchers need to be attentive to measurement and think about methodological solutions to measurement error that may stem from misreporting of data.
- When it comes to survey data, regardless of whether that data is collected through fieldwork or compiled by the state itself, researchers have to think carefully about the role that social desirability bias, intimidation, and shared identity traits play in shaping survey responses.
- Similar to the challenges faced by qualitative scholars conducting interviews, researchers also need to think about how the nature of the authoritarian regime shapes the kinds of questions that get asked on surveys in the first place.

Final Thoughts

1. The importance of in-depth case knowledge. Research in authoritarian contexts benefits significantly from deep knowledge of the specific country or region under study. This includes understanding political history, institutional dynamics, and informal practices. While this research guide avoids detailed case studies, we underscore the broader point: effective research design and interpretation depend on serious engagement with the local context.

2. Institutional challenges around ethics approvals and contextual sensitivity. Academic journals, universities, and funders do not always understand the challenges faced by researchers or the specific local contexts. For example, when ethics review boards insist on written consent, this may jeopardize participant anonymity, whereas oral consent may be more appropriate. Similarly, some institutions may require complex data protection protocols that do not align with on-the-ground realities. These tensions must be navigated carefully and ethically.

3. Gaps in the methodological literature. While there is a solid body of literature which discusses how to conduct research in and on authoritarian regimes at a general disciplinary level², there are key gaps in the methodological literature on climate obstruction (and related issues) in these regimes. More work is needed to address some of the specific dilemmas raised in this paper.

4. The importance of research design. Research design is important in any project, however it can be especially critical when working in authoritarian settings. Projects need to be methodologically sound and also account for the political sensitivities, data constraints, and ethical considerations discussed above. Anticipating potential obstacles, such as restricted access or sudden political shifts, can help researchers prepare. Flexibility and responsiveness to context are key.

5. Sharing best practices among researchers. Given the challenges and risks surrounding this type of research, it is important for scholars to continue to share best practices and lessons learned. This will help strengthen collective knowledge generation and support safer and more effective research.

6. Engaging local scholars and experts. Maintaining an on-going dialogue with local scholars and experts is vital.

² For example, in political science and international relations, see: Kapiszewski D, MacLean LM, Read BL. *Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles*. Cambridge University Press; 2015. Kušić K and Záhora J. *Fieldwork as Failure: Living and Knowing in the Field of International Relations*. E-International Relations; 2020. Malthaner S. *Fieldwork in the Context of Violent Conflict and Authoritarian Regimes*. In: *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, edited by della Porta D. Oxford University Press; 2014. Martínez LR. "How Much Should We Trust the Dictator's GDP Growth Estimates?" *Journal of Political Economy* 130(10); 2022. Mosley L. *Interview Research in Political Science*. Cornell University Press; 2013.

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