

Disinverting moralized authoritarian governance: Truth, verification, and non-Teleological pathways of destabilization

Désinversion morale de la gouvernance autoritaire : Vérité, vérification et trajectoires non téléologiques de fragilisation

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Date submitted : 13/03/2026

Date of acceptance : 02/05/2026

To cite this article :

SISSOKO. E. F. & BAYO P. (2026) «Disinverting moralized authoritarian governance: Truth, verification, and non-Teleological pathways of destabilization», Revue Internationale des Sciences de Gestion « Volume 9 : Numéro 2 » pp : 797 - 823

Abstract :

This article conceptualizes a form of authoritarian fragility that remains obscured when institutional persistence is equated with political stability. It introduces the concept of moral disinversion to designate an endogenous, reversible, and non-teleological process through which moralized authoritarian governance loses its capacity to convert narrative loyalty into moral adhesion, without necessarily producing democratic transition, institutional collapse, or organized resistance. The central claim is that obedience may persist while belief withdraws. The article positions this concept in relation to scholarship on authoritarian stability, informational autocracy, symbolic domination, and infra-political practices. It then identifies five observable mechanisms: narrative–experience dissonance, moral fatigue, symbolic desacralization, fragmentary reactivation of verification practices, and obedience–belief dissociation. Finally, it distinguishes between two logics for managing this fragility, patriotic resilience and informational resilience, before proposing a non-teleological typology of possible configurations. The article’s main contribution is to make observable a moral form of fragility under authoritarian continuity.

Keywords: authoritarianism; moralized governance; moral disinversion; public truth; legitimation; resilience.

Résumé :

Cet article conceptualise une forme de fragilité autoritaire qui demeure invisible lorsque la persistance institutionnelle est confondue avec la stabilité politique. Il introduit le concept de désinversion morale pour désigner un processus endogène, réversible et non téléologique par lequel une gouvernance autoritaire moralisée perd sa capacité à convertir la loyauté narrative en adhésion morale, sans produire nécessairement transition démocratique, effondrement institutionnel ou résistance organisée. L’argument central est que l’obéissance peut se maintenir alors que la croyance se retire. L’article positionne ce concept face aux travaux sur la stabilité autoritaire, l’autoritarisme informationnel, la domination symbolique et les pratiques infra-politiques. Il identifie ensuite cinq mécanismes observables: dissonance entre récit et expérience, fatigue morale, désacralisation symbolique, réactivation fragmentaire de la vérification et dissociation entre obéissance et croyance. Enfin, il distingue deux logiques de gestion de cette fragilité, la résilience patriotique et la résilience informationnelle, avant de proposer une typologie non téléologique des configurations possibles. La contribution principale est de rendre observable une fragilité morale sous continuité autoritaire.

Mots clés : autoritarisme ; gouvernance moralisée ; désinversion morale ; vérité publique ; légitimation ; résilience.

Introduction

Contemporary authoritarian governance is not always weakened through open crisis, elite defection, mass protest, or institutional breakdown. In many configurations, coercive capacity remains intact, institutions continue to function, and public compliance persists. Yet the moral claims through which power justifies obedience, sacrifice, and narrative conformity may lose their capacity to generate adhesion. This article starts from that analytical problem: authoritarian fragility can emerge under conditions of institutional continuity, not as an immediate prelude to democratization or collapse, but as a dissociation between obedience and belief.

The literature on authoritarianism has clarified how non-democratic regimes endure through elections, legal forms, coercion, co-optation, uncertainty, elite management, and justificatory narratives (Geddes et al., 2018; Gerschewski, 2013; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2013; Scheppele, 2018; Svoboda, 2012). A second body of work analyzes the political organization of truth, verification, and information disorder, from political lying to post-truth and informational autocracy (Arendt, 1972; Guriev & Treisman, 2019; McIntyre, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). A third line of inquiry, centered on symbolic domination and hidden transcripts, shows that public compliance may coexist with private distance (Scott, 1990; Wedeen, 1999). These literatures explain survival, manipulation, and staged consent; they leave less visible the erosion of moral adhesion under continued obedience.

The article therefore asks: how can moralized authoritarian governance become fragile without producing democratic transition, institutional collapse, or organized resistance? This question requires separating authoritarian fragility from its presumed outcomes. Fragility does not necessarily mean breakdown. It may designate a condition in which the infrastructures that make domination meaningful, legitimate, or affectively compelling lose effectiveness while coercive and institutional capacities remain operative.

To address this problem, the article introduces the concept of moral disinversion. Moral disinversion refers to an endogenous, reversible, and non-teleological process through which moralized authoritarian governance loses its capacity to transform narrative loyalty into moral adhesion. It designates the disarticulation of the cognitive, normative, emotional, and symbolic mechanisms through which moralized power converts conformity into virtue and verification into deviance. Its central mechanism is obedience without belief: individuals may continue to comply, participate in official rituals, repeat public narratives, or avoid dissent, while no longer treating the regime's moral claims as credible, binding, or self-evident.

The scope of the concept is specific. Moral disinversion applies primarily to political configurations in which the ruling apparatus moralizes loyalty, sacrifice, endurance, national unity, or narrative conformity, and treats verification, doubt, or factual correction as civic failure. It is most relevant where public truth is subordinated to prescribed virtue, and where legitimacy depends not only on coercion, performance, or institutional control, but also on the moral conversion of political obedience. This scope condition prevents the concept from becoming a general theory of authoritarian decline or a synonym for misinformation, cynicism, or resistance.

Methodologically, the article develops a conceptual framework supported by empirical plausibility probes rather than a causal test of regime transformation. It identifies observable mechanisms—narrative—experience dissonance, moral fatigue, symbolic desacralization, fragmentary verification practices, and obedience—belief dissociation—and specifies the evidentiary threshold required to infer moral disinversion.

The article proceeds in five steps: theoretical positioning, definition and scope, observable mechanisms, management logics, and non-teleological configurations. The conclusion clarifies the contribution, limits, and empirical uses of the concept.

1. Theoretical Positioning and Conceptual Boundaries

Introducing moral disinversion requires more than distinguishing it from adjacent notions such as democratic transition, resistance, collapse, or post-truth. The concept intervenes at the intersection of three bodies of literature: authoritarian stability and legitimation, information politics and post-truth dynamics, and symbolic domination through ritualized public compliance. Each literature clarifies an important dimension of contemporary authoritarian governance. Yet none fully captures the form of fragility examined here: the erosion of moral adherence under continued obedience.

Moral disinversion is not proposed as a general theory of authoritarian decline. It is a bounded analytical concept designed to identify situations in which moralized authoritarian governance continues to command compliance while losing the capacity to make this compliance morally credible, affectively compelling, or symbolically self-evident. Its contribution lies in separating authoritarian fragility from its conventional outcomes: transition, collapse, institutional opening, or organized resistance.

1.1. Authoritarian stability and the limits of survival-centered analysis

The literature on authoritarianism has refined the analysis of non-democratic durability. Early transition studies interpreted authoritarian fragility through the possibility of liberalization, elite splits, institutional opening, or democratic transition (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). Later research shifted attention from transitions to the internal organization of authoritarian rule, emphasizing elections, ruling parties, coercive institutions, elite management, and strategies of opposition containment (Geddes et al., 2018; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Svobik, 2012). Work on electoral authoritarianism and autocratic legalism further showed that authoritarian rule can operate through institutions, legality, and controlled uncertainty rather than through overt repression alone (Schedler, 2013; Scheppele, 2018).

Gerschewski's model of legitimation, repression, and co-optation is particularly useful because it shows that authoritarian stability rests on combinations of coercive, distributive, and justificatory mechanisms rather than on repression alone (Gerschewski, 2013). However, this literature tends to treat fragility as analytically decisive when it affects regime survival, opposition coordination, elite cohesion, or institutional control. Fragility becomes visible when it threatens the regime as a political system.

Moral disinversion shifts the analytical focus. It does not ask whether the regime is about to collapse, liberalize, or lose control over institutions. It asks whether the moral infrastructure that enables authoritarian governance to transform obedience into virtue remains effective. A regime may retain coercive capacity, institutional continuity, and public compliance while losing the moral force through which its narratives organize belief, loyalty, and sacrifice. In such cases, the regime is not necessarily unstable in a conventional institutional sense. It is fragile in a moral-functional sense.

This also distinguishes moral disinversion from a broad theory of legitimacy loss. Legitimacy is often understood as acceptance of rule or belief in the rightfulness of authority. Moral disinversion refers to a narrower process: the weakening of the mechanisms through which a ruling apparatus moralizes narrative conformity and delegitimizes verification. The issue is not simply whether citizens consider the regime legitimate or illegitimate. The issue is whether they continue to experience the regime's moral claims as binding, credible, and self-evident while complying with them.

1.2. Information politics, post-truth, and moralized truth-claims

A second relevant literature concerns truth, information, and verification. Arendt's analysis of political lying showed that organized falsehood does not merely distort isolated facts; it can reorganize the conditions under which public reality is perceived and judged (Arendt, 1972). Contemporary work on post-truth and information disorder examines the weakening of shared verification standards, the fragmentation of factual authority, and the manipulation of public judgment (McIntyre, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Research on informational autocracy has further shown that modern authoritarian rulers may rely less on explicit ideology than on performance management, selective censorship, informational manipulation, and the strategic production of uncertainty (Guriev & Treisman, 2019).

Moral disinversion builds on these insights but identifies a more specific configuration. It is not equivalent to misinformation, propaganda, post-truth, or general epistemic disorder. The problem is not only that falsehood circulates, or that verification becomes difficult. The problem is that loyalty to an official narrative can become morally encoded. Under moralized authoritarian governance, adherence to the prescribed narrative is treated as a sign of patriotism, civic maturity, sacrifice, or national loyalty, while doubt, correction, or verification may be recoded as betrayal, weakness, foreign manipulation, or moral failure.

This moralization of truth-claims modifies the political function of falsehood. Falsehood is no longer only an instrument of deception. It becomes a test of belonging. The citizen is not merely expected to ignore contradictory facts, but to demonstrate loyalty by accepting the official hierarchy of reality. Verification is not simply discouraged; it is morally degraded. In this sense, moralized authoritarian governance does not merely produce informational distortion. It produces a moral order in which truth is subordinated to prescribed virtue.

Moral disinversion begins when this moral order loses effectiveness. Individuals may still repeat official narratives, avoid public contradiction, or comply with symbolic rituals. Yet the official narrative no longer organizes their expectations, practical judgments, or sense of moral obligation. Verification may reappear in fragmentary and informal forms: comparison of sources, reliance on lived experience, private doubt, irony, pragmatic adaptation, or selective distrust. These practices do not necessarily produce institutional pluralism or open dissent. They indicate that the moral monopoly of the official narrative has weakened.

1.3. Symbolic domination and infra-political distancing

A third body of literature helps explain why the weakening of belief does not automatically become visible as resistance. Scott's work on domination and hidden transcripts demonstrates that public compliance may coexist with private distance, irony, resentment, or disbelief (Scott, 1990). Wedeen's analysis of authoritarian performance similarly shows that symbolic rituals can compel participation without securing genuine conviction (Wedeen, 1999). Practice-oriented approaches to authoritarianism further shift attention from regime types to the concrete repertoires, acts, and performances through which authoritarian power is exercised and reproduced (Glasius, 2018).

This literature is essential for moral disinversion because it makes analytically visible the gap between compliance and belief. Authoritarian governance may continue to function behaviorally even when its symbolic and moral claims lose credibility. Citizens may attend ceremonies, reproduce official language, or avoid dissent not because they believe, but because compliance remains prudent, routine, or materially necessary. Recent empirical work on silent adaptation in post-2020 Mali similarly shows why public restraint, self-censorship, and discreet distancing cannot be interpreted mechanically as political conviction (Sissoko & Konaté, 2025).

However, moral disinversion is not simply another name for hidden resistance. It does not require oppositional intent, collective organization, or a counter-hegemonic project. The concept captures a prior and more ambiguous condition: the functional disarticulation of moralized rule. Disbelief may remain private. Distancing may remain ironic, fragmented, or pragmatic. Verification may reappear without becoming institutionalized. The central issue is not whether citizens resist, but whether the regime still succeeds in making obedience morally meaningful.

If every form of distance is interpreted as resistance, analysis risks over-politicizing ordinary practices. If every form of compliance is interpreted as belief, analysis risks reproducing the regime's own performative fiction. Moral disinversion offers an intermediate category: obedience may persist while belief withdraws.

1.4. Conceptual boundaries

The concept must be distinguished from several adjacent notions. These distinctions are not merely semantic. They prevent four recurrent analytical errors: democratic teleology, rupture bias, conceptual inflation, and normative slippage. Moral disinversion does not predict what

will happen to an authoritarian regime. It identifies a condition in which moralized governance loses part of its capacity to transform narrative conformity into moral adhesion.

Table 1. Conceptual Boundaries of Moral Disinversion

Adjacent notion	Main analytical focus	What moral disinversion isolates instead	Analytical bias avoided
Democratic transition	Institutional opening, liberalization, alternation, constitutional reform	Fragility without transition or regime change	Democratic teleology
Political resistance or mobilization	Collective action, protest, organized opposition	Infra-political distancing without necessary oppositional intent	Over-politicization of fragility
Authoritarian collapse	Coup, institutional breakdown, civil war, command disintegration	Moral fragilization under institutional and coercive continuity	Rupture bias
General legitimacy loss	Declining acceptance of authority or rightfulness of rule	Dissociation between obedience and belief while compliance persists	Binary opposition between legitimacy and illegitimacy
Normative critique of lying	Ethical evaluation of truth and falsehood in politics	Functional erosion of moralized official narratives as governing instruments	Moral normativism
Post-truth or misinformation	General degradation of factual standards and public knowledge	Moral insulation of official truth-claims from verification	Conceptual inflation

Source: Author's elaboration.

These boundaries clarify the analytical status of moral disinversion. The concept does not describe democratization, resistance, collapse, pluralism, or truth restoration. Nor does it offer a moral denunciation of authoritarian lying. It identifies a specific form of internal fragility: the weakening of the moral mechanisms that make narrative loyalty appear virtuous and verification appear deviant.

Three implications follow. First, moral disinversion can occur while the regime remains institutionally stable. Second, it may remain socially dispersed and politically unorganized. Third, it can be reversed, blocked, or redirected through renewed efforts at moralization. This theoretical positioning prepares the positive definition developed in the next section: the loss of alignment between cognitive credibility, normative authority, emotional adhesion, and symbolic performativity.

2. Moral Disinversion: Definition, Scope, and Core Mechanism

Having clarified the conceptual boundaries of moral disinversion, this section specifies its positive analytical content. Moral disinversion is not merely a synonym for legitimacy loss, misinformation fatigue, symbolic decline, or hidden resistance. It designates a specific process internal to moralized authoritarian governance: the weakening of the mechanisms through which power transforms narrative conformity into moral adhesion.

The central claim is that authoritarian governance may continue to function behaviorally while losing part of its moral effectiveness. Citizens may comply, attend public rituals, repeat official language, avoid dissent, and remain formally integrated into institutional routines. Yet this compliance may no longer be sustained by belief in the moral claims through which power justifies obedience, sacrifice, endurance, or loyalty. Moral disinversion names this dissociation between public conformity and moral adhesion.

2.1. Definition and analytical status

Moral disinversion refers to an endogenous, reversible, and non-teleological process through which moralized authoritarian governance loses its capacity to convert narrative loyalty into moral adhesion, without necessarily producing democratic transition, institutional collapse, or organized resistance.

This definition contains four analytical elements. First, moral disinversion is endogenous: it unfolds within the regime's own symbolic, normative, and informational operations, even when external shocks accelerate it. Second, it is reversible: the ruling apparatus may partially re-align obedience and belief through patriotic rhetoric, coercion, material redistribution, symbolic recalibration, or information control. Third, it is non-teleological: it does not predict transition, collapse, liberalization, or emancipation. Fourth, it is processual rather than deterministic: it identifies mechanisms through which moralized rule becomes less effective without claiming that those mechanisms necessarily transform the regime.

Classical accounts of authority and legitimacy ask why individuals accept rule as rightful or binding (Weber, 1978). Moral disinversion narrows the question. It asks whether a specific moral operation still functions: the conversion of narrative conformity into civic virtue. The issue is not simply whether people consider the regime legitimate or illegitimate. The issue is whether they continue to experience the regime's moral claims as credible, binding, and self-evident while complying with them.

2.2. Moralized authoritarian governance and the role of TIME

Moral disinversion becomes intelligible in relation to moralized authoritarian governance. By moralized authoritarian governance, this article refers to configurations in which the ruling apparatus does not merely demand obedience, but frames obedience as a moral duty. Loyalty to the official narrative is presented as patriotism, sacrifice, civic maturity, national responsibility, or fidelity to collective destiny. Conversely, doubt, verification, factual correction, or refusal to repeat the authorized narrative may be framed as betrayal, weakness, foreign manipulation, or moral failure.

The Theory of Moral Inversion of the State provides a useful matrix for specifying this operation. TIME conceptualizes moralized authoritarian stabilization through four interdependent dimensions: cognitive, normative, emotional, and symbolic. In this configuration, official narratives organize reality, law and norms moralize obedience, emotional registers attach loyalty to sacrifice or endurance, and public symbols perform the unity of the political community.

However, moral disinversion does not depend on treating TIME as a closed theoretical system. TIME provides the matrix through which moralized rule can be described; moral disinversion identifies the counter-process through which that matrix loses coherence. The concept is therefore not a mere derivative of TIME. It is a mid-range analytical tool for examining how moralized authoritarian governance becomes fragile when its cognitive, normative, emotional, and symbolic dimensions cease to reinforce one another.

Moral disinversion should therefore be understood not as the simple reversal of moral inversion, but as its functional disarticulation. The regime may still speak, command, ritualize, punish, and mobilize. What weakens is the alignment between these operations and the moral adhesion they are supposed to produce.

2.3. Scope conditions

The concept applies primarily where three conditions are present. First, the ruling apparatus moralizes political loyalty: obedience is framed not only as compliance but as evidence of virtue, patriotism, or national responsibility. Second, official truth-claims are insulated from ordinary verification: to question them may be treated as irresponsibility or betrayal. Third, symbolic participation matters: rituals, commemorations, slogans, and public performances help produce the appearance of moral unity. These scope conditions prevent conceptual inflation. Moral disinversion does not apply to every authoritarian regime, every episode of

misinformation, or every decline in popularity; it applies where obedience, truth, and belonging are morally fused and where this fusion loses effectiveness while conformity persists.

2.4. Four dimensions of moral disinversion

Moral disinversion unfolds through the disarticulation of four dimensions: cognitive, normative, emotional, and symbolic. These dimensions should not be treated as chronological stages. They are analytical dimensions that may overlap, reinforce one another, or appear unevenly across contexts.

Cognitive disinversion occurs when the official narrative continues to circulate but no longer organizes expectations, interpretation, or practical judgment. Citizens may continue to repeat official language, but they no longer rely on it to understand what is happening. This dimension connects to the problem of political reality analyzed by Arendt: organized falsehood does not merely hide facts; it seeks to reorganize the conditions under which reality is publicly judged (Arendt, 1972).

Normative disinversion occurs when commands, laws, or official obligations remain enforceable but lose their moral authority. Compliance persists, but it becomes increasingly instrumental, defensive, or prudential. Individuals obey because refusal is costly, because routine requires it, or because alternatives are unavailable, not because the command is experienced as morally justified.

Emotional disinversion occurs when the affective registers of moralized governance—sacrifice, endurance, patriotic suffering, resilience, national unity, gratitude, vigilance—lose mobilizing force. Appeals that previously generated attachment may produce fatigue, indifference, irritation, irony, or withdrawal. This does not necessarily generate opposition. It may produce emotional demobilization.

Symbolic disinversion occurs when rituals, slogans, emblems, ceremonies, and performances continue to be reproduced but lose part of their sacralizing capacity. Public participation remains visible, but its performative force declines. Repetition produces banalization rather than renewed adhesion. This dimension is close to Wedeen's insight that authoritarian rituals can compel performance without securing genuine conviction (Wedeen, 1999).

2.5. Core mechanism: obedience without belief

The central mechanism of moral disinversion is obedience without belief. This expression does not mean that citizens abandon all beliefs, nor that they necessarily become opponents of

the regime. It means that behavioral compliance becomes dissociated from moral adhesion. Individuals may obey, repeat, attend, and perform, while no longer treating the moral claims of the ruling apparatus as credible or binding.

This mechanism is analytically decisive because it prevents two symmetrical errors. The first error is to infer belief from compliance. In authoritarian contexts, public conformity may reflect coercion, prudence, habit, dependence, fear, administrative necessity, or lack of alternatives. It cannot automatically be interpreted as moral adhesion. The second error is to infer resistance from disbelief. Disbelief may remain private, fragmented, ironic, or pragmatic. It may weaken the moral infrastructure of rule without producing collective action. Obedience without belief therefore identifies an intermediate condition between stable moralized governance and visible political rupture. The regime still obtains behavior, but it no longer fully produces conviction. Its narratives continue to be repeated, but they no longer monopolize judgment. Its rituals continue to be performed, but they no longer necessarily sacralize authority. Its commands continue to be followed, but increasingly because refusal is costly rather than because obedience appears morally self-evident.

The empirical challenge is that obedience without belief cannot be observed through public compliance alone. It must be inferred from discrepancies between official performances and practical judgments: private distancing, ironic repetition, declining emotional investment in rituals, informal verification practices, reliance on lived experience against official narratives, or the routinization of participation without conviction. These indicators are developed in the following section.

3. Observable Mechanisms and Empirical Plausibility Probes

The previous section defined moral disinversion as the erosion of moral adhesion under continued obedience. This section translates that conceptual claim into observable mechanisms. Its objective is not to provide a causal test of regime transformation, nor to predict democratic transition or authoritarian collapse. It specifies how moral disinversion can be empirically examined through convergent traces of narrative dissonance, affective withdrawal, symbolic banalization, renewed verification practices, and obedience–belief dissociation.

This approach follows a logic of empirical plausibility probing rather than full causal validation. A plausibility probe does not establish general causal effects across cases; it assesses whether a theoretical mechanism leaves observable traces in concrete political

configurations (Eckstein, 1975; George & Bennett, 2005). In this article, plausibility depends on whether moralized authoritarian governance continues to obtain public compliance while losing part of its capacity to make that compliance morally credible, emotionally compelling, and symbolically self-evident.

The empirical difficulty is that moral disinversion cannot be inferred from public behavior alone. In authoritarian contexts, public compliance may reflect conviction, fear, routine, dependence, prudence, or lack of alternatives. Conversely, disbelief does not necessarily become visible as protest. For this reason, moral disinversion must be inferred through triangulation between three levels of observation: official moralizing narratives, public or ritualized performances of compliance, and practical forms of judgment, distancing, or verification.

The mechanisms developed below are therefore not isolated indicators. Each becomes analytically relevant when it reveals a discrepancy between what the ruling apparatus seeks to moralize and how individuals, groups, or social spaces practically orient their judgments and behaviors. The strongest inference occurs when several mechanisms converge without immediate institutional rupture.

3.1. Narrative–experience dissonance

Narrative–experience dissonance occurs when the official narrative continues to circulate publicly but no longer organizes practical expectations or everyday judgment. Under moralized authoritarian governance, official narratives do more than describe reality. They classify loyalty, assign virtue, define enemies, and instruct citizens on how events should be interpreted. Moral disinversion begins when the gap between official narration and lived experience becomes increasingly difficult to absorb.

Empirically, this mechanism may be observed through discrepancies between official discourse and ordinary practices: repeated official claims contradicted by local experience; public repetition of slogans combined with private skepticism; reliance on informal knowledge rather than state narratives; or practical adjustment of behavior in ways that contradict the official interpretation of events. Relevant sources include speeches, policy documents, local media, interviews, ethnographic observation, social media discussions, rumor networks, and evidence of routine practices that diverge from official expectations. The inference criterion is met when the official narrative no longer orients concrete expectations, even if it continues to be publicly repeated.

3.2. Moral fatigue

Moral fatigue emerges when recurrent appeals to sacrifice, endurance, dignity, vigilance, patriotic suffering, national unity, or resilience lose their mobilizing force. These appeals convert constraint into virtue. They ask citizens not only to obey, but to interpret obedience as morally meaningful. When these affective registers are over-solicited, they may produce indifference, irony, irritation, or withdrawal rather than adhesion.

This mechanism should not be confused with anger or mobilization. Moral fatigue may produce passivity rather than protest. Its political significance lies precisely in that ambiguity: the affective infrastructure of rule weakens without necessarily generating organized resistance. Empirically, it may be observed through declining enthusiasm in public rituals, formulaic participation, ironic repetition of official slogans, reduced emotional intensity in ceremonies, private complaints about sacrificial rhetoric, or a shift from moral language to pragmatic language in everyday accounts of obedience.

3.3. Symbolic desacralization

Symbolic desacralization occurs when rituals, emblems, ceremonies, slogans, commemorations, and public performances continue but lose part of their performative force. These devices do not merely decorate power. They produce the appearance of unity and make authority appear morally self-evident. A ceremony that continues to attract participants does not necessarily demonstrate moral adhesion. Participation may reflect fear, social pressure, career incentives, administrative obligation, or routine.

Empirically, symbolic desacralization may be observed through routinized attendance, visible disengagement during ceremonies, declining emotional intensity, mechanical repetition of slogans, irony toward official symbols, reduced voluntary participation, or a growing gap between ritual performance and private interpretation. Possible sources include observations of ceremonies, official media coverage, participant interviews, visual materials, commemorative practices, public reactions, and changes in the symbolic grammar of state communication.

3.4. Fragmentary reactivation of verification practices

The fragmentary reactivation of verification practices occurs when the moral monopoly over official truth begins to weaken. This does not imply informational liberalization. Nor does it require a free press, institutional pluralism, or public restoration of factual authority. Verification may reappear in partial, discreet, informal, and non-institutionalized forms.

Individuals may compare sources, rely on practical indicators, reinterpret official discourse in light of lived experience, circulate alternative accounts privately, or use irony to mark distance from official truth-claims.

Empirically, this mechanism may be observed through informal source comparison, reliance on non-official information networks, private correction of public narratives, increased attention to discrepancies between official claims and material conditions, coded skepticism, rumor circulation, or pragmatic decisions that contradict the state's preferred interpretation of reality. The inference criterion is met when individuals or groups no longer rely exclusively on official narratives to guide judgment and action.

3.5. Obedience–belief dissociation

Obedience–belief dissociation is the empirical expression of obedience without belief. It occurs when behavioral compliance persists while moral adhesion weakens. Individuals continue to obey, attend, repeat, vote, participate, or remain silent, but they do so for reasons that no longer correspond to the moral claims of the ruling apparatus.

Empirically, this mechanism may be observed through mismatches between public performance and private interpretation; formulaic repetition of official language combined with practical distrust; continued participation in rituals without emotional investment; public silence accompanied by informal criticism; or compliance justified in prudential rather than moral terms. This mechanism requires careful inference because it cannot be established by public behavior alone. It demands triangulation between discourse, practice, affect, and context.

Table 2. Observable Mechanisms of Moral Disinversion

Mechanism	Observable signs	Possible empirical sources	Inference criterion	Falsification condition
Narrative–experience dissonance	Gap between official discourse and lived experience; repetition without practical reliance	Speeches, policy documents, interviews, local media, ethnography, social media, everyday practices	Official narrative no longer structures practical expectations	Official narrative continues to organize judgment and behavior
Moral fatigue	Indifference, irony, withdrawal, affective neutrality toward sacrificial or patriotic appeals	Interviews, ceremonies, commemorations, public reactions, local press, social media	Moral appeals no longer produce affective adhesion	Appeals continue to generate stable emotional mobilization without coercive escalation
Symbolic desacralization	Rituals persist but lose unifying or sacralizing force; mechanical participation	Ceremony observation, official media, visual materials, participant interviews, symbolic practices	Ritual repetition no longer produces moral self-evidence	Rituals retain voluntary mobilizing power and collective identification
Fragmentary verification practices	Source comparison, private correction, reliance on lived experience, coded skepticism	Interviews, digital traces, media use, rumor networks, ethnographic observation, local discussions	Narrative loyalty is no longer the exclusive criterion of judgment	Official truth-claims continue to monopolize interpretation
Obedience–belief dissociation	Compliance without conviction; public participation justified by prudence, fear, routine, or dependency	Interviews, discourse/practice comparison, ethnography, ritual participation, administrative routines	Compliance persists while moral adhesion weakens	Obedience and belief remain durably aligned

Source: Author’s elaboration.

3.6. Minimum evidentiary threshold

Because moral disinvolution concerns a discrepancy between public conformity and moral adhesion, no single indicator is sufficient. Public participation alone does not prove belief. Private skepticism alone does not prove disinvolution. Isolated criticism does not prove fragility. The concept becomes empirically plausible only when several traces converge.

A minimal evidentiary threshold requires three elements. First, the ruling apparatus must be shown to moralize loyalty, sacrifice, endurance, or narrative conformity. Second, public compliance must persist, otherwise the problem becomes one of open refusal or breakdown rather than obedience without belief. Third, evidence must show weakening cognitive, normative, emotional, or symbolic adhesion despite continued conformity. The strongest inference arises when moralizing discourse intensifies while adhesion declines, suggesting that the regime is attempting to compensate for weakening moral effectiveness.

4. Managing Fragility: Patriotic and Informational Resilience

The previous section identified observable mechanisms. This section examines how the effects of moral disinvolution may be managed. Two logics are central: patriotic resilience and informational resilience. They do not introduce independent theories; they designate competing and asymmetrical responses to the erosion of moral adhesion. Patriotic resilience refers to regime-centered efforts to remoralize loyalty, sacrifice, unity, sovereignty, and endurance. Informational resilience refers to the partial reactivation of verification practices by individuals, groups, or informal networks. The term resilience is used analytically, not normatively: patriotic resilience may stabilize authoritarian governance, while informational resilience may reactivate verification without necessarily producing opposition or transition.

4.1. Patriotic resilience as corrective remoralization

Patriotic resilience is the regime-centered response to moral disinvolution. It appears when the ruling apparatus attempts to contain weakened moral adhesion by intensifying the moral coding of obedience. Its objective is not simply to persuade citizens that the official narrative is factually accurate. It is to make doubt morally costly: verification may be recoded as betrayal, hesitation as irresponsibility, criticism as hostility, and endurance as proof of belonging. This logic may operate through appeals to unity, sovereignty, national dignity, sacrifice, collective endurance, external enemies, internal traitors, ceremonies, commemorations, and official media campaigns. It is consistent with broader accounts of authoritarian legitimation, in which rulers combine coercion, co-optation, and justificatory

narratives to sustain rule (Gerschewski, 2013). Yet the intensification of patriotic resilience does not necessarily prove that disinversion has been overcome. It may also indicate that the regime perceives a weakening of the moral bond it seeks to restore.

4.2. Informational resilience as partial reactivation of verification

Informational resilience refers to the partial recovery of verification practices under conditions where official truth-claims remain morally protected. It does not imply full media pluralism, institutional transparency, or democratic public debate. It refers instead to dispersed practices through which individuals, groups, or social spaces begin to compare official narratives with lived experience, alternative sources, practical evidence, or informal knowledge.

Under moralized authoritarian governance, verification is not only epistemically discouraged. It is morally degraded. To doubt, compare, or correct the official narrative may be treated as disloyal, irresponsible, foreign-influenced, or unpatriotic. Informational resilience begins when this moral degradation of verification loses effectiveness. Citizens may still avoid public contradiction, but they no longer rely exclusively on official narratives to orient judgment.

This logic is distinct from post-truth analysis in general. The issue is not simply the circulation of falsehood or the fragmentation of factual authority. The issue is whether practices of verification can reappear after having been morally disqualified. In this sense, informational resilience is the cognitive and practical counterpart of moral disinversion: it signals that the official narrative no longer monopolizes the criteria by which reality is interpreted.

Informational resilience may appear in weak, informal, or coded forms. Individuals may compare official claims with local conditions, cross-check information through private networks, interpret official speeches ironically, rely on rumors as provisional evidence, follow alternative media discreetly, or use practical experience to correct state narratives. These practices need not become public opposition. Their significance lies in the fact that judgment begins to detach from narrative loyalty.

This point is compatible with research on informational autocracy, which shows that contemporary authoritarian power often depends less on explicit ideological indoctrination than on selective manipulation, censorship, and control over public knowledge (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). It also resonates with work on information disorder, which emphasizes the fragility of shared verification standards in contested public spheres (Wardle & Derakhshan,

2017). Yet informational resilience is more specific: it concerns the recovery of verification where verification itself has been morally delegitimized.

4.3. Asymmetrical interaction between the two logics

Patriotic resilience and informational resilience are asymmetrical. Patriotic resilience is generally top-down, organized by the ruling apparatus, and oriented toward remoralization. Informational resilience is generally dispersed, socially embedded, and oriented toward verification. The former seeks to restore obedience as virtue. The latter weakens the fusion between loyalty and truth.

Their interaction can produce several outcomes. Patriotic resilience may contain informational resilience by reclassifying verification as betrayal. Informational resilience may deepen moral disinversion by making official narratives less capable of monopolizing judgment. The two may also coexist: citizens may publicly perform patriotic loyalty while privately relying on alternative sources or practical evidence. In that case, the regime maintains behavioral compliance but loses part of its moral authority.

The relationship between the two logics is therefore not a simple opposition between authoritarian falsehood and democratic truth. Patriotic resilience may appropriate factual language, statistics, expert discourse, or legal forms to reinforce moralized loyalty. Informational resilience may remain fragmented, rumor-based, uncertain, or socially limited. The analytical task is not to assign normative purity to one side, but to examine how each logic affects the central relation between obedience and belief.

4.4. Analytical implications

Three implications follow. First, patriotic resilience explains how authoritarian governance may survive moral disinversion by replacing weakened adhesion with renewed moral pressure. Second, informational resilience shows why disinversion is not reducible to cynicism: when verification practices reappear, even fragmentarily, the moral monopoly of official truth weakens. Third, the interaction between these two logics prepares a non-teleological typology of outcomes: disinversion may be blocked, partially reversed, stabilized without transition, or absorbed into authoritarian recomposition.

5. Non-Teleological Configurations of Moral Disinversion

The previous section distinguished patriotic and informational resilience as two logics through which moral disinversion may be managed. This section develops a non-teleological typology

of outcomes. The typology is built on three dimensions: the visibility of disinversion mechanisms, the relative strength of patriotic and informational resilience, and the degree of institutional continuity. This move is important because authoritarian fragility is often interpreted through institutionally visible outcomes—coups, protests, electoral openings, elite defections, or collapse. Moral disinversion requires a broader analytic range because it may alter the moral effectiveness of rule without immediately transforming its institutional structure.

5.1. Partial disinversion

Partial disinversion occurs when some mechanisms of moral disinversion appear, but remain socially, institutionally, or symbolically limited. Narrative–experience dissonance may be visible in specific sectors, regions, professional groups, generational cohorts, or information spaces, while the broader moral architecture of rule continues to function. Obedience and belief begin to separate in some contexts, but the separation does not yet become generalized. In this configuration, patriotic resilience may still retain considerable effectiveness. Official narratives continue to organize loyalty for core constituencies, while verification practices remain localized or socially fragmented. Partial disinversion is analytically important because it prevents a binary opposition between stability and crisis. A regime may remain broadly effective while showing localized signs of moral fragility. The relevant question is not whether the regime is collapsing, but whether specific social spaces no longer treat its moral claims as credible or binding.

5.2. Blocked disinversion

Blocked disinversion occurs when mechanisms of moral disinversion begin to emerge but are neutralized or contained by strong patriotic resilience, coercive reinforcement, symbolic escalation, or information control. The defining feature is not the absence of dissonance. It is the regime's capacity to prevent dissonance from becoming politically or cognitively expansive. Doubt is reclassified as betrayal. Verification is framed as foreign manipulation. Hardship is reinterpreted as sacrifice. Criticism is absorbed into narratives of siege, national dignity, or existential threat.

This configuration is especially important because it shows that moral disinversion can strengthen authoritarian practices rather than weaken them immediately. The regime may respond to declining adhesion by expanding loyalty rituals, increasing surveillance, intensifying patriotic education, controlling symbolic spaces, or moralizing obedience more

aggressively. In such cases, the fragility of moral adhesion produces a compensatory hardening of rule.

5.3. Reversible disinversion

Reversible disinversion occurs when the weakening of moral adhesion becomes visible but is partially reabsorbed through renewed performance, symbolic recalibration, material redistribution, enemy construction, institutional adjustment, or successful patriotic remobilization. Unlike blocked disinversion, where the process is contained before expanding, reversible disinversion involves a more substantial weakening of moral adhesion that is later partially repaired.

This configuration does not imply a genuine restoration of truth, legitimacy, or democratic accountability. Reversal means that the regime succeeds in re-aligning obedience and belief sufficiently to restore the practical effectiveness of moralized governance. Citizens who had begun to distance themselves may be reintegrated into official narratives through new threats, new promises, renewed symbolic intensity, or selective concessions.

5.4. Durable disinversion without transition

Durable disinversion without transition is the configuration in which moral adhesion weakens persistently while institutional continuity and public compliance remain intact. It is the central configuration for the argument of this article. The regime continues to govern, command, ritualize, and obtain obedience, but its moral claims no longer produce stable belief among significant social groups.

In this configuration, obedience without belief becomes routinized. Citizens participate because refusal is costly, because routines persist, because administrative dependence remains, or because alternatives are unavailable. They may continue to repeat official narratives in public while relying on other sources of judgment in practice. Rituals continue, but their sacralizing force declines. Patriotic rhetoric circulates, but it produces fatigue, irony, or instrumental compliance rather than adhesion.

Durable disinversion without transition is analytically distinct from regime collapse. The regime may remain institutionally strong. It may preserve coercive capacity, control over public administration, electoral management, symbolic rituals, and media dominance. Yet its moral infrastructure has weakened. The official narrative still commands performance, but no longer monopolizes belief. This configuration is one of the article's main contributions. It shows that authoritarian regimes can survive while losing the moral density of obedience.

5.5. Authoritarian recomposition

Authoritarian recomposition occurs when the ruling apparatus adapts to moral disinversion by reorganizing the bases of rule. Instead of simply restoring the previous moral order, the regime recalibrates its governing strategy. It may reduce reliance on moral adhesion and increase reliance on coercion, material incentives, technocratic performance, selective legality, information management, or narrower forms of loyalty.

This configuration is distinct from reversal. In reversible disinversion, the regime restores the previous alignment between obedience and belief, at least partially. In authoritarian recomposition, the regime accepts, manages, or exploits weakened moral adhesion by shifting toward a different mixture of domination. It may preserve patriotic rhetoric, but combine it with more explicit surveillance, administrative discipline, selective rewards, controlled pluralism, or targeted repression.

Authoritarian recomposition demonstrates why moral disinversion does not necessarily weaken authoritarianism in a linear way. A regime that loses moral adhesion may become less ideologically persuasive but more administratively coercive, less symbolically credible but more technically adaptive, less morally hegemonic but more selective in its control. Moral fragility can therefore produce authoritarian innovation.

Table 3. Non-Teleological Configurations of Moral Disinversion

Configuration	Defining condition	Dominant management logic	Relation between obedience and belief	Analytical implication
Partial disinversion	Disinversion mechanisms appear but remain localized or sectoral	Patriotic resilience still broadly effective; informational resilience limited	Obedience and belief diverge only in specific spaces	Fragility exists without systemic destabilization
Blocked disinversion	Emerging dissonance is contained before becoming expansive	Strong patriotic resilience, coercive reinforcement, symbolic escalation	Belief is pressured back into alignment with obedience	Fragility may produce authoritarian hardening

Configuration	Defining condition	Dominant management logic	Relation between obedience and belief	Analytical implication
Reversible disinversion	Moral adhesion weakens but is later partially restored	Successful remoralization, symbolic recalibration, performance recovery	Obedience and belief are partially re-aligned	Disinversion is not irreversible
Durable disinversion without transition	Moral adhesion weakens persistently while compliance remains	Patriotic resilience insufficient; informational resilience fragmented	Obedience persists without stable belief	Persistence is not equivalent to stability
Authoritarian recomposition	The regime adapts to weakened moral adhesion by reorganizing rule	Strategic recalibration of coercion, incentives, information control, and selective remoralization	Belief is no longer fully restored; obedience is maintained through new combinations	Moral fragility can generate authoritarian adaptation

Source: Author's elaboration.

5.6. Typological implications

This typology clarifies three points. First, moral disinversion is not a transitional stage. It may precede transition, but it may also remain partial, be blocked, become reversible, persist without transition, or generate authoritarian recomposition. Second, the relation between patriotic and informational resilience is decisive: strong patriotic resilience can contain disinversion, while informational resilience may reveal or deepen it without producing organized resistance. Third, the typology distinguishes survival, stability, and moral effectiveness. A regime may survive institutionally while losing the moral capacity to make obedience appear legitimate, necessary, or self-evident.

Conclusion

This article has developed the concept of moral disinversion to identify a form of authoritarian fragility obscured when regime persistence is equated with political stability. Moral disinversion refers to an endogenous, reversible, and non-teleological process through

which moralized authoritarian governance loses its capacity to convert narrative loyalty into moral adhesion while continuing to secure public obedience.

The argument contributes to authoritarian studies by distinguishing regime survival, institutional stability, and moral effectiveness. Existing research explains how authoritarian regimes endure through coercion, co-optation, law, uncertainty, information control, and symbolic performance. Moral disinversion adds a narrower claim: these instruments may continue to operate even when the moral bond that makes obedience appear virtuous, patriotic, or necessary weakens. The central mechanism is obedience without belief.

The analysis also distinguished between two logics through which moral disinversion may be managed. Patriotic resilience refers to regime-centered efforts to contain disinversion by remoralizing loyalty, sacrifice, unity, and endurance. Informational resilience refers to the partial and often informal reactivation of verification practices. These two logics do not lead automatically to opposing outcomes. Patriotic resilience may stabilize authoritarian rule by compensating for weakened adhesion. Informational resilience may weaken the monopoly of official truth-claims without producing organized resistance or democratic transition.

The concept has limits. It does not explain every form of authoritarian decline, every case of misinformation, or every instance of public cynicism. It applies most clearly where loyalty, truth, and belonging are morally fused. Future research can extend the framework through comparative and case-based inquiry, including discourse analysis, ritual observation, media practices, interviews, and discourse–practice comparison. Moral disinversion does not predict the fall of authoritarian rule. It identifies a prior condition: the erosion of moral adhesion under continued obedience.

Annexes

Tableau A1. Dimensions of Moral Disinversion

Dimension	Under moralized authoritarian governance	Under moral disinversion	Main analytical implication
Cognitive	Official narratives organize reality and expectations	Narratives circulate but no longer structure practical judgment	Loss of narrative credibility
Normative	Obedience is framed as civic virtue or moral duty	Compliance becomes instrumental or defensive	Loss of moral authority
Emotional	Loyalty is attached to sacrifice, endurance, or patriotic affect	Appeals generate fatigue, indifference, irony, or withdrawal	Loss of affective adhesion
Symbolic	Rituals and symbols perform unity and moral legitimacy	Repetition produces banalization or empty participation	Loss of symbolic performativity

Source: Author's elaboration.

Tableau A2. Management Logics of Moral Disinversion

Logic	Main agent or site	Core operation	Effect on moral disinversion	Analytical caution
Patriotic resilience	Ruling apparatus, official institutions, state media, ritual spaces	Corrective remoralization of loyalty, sacrifice, unity, and endurance	May contain, redirect, or partially reverse disinversion	Intensified patriotism may indicate compensation for fragility, not stable adhesion
Informational resilience	Individuals, social groups, informal networks, media practices, local knowledge spaces	Partial reactivation of verification and comparison	May deepen or reveal disinversion by weakening narrative monopoly	Verification does not automatically imply opposition, liberalization, or democratic transition

Source: Author's elaboration.

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