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RECEIVED 05 May 2025

REVISED 12 September 2025

ACCEPTED 24 November 2025

PUBLISHED 04 March 2026

CITATION

Lee A (2026) Policy choices under military rule: a comparative analysis of developmental divergence in South Korea and Myanmar. *Front. Polit. Sci.* 7:1623139. doi: 10.3389/fpos.2025.1623139

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Policy choices under military rule: a comparative analysis of developmental divergence in South Korea and Myanmar

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Introduction: This study examines the divergent economic trajectories of South Korea and Myanmar following military coups in the early 1960s. Despite similar starting points under authoritarian rule, the two regimes adopted fundamentally different economic strategies, resulting in contrasting developmental outcomes.

Methods: Drawing on a comparative political economy framework and Peter Evans' concept of the developmental state, the study employs a mixed-methods approach combining historical institutional analysis with Difference-in-Differences (DiD) estimation using World Bank and Maddison Project data (1955–1985).

Results: The DiD analysis indicates that South Korea experienced a statistically significant post-1962 treatment effect of approximately \$620 in GDP per capita relative to Myanmar, alongside substantially higher urbanization growth. These findings demonstrate that export-oriented industrialization under a developmental state framework generated markedly stronger economic transformation.

Discussion: The results suggest that military regimes are not economically deterministic; rather, developmental outcomes depend on institutional capacity, leadership orientation, and strategic policy choices. The study contributes to debates on authoritarian development by highlighting the interaction between domestic institutions and geopolitical context.

KEYWORDS

authoritarian development, developmental state, military rule, difference-in-differences, South Korea, Myanmar

1 Introduction

In the decades following the Second World War, many newly independent nations found themselves governed not by democratically elected civilian administrations, but by military regimes that came to power through coups d'état. In such regimes, the military often became the dominant political actor, justifying its authority on the basis of national security and development imperatives. This phenomenon was particularly prevalent in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where post-colonial states were institutionally fragile and lacked cohesive governing frameworks. Among these, Myanmar (formerly Burma) and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) present especially instructive cases. Both experienced military takeovers in the early 1960s, but their subsequent economic and political trajectories diverged dramatically.

While both countries shared the experience of military coups, their pre-coup conditions were not identical. South Korea benefited from substantial U.S. economic and

military assistance and its strategic position within the Cold War order, which created strong external incentives for institutional consolidation and export-oriented growth. Myanmar, by contrast, pursued a policy of non-alignment and self-reliance; despite its abundant natural resources, this orientation fostered international isolation and limited access to foreign markets and aid. Acknowledging these structural differences helps to address potential critiques of case comparability. Nevertheless, the central concern of this study remains the distinct policy orientations, leadership choices, and institutional capacities that ultimately shaped the countries' divergent developmental outcomes.

Myanmar was once considered one of the most resource-rich and agriculturally advanced countries in Southeast Asia. By the late 1940s, it had the highest per capita income in the region and was the world's leading exporter of rice. However, following the 1962 military coup led by General Ne Win, the country embarked on a path of rigid economic nationalism and self-reliant socialism, known as the "Burmese Way to Socialism." In contrast, South Korea, emerging from colonial occupation and civil war with far fewer economic resources, pursued an export-led, state-guided capitalist development strategy under the leadership of General Park Chung-hee after the 1961 coup. By the late 1980s, South Korea had become a member of the OECD, while Myanmar had descended into economic stagnation and political isolation.

This stark divergence raises a fundamental question in the comparative study of authoritarian regimes: why do similar military regimes, emerging under comparable historical and geopolitical circumstances, generate such vastly different developmental outcomes? Existing literature provides partial answers through modernization theory (Huntington, 1968), dependency theory (Frank, 1966), and developmental state theory (Johnson, 1982; Evans, 1995). However, much of this scholarship remains either overly descriptive or limited to single-country analyses, lacking empirical evaluation of causal mechanisms across comparable authoritarian contexts. This study seeks to fill that gap by integrating theoretical and empirical approaches to explain how divergent economic policies under military rule can lead to fundamentally different trajectories of state transformation and national development.

Drawing upon Peter Evans' concept of "embedded autonomy" (Evans, 1995) and the broader developmental state literature, this study argues that policy orientation—particularly the strategic alignment of leadership, state capacity, and institutional autonomy—plays a decisive role in shaping long-term developmental outcomes under authoritarian rule. While Ne Win's Myanmar evolved into a predatory state marked by rent-seeking behavior, weak institutions, and policy incoherence, Park Chung-hee's South Korea exemplified the characteristics of a developmental state: high institutional capacity, effective bureaucratic coordination, and long-term policy vision focused on economic transformation.

To examine this proposition empirically, the study adopts a mixed-methods design that combines historical-comparative analysis with Difference-in-Differences (DiD) estimation. The DiD approach allows for quantitative testing of the treatment effect of South Korea's capitalist policy trajectory relative to Myanmar's socialist path, using key indicators such as GDP per capita and urbanization rates between 1955 and 1985. This analytical

framework not only grounds theoretical claims in observable outcomes but also contributes to a growing body of literature emphasizing the importance of institutional design and leadership orientation in authoritarian governance (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012; Slater, 2010; Svobik, 2012).

Moreover, the study contributes to current political science debates on authoritarian resilience and developmental variation in the Global South. As scholars increasingly recognize the limitations of regime typologies based solely on procedural democracy or authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way, 2010), this paper shifts the focus toward the substantive outcomes of governance—particularly in economic development and institutional transformation. In doing so, it provides insight into how policy design, even under illiberal rule, can produce divergent legacies of national capacity, economic mobility, and political legitimacy.

In sum, this study investigates why military regimes with ostensibly similar foundations produced radically different economic outcomes in Myanmar and South Korea. By emphasizing the interplay between policy choice, state capacity, and leadership under authoritarian rule, it offers a nuanced explanation of developmental divergence—one that is increasingly relevant in an era where military takeovers are resurging in parts of Africa and Asia (Powell and Thyne, 2011; Geddes et al., 2014). In this context, the findings not only provide historical understanding but also inform contemporary debates on authoritarian development models and their global implications.

2 Theoretical background and literature review

The literature on military regimes and economic development is extensive yet fragmented, spanning multiple theoretical traditions across political science, sociology, and development studies. Classical modernization theory, as articulated by Huntington (1968), posited that military intervention often arises in transitional societies where political mobilization outpaces institutional development. In this view, military regimes serve as temporary stabilizers during periods of political and economic disorder. Similarly, Von der Mehden (1969) argued that in many postcolonial contexts, military rule emerged not out of ambition but as a pragmatic response to the dysfunction of civilian governance in the early stages of independence.

More recent studies, however, have called into question the presumed neutrality or efficacy of military governments. Moore (1993) suggested that strong bureaucratic institutions, including the military, can suppress popular pressures and sustain authoritarian modernization, but only under specific leadership conditions. Wilson (1999) took this further by conceptualizing military regimes as "barracks states," in which the military transforms itself into a revolutionary force pursuing its own interests, often at odds with societal welfare. These frameworks converge in treating the military not merely as an instrument of national defense but as a central actor in political and economic transformation.

Within the comparative politics literature, one of the most influential frameworks for explaining divergent developmental outcomes under authoritarianism is the developmental state

paradigm (Johnson, 1982; Evans, 1995). This approach shifts attention from regime type to institutional configuration, emphasizing the role of technocratic capacity, state autonomy, and elite commitment to economic transformation. In particular, Evans' concept of "embedded autonomy" captures the balance between a strong state apparatus and its integration with societal interests through meritocratic bureaucracy and long-term planning (Evans, 1995).

Developmental state theory has provided a powerful lens for analyzing East Asian industrialization, but its applicability to other authoritarian regimes remains contested. Scholars such as Amsden (1989) and Woo-Cumings (1999) have emphasized the importance of late-industrialization strategies, including export orientation and sectoral planning. Meanwhile, critics have pointed out that developmental outcomes are often contingent on unique historical conditions, such as colonial legacies or geopolitical patronage.

At the same time, it is important to clarify the analytical distinctions among these frameworks. Dependency theory locates the roots of underdevelopment primarily in external structural constraints, such as unequal terms of trade and the hierarchical organization of the global capitalist system, which lock peripheral economies into subordinate positions (Frank, 1966). By contrast, the concept of the predatory state (Robinson, 1999) highlights the role of domestic elites and rent-seeking behavior, arguing that authoritarian rulers may exploit state power to appropriate resources without reinvesting them into productive sectors. Both perspectives emphasize mechanisms of economic stagnation, but they diverge in identifying the locus of constraint: the former stresses external dependency, while the latter underscores internal institutional weakness. Against this backdrop, the developmental state paradigm (Johnson, 1982; Evans, 1995; Chang, 1999; Leftwich, 1995; Weiss, 1998) offers a more positive account by demonstrating how strong, meritocratic, and embedded bureaucracies can generate autonomous yet socially responsive policy capacity, enabling states to pursue long-term industrial transformation despite authoritarian constraints.

Yet, as several scholars have noted, Peter Evans' framework of embedded autonomy was formulated in the context of late industrialization and the global neoliberal turn of the 1980s, primarily to "find the state" in settings where civil society was underdeveloped or fragmented. Its analytical reach becomes less straightforward when applied to East Asia's earlier military regimes, where political parties and armed revolutions—not merely bureaucracies—were central vehicles of modernization. In countries such as South Korea and Myanmar, military elites themselves became decisive actors in shaping both the opportunities and constraints of development. Thus, complementing Evans' emphasis on state–society relations with closer attention to the role of political parties, military revolutions, and their interaction with external powers provides a fuller framework for explaining divergent authoritarian outcomes in the region.

In contrast to the developmental state, the notion of the predatory state—most clearly elaborated by Robinson (1999)—describes regimes that extract economic surplus for narrow elite interests without reinvesting in productivity or public welfare. In such states, the military may become an extractive institution,

undermining economic dynamism rather than enhancing it. According to Robinson, predatory states are characterized by weak bureaucratic capacity, low institutional accountability, and an absence of long-term policy coordination.

Despite the richness of this theoretical landscape, empirical analyses that test the developmental or predatory nature of military regimes through comparative, data-driven methods remain scarce. Existing studies tend to focus either on single-country case studies or broad typological classifications without evaluating policy impact through longitudinal data. This study addresses that gap by applying a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) methodology to systematically compare the economic trajectories of Myanmar and South Korea under military rule.

Moreover, the growing literature on authoritarian institutionalism provides new insights into how variation in leadership vision, elite cohesion, and bureaucratic strength shapes policy outcomes under autocracy (Slater, 2010; Svobik, 2012). These studies suggest that military regimes are not inherently developmental or extractive, but that their outcomes depend on the internal logic of institutional design and policy coherence.

In this respect, the present study contributes to refining existing theories by situating two historically parallel cases within a shared theoretical and empirical framework. At the same time, it is important to clarify how this approach differs from conventional modernization theory, which often treated military regimes as uniformly conducive to economic growth. By contrast, this study emphasizes variation within military rule, showing that developmental outcomes depend on the interaction of state capacity, leadership orientation, and external alignments.

3 Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach that integrates historical institutional analysis with quantitative evaluation, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of how policy orientation under military regimes shaped divergent development paths. By combining qualitative case comparison with econometric estimation, the research design seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical insight and empirical validation.

The qualitative component employs a historical-institutionalist framework to trace the evolution of economic institutions and policy strategies under the Ne Win regime in Myanmar and the Park Chung-hee regime in South Korea. This part draws on secondary literature, archival data, and prior case studies to establish a contextual narrative of each regime's economic logic, institutional strength, and leadership orientation. It highlights the ways in which ideology, elite cohesion, and technocratic engagement shaped state capacity and strategic direction.

The quantitative component applies a DiD design to assess the causal effect of divergent economic policy choices. This method enables comparison of outcome variables—specifically, GDP per capita (in constant 2010 USD) and urban population share—before and after the treatment year of 1962, when both countries were under military rule but began to implement sharply contrasting economic strategies. South Korea is treated as the "treatment" group due to its shift toward export-led industrialization under

a developmental state framework, whereas Myanmar serves as the control group, having remained committed to inward-looking socialist policies.

In addition to visual inspection, this study employs a formal pre-trend test using an event-study specification. By estimating lead coefficients for the years preceding 1962, it confirms that South Korea and Myanmar followed broadly parallel trajectories in GDP per capita and urbanization before the treatment year. The absence of statistically significant pre-treatment differences reinforces the credibility of the parallel trends assumption and strengthens the causal interpretation of the DiD results.

The DiD model is formally specified as follows:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Treated}_i + \beta_2 \text{Post}_t + \delta(\text{Treated}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + \epsilon_{it}$$

In this equation, Y_{it} represents the outcome variable for country i at year t either GDP per capita or urban population share. The binary variable Treated_i equals 1 for South Korea and 0 for Myanmar, while Post_t equals 1 for the post-treatment period (years after 1962) and 0 otherwise. The coefficient δ on the interaction term ($\text{Treated}_i \times \text{Post}_t$) captures the average treatment effect of South Korea's transition to capitalist policy under a developmental state model, relative to Myanmar's path under state socialism.

The dataset includes annual data from 1955 to 1985, sourced from the World Bank's World Development Indicators and the Maddison Project Database. This 31-year span allows for balanced comparison of the pre- and post-treatment periods while minimizing the risk of overlapping regime transitions.

To validate the parallel trends assumption—an essential condition for the credibility of DiD estimations—the study conducts both visual inspection and descriptive analysis. Trend lines for both GDP per capita and urban population are plotted across time for each country, showing broadly similar trajectories prior to 1962. Additional robustness checks include placebo DiD estimations using false treatment years and alternative outcome specifications, where data availability permits.

While the design necessarily limits generalizability due to the small number of country units ($n=2$), it offers a rare opportunity to apply causal inference tools in a tightly controlled historical comparison. By treating the South Korea–Myanmar divergence as a natural experiment in policy orientation under military rule, this study seeks to isolate the developmental consequences of economic strategy within comparable authoritarian contexts.

Rather than treating the two-country design solely as a limitation, this study frames it as a form of “micro-laboratory” for theory testing. By focusing on two cases that share the experience of military coups but differ in their policy orientation, institutional capacity, and geopolitical positioning, the analysis allows for unusually close scrutiny of causal mechanisms. This strategy highlights the value of small- N comparisons in political economy: while they may not yield broad generalizations, they can provide precise leverage to test theoretical expectations, clarify scope conditions, and generate insights that complement large- N cross-national studies.

While this design leverages robust indicators such as GDP per capita and urban population share, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of relying on a relatively narrow set of variables.

Broader measures—such as foreign aid flows, trade dependence, or sectoral industrial performance—could provide complementary insights into the mechanisms of development under military rule. However, consistent and reliable historical data for Myanmar in the 1950s–1980s are scarce, which constrains the feasibility of incorporating such variables without compromising comparability. The decision to focus on GDP and urbanization therefore reflects a balance between parsimony and credibility, ensuring that the Difference-in-Differences estimation remains empirically tractable and historically grounded. Future research may expand this framework through larger panel datasets, triple-difference designs, or sector-specific indicators to more systematically test how external support, sanctions, and global integration interacted with domestic policy choices.

4 Comparative case description

To understand the divergent developmental outcomes of Myanmar and South Korea under military rule, it is essential to examine not only their macroeconomic policies but also the nature of their governing institutions and leadership orientation. Drawing on Peter Evans' typology of the developmental, predatory, and intermediate states (Evans, 1995), this section outlines the structural and strategic differences between the Ne Win regime in Myanmar and the Park Chung-hee administration in South Korea. While both regimes emerged from military coups and operated under authoritarian frameworks, their internal logic of governance, policy priorities, and institutional capacity diverged significantly.

4.1 The Ne Win Regime in Myanmar: ideological rigidity and institutional weakness

When General Ne Win seized power in 1962, Myanmar's political and economic future was abruptly redirected. His new regime introduced what came to be known as the “Burmese Way to Socialism”—an economic and ideological framework that aspired to sever ties with colonial capitalism and foster a self-sufficient, sovereign society (Steinberg, 2001; Taylor, 2009). Grounded in a blend of Buddhist values, nationalist sentiment, and socialist planning, this model initially appealed to many as a pathway toward equity and independence. It is important to note, however, that the very classification of post-1962 Burma as a “socialist” state remains contested in the scholarly literature. Some scholars argue that the “Burmese Way to Socialism” functioned less as a coherent socialist model than as an authoritarian nationalist project that selectively appropriated socialist rhetoric without building the institutional foundations of socialism (Campbell, 2023). In this study, the term socialism is employed primarily as a shorthand to capture the regime's inward-looking and state-dominated economic strategy, while recognizing that its precise ideological character is the subject of ongoing debate.

At the outset, the regime's intentions were not entirely devoid of developmental logic. The central government nationalized industries, monopolized foreign trade, and launched policies

intended to reduce foreign dependence and dismantle oligarchic wealth structures (Myint-U, 2006). Yet these reforms were implemented within a highly centralized bureaucracy that lacked both policy expertise and institutional flexibility. Ministries and public agencies were often staffed not for competence but for loyalty, and policy feedback mechanisms were virtually absent. Consequently, while central control expanded, coordination and execution steadily deteriorated.

Myanmar's state apparatus, though formally autonomous, suffered from chronic deficiencies in bureaucratic professionalism and strategic foresight. Without effective oversight or adaptive learning, state-owned enterprises struggled to remain productive. Inflation, supply disruptions, and administrative bottlenecks became persistent features of daily life (Selth, 2002). Rather than correcting course, the regime responded by reinforcing ideological orthodoxy and clamping down on dissent, which further constrained the system's capacity to reform itself.

Viewed through the lens of Evans' (1995) typology, the Ne Win government exhibited the key traits of a predatory state—a state that extracts resources from society without reinvesting in institutional development or broad-based prosperity. Decision-making was insulated, rigid, and largely decoupled from social needs. Over time, economic stagnation hardened into structural decline, and by the 1980s, Myanmar was increasingly marginalized from global markets, aid flows, and regional development trends (Robinson, 1999).

Although the “Burmese Way to Socialism” had, at its inception, a certain popular legitimacy rooted in historical trauma and a desire for national self-determination, its legacy is more accurately characterized by institutional fragility, economic mismanagement, and political repression (Callahan, 2003; Taylor, 2009). The regime's original developmental ambition gradually collapsed under the weight of inefficiency, isolation, and its own inability to adapt.

Beyond these internal dynamics, external constraints further compounded Myanmar's stagnation. After independence, Aung San and his successors navigated between competing influences of Britain and Japan, but following the 1962 coup, the country's policy of non-alignment and self-reliance left it isolated from Cold War patronage networks. Unlike South Korea and Thailand, Myanmar did not receive sustained military or economic assistance from the United States or Japan. Instead, the regime faced long-term sanctions and trade restrictions, particularly from Western countries during the late twentieth century, which limited access to capital, technology, and export markets. These geopolitical dynamics magnified the costs of domestic policy failures, reinforcing the country's exclusion from global industrial chains and deepening its trajectory of underdevelopment.

4.2 The Park Chung-hee Regime in South Korea: strategic coordination and developmental planning

Unlike Myanmar's trajectory, South Korea under General Park Chung-hee followed a radically different path after the military coup of 1961. Facing widespread poverty, weak institutions, and the legacy of civil war, the country stood on precarious ground.

Park's response, however, was not ideological isolationism but strategic adaptation. His administration launched a series of 5-Year Economic Development Plans that prioritized export-led growth, industrial modernization, and integration into global markets. With U.S. financial support, foreign aid, and concessional loans, the regime channeled resources into infrastructure, manufacturing, and human capital development (Amsden, 1989; Woo-Cumings, 1999).

While authoritarian in structure, the regime did not operate as a monolith of coercion. Rather, it built a technocratic bureaucracy capable of long-term economic planning and selective policy learning. Institutions such as the Economic Planning Board became engines of industrial transformation, staffed by experts who were insulated from clientelist pressures. These bureaucratic elites worked in tandem with emerging business conglomerates—the *chaebols*—through a system of state-business coordination that balanced autonomy and embeddedness (Johnson, 1982; Evans, 1995). Crucially, the government did not merely dictate terms from above; it negotiated with capital in a way that aligned private investment with national development goals.

Park himself played a complex role. On the one hand, his unwavering commitment to economic modernization allowed for policy consistency and insulation from short-term populism. On the other, his consolidation of executive power, suppression of dissent, and manipulation of the press severely constrained democratic life. Political opposition was routinely silenced, labor movements repressed, and legal institutions subordinated to executive interests (Kim, 2000). The developmental state, in this context, operated within an authoritarian framework that prioritized growth at the expense of political freedoms.

Nevertheless, the economic outcomes were undeniably transformative. Between 1962 and 1979, South Korea's GDP per capita more than tripled, urbanization accelerated rapidly, and industrial diversification expanded into high-value sectors. These results reflect not merely economic luck or external support, but the internal logic of a coordinated state apparatus that was both capable and intentional in its developmental strategy.

In short, South Korea's military regime embodied the characteristics of a developmental state, but not without costs. The combination of technocratic governance, embedded autonomy, and strategic leadership produced one of the most successful cases of late industrialization in the 20th century. Yet this success was accompanied by systematic repression, curtailed civil liberties, and a democratic deficit that would only begin to be redressed in the late 1980s. The Park regime thus illustrates the paradox of authoritarian development where institutional capacity can coexist with coercion, and growth can emerge in the absence of freedom.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that South Korea's developmental trajectory cannot be explained by domestic institutional capacity alone. The country's strategic position at the frontline of the Cold War brought massive U.S. military protection and economic assistance, which provided external security guarantees and critical inflows of capital. The 1965 normalization treaty with Japan further facilitated large-scale loans, investment, and technology transfers, while expanding access to regional markets. In addition, South Korea actively integrated itself into the emerging global industrial division of labor, attracting foreign direct investment from Japan and

Western economies in sectors such as textiles, electronics, and shipbuilding. These external opportunities, however, did not automatically generate transformation; they became developmental only because Park’s regime constructed a capable technocratic bureaucracy and disciplined state–business relations that effectively absorbed and redirected external resources. The South Korean case thus underscores the interaction of geopolitical alignment, external support, and domestic institutional design—showing that developmental success under authoritarian rule was neither inevitable nor solely a product of internal policy vision.

4.3 Comparative implications

Taken together, the divergence between Myanmar and South Korea was not solely a function of domestic leadership and institutional design, but also of their structural positioning in the international system. Whereas South Korea capitalized on Cold War alliances, U.S. security guarantees, and external inflows of capital and technology—conditions that amplified the effectiveness of its developmental state—Myanmar’s self-imposed isolation and subsequent sanctions narrowed its developmental possibilities and magnified the costs of weak institutions.

This comparative perspective underscores that authoritarian trajectories must be understood through the interaction of internal governance choices and external geopolitical conditions. In short, divergent outcomes under military rule are best explained not by policy orientation alone, but by the dynamic interplay between state capacity, leadership strategy, and the broader international environment in which these regimes are embedded. By highlighting this interplay, the analysis extends developmental state theory beyond its traditional focus on domestic institutional design to incorporate international structural constraints and opportunities, offering a more comprehensive account of how authoritarian regimes succeed, stagnate, or collapse.

5 Results

This section presents the results of the DiD estimation designed to assess the economic impact of divergent policy choices under military rule in Myanmar and South Korea. The empirical analysis focuses on two key indicators: GDP per capita (in constant 2010 USD) and the share of the urban population, both widely recognized as robust proxies for national economic transformation and modernization.

Figure 1 illustrates the trends in GDP per capita for South Korea and Myanmar from 1955 to 1985. To provide a descriptive overview of these indicators across time, Table 1 summarizes the mean values of GDP per capita and urban population share for both countries, divided into pre- and post-1962 periods. As shown in Table 1, the two countries began from broadly similar economic positions. Before 1962, Myanmar’s GDP per capita was \$410.2, while South Korea’s stood at \$465.8—a relatively modest difference. Similarly, urban population shares were comparable at 17.4% for Myanmar and 22.3% for South Korea. However, in the post-treatment period, South Korea’s GDP per capita increased to \$1,224.6, nearly double that of Myanmar’s \$601.7. Urbanization

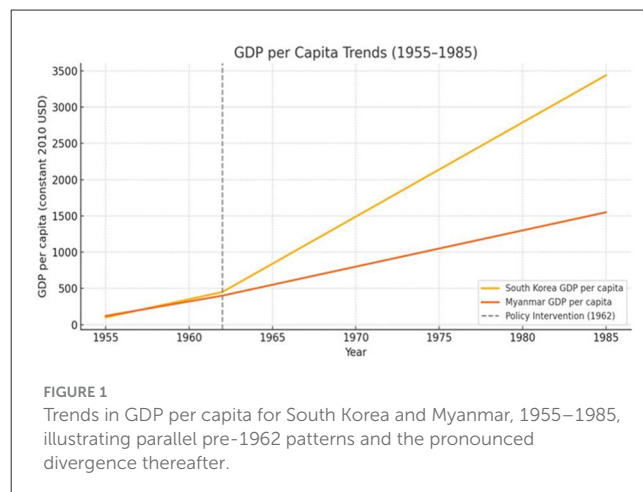


FIGURE 1 Trends in GDP per capita for South Korea and Myanmar, 1955–1985, illustrating parallel pre-1962 patterns and the pronounced divergence thereafter.

TABLE 1 Summary statistics of GDP per capita and urban population share for Myanmar and South Korea, comparing pre-1962 and post-1962 averages.

Variable	Country	Pre-1962 mean	Post-1962 mean	Std. dev.
GDP per Capita (USD)	Myanmar	410.2	601.7	112.4
GDP per Capita (USD)	South Korea	465.8	1,224.6	305.2
Urban Pop. Share (%)	Myanmar	17.4	23.2	3.8
Urban Pop. Share (%)	South Korea	22.3	41.7	6.4

Source: Author’s calculation based on World Bank (2024) and Maddison Project Database (2023). Data compiled to ensure inter-country comparability as outlined in Evans (1995).

TABLE 2 Results of difference-in-differences (DiD) estimation for GDP per capita (1955–1985), showing the differential post-1962 effect of South Korea’s export-led industrialization relative to Myanmar’s socialist path.

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-statistic	p-value
Treated (SKR)	285.2	34.1	8.36	0.000
Post-1962	124.7	22.8	5.47	0.000
Treated × Post (DiD)	622.9	55.6	11.20	0.000

also advanced more rapidly in South Korea, reaching 41.7% compared to Myanmar’s 23.2%. These trends offer preliminary support for the hypothesis that differences in policy orientation contributed significantly to divergent developmental outcomes.

The DiD model estimates the average treatment effect of South Korea’s adoption of capitalist export-led growth policies following the 1961 military coup. Table 2 displays the regression output for GDP per capita.

The interaction term, which represents the DiD estimate, is statistically significant at the 1% level, indicating that South Korea’s GDP per capita increased by approximately \$623 more than Myanmar’s in the post-treatment period, after controlling for

TABLE 3 Results of Difference-in-Differences (DiD) estimation for urban population share (1955–1985), highlighting the sharper urbanization trajectory in South Korea compared to Myanmar after 1962.

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-statistic	P-value
Treated (SKR)	3.21	0.42	7.64	0.000
Post-1962	2.45	0.35	6.99	0.000
Treated × Post (DiD)	7.68	0.61	12.59	0.000

baseline differences and time trends. This suggests a substantial economic gain attributable to South Korea's policy orientation and developmental state structure.

This visual representation confirms that the parallel trends assumption holds reasonably well, supporting the validity of the DiD design. The sharp divergence following 1962 reinforces the statistical findings. To capture broader structural transformation, we include urban population share as a secondary outcome. The DiD results for this indicator are shown in Table 3.

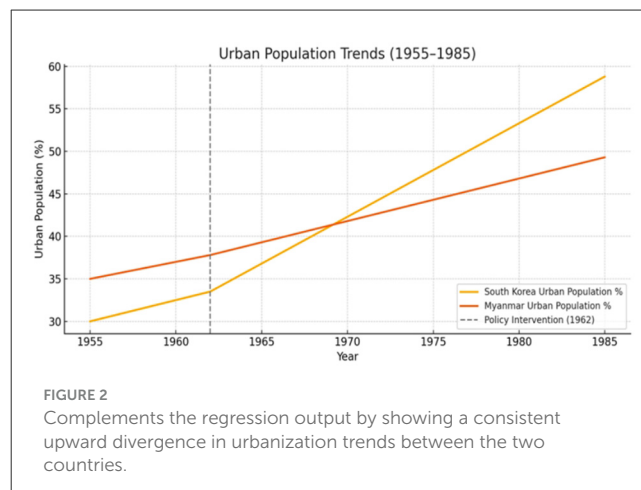
Figure 2 presents the DiD estimation results for urban population share from 1955 to 1985. South Korea's urban population share increased by an estimated 7.7 percentage points more than Myanmar's in the post-1962 period. This result is also statistically significant at the 1% level, further supporting the hypothesis that export-oriented economic policies under a developmental state contributed to structural modernization.

Beyond their statistical value, these urbanization patterns should be understood not only as demographic shifts but also as indicators of broader institutional and developmental dynamics. In the developmental state framework, rising urban population shares signal the state's capacity to mobilize labor, foster industrial clustering, and expand public infrastructure to support sustained growth. In South Korea, rapid urban concentration reflected the state's ability to channel resources toward manufacturing and integrate rural populations into the national economy. By contrast, Myanmar's more stagnant and uneven urban transition illustrates the constraints of a predatory state, where limited bureaucratic capacity and reliance on coercion hindered broad-based modernization. This interpretation positions urbanization as a useful proxy for assessing the depth of state capacity and the nature of state–society relations under authoritarian rule.

Taken together, these results provide compelling empirical support for the proposition that policy orientation under military regimes—when coupled with institutional capacity and developmental leadership—can produce dramatically different economic outcomes. While causality should be interpreted with caution given the small number of comparison units, the consistent direction and magnitude of effects across multiple indicators strengthen the credibility of the findings.

6 Discussion

The findings presented above invite a deeper exploration of the intermediate mechanisms through which policy orientation



translated into divergent developmental outcomes. Economic growth and urbanization did not emerge in isolation; they were mediated by state strategies in areas such as education, industrial policy, and state–business relations. In South Korea, sustained investment in universal education produced a skilled labor force that could be effectively absorbed into manufacturing and technology-intensive industries, thereby reinforcing the state's developmental agenda. Industrial policy, particularly through targeted credit allocation and the nurturing of chaebol conglomerates, further institutionalized state–business collaboration in line with Evans' notion of embedded autonomy. Conversely, in Myanmar, the military regime's emphasis on autarky and resource extraction undermined the creation of developmental bureaucracies and weakened incentives for long-term investment. The state's reliance on coercion rather than negotiated bargains with social and economic actors limited the possibilities for broad-based industrial transformation. By foregrounding these mechanisms, the study underscores that the contrast between South Korea and Myanmar is not merely a reflection of external conditions, but of the interaction between leadership vision, institutional capacity, and the strategic design of policies—a point that reinforces and nuances existing debates on the nature of authoritarian developmental trajectories.

At the same time, the divergent outcomes cannot be explained by domestic policy orientation alone. Geopolitical alignment and access to external resources played a decisive role in shaping the room for maneuver available to military rulers. South Korea, situated at the frontlines of the Cold War, benefited from extensive U.S. military protection and economic assistance, which provided foreign exchange, technological transfer, and preferential market access. These external supports amplified the effectiveness of Park's developmental strategy. By contrast, Myanmar's posture of non-alignment and self-reliance—combined with international sanctions that intensified from the 1960s onward—produced isolation from global capital and markets, limiting the potential for policy reform even if internal institutions had been stronger. Initial conditions also mattered: while both countries inherited colonial legacies, South Korea's relatively dense agrarian base and prior exposure to Japanese industrial practices created opportunities for

mobilization that Myanmar's fragmented and resource-dependent economy could not easily replicate.

Placing South Korea and Myanmar alongside Thailand further contextualizes these contrasts. Thailand, though not part of the formal DiD analysis, illustrates an intermediate trajectory under repeated military interventions. Benefiting from Cold War alignment, U.S. aid during the Vietnam War, and substantial Japanese investment, Thailand achieved rapid growth and partial industrialization, attaining middle-income status. Yet recurrent coups, weak party institutionalization, and policy instability constrained its ability to consolidate a full developmental state. Thailand's experience underscores that authoritarian legacies cannot be reduced to a binary of success or failure. Instead, outcomes reflect the intersection of domestic institutional capacity with external alignment and geopolitical opportunities, yielding a spectrum that ranges from developmental transformation (South Korea), through partial modernization (Thailand), to stagnation (Myanmar).

Taken together, these insights highlight that developmental divergence under military rule emerges from the layered interaction of domestic policy orientation, institutional strength, and external conditions. Leadership vision and institutional design shaped the internal capacity for development, while geopolitical context and access to external resources conditioned the extent to which those strategies could succeed. Recognizing this multi-dimensional causality provides a more comprehensive account of why military regimes with similar origins produced radically different developmental outcomes, and it positions the South Korea–Myanmar comparison not as an isolated dyad but as part of a wider spectrum of authoritarian developmental possibilities.

7 Conclusion

This study set out to examine why two military regimes that emerged under similar geopolitical conditions in the early 1960s—Myanmar and South Korea—produced vastly different developmental outcomes. By combining a comparative political economy framework with a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) empirical analysis, we explored how divergent economic policy choices and institutional configurations under authoritarian rule can shape long-term national trajectories.

The empirical findings reveal that South Korea, under Park Chung-hee's leadership, experienced significantly greater gains in GDP per capita and urban population share than Myanmar during the post-1962 period. These results are not merely statistical artifacts, but rather reflect a deeper structural transformation enabled by a developmental state model. Park's regime invested in institutional capacity, fostered technocratic governance, and pursued pragmatic economic strategies that aligned public planning with private sector incentives. By contrast, Ne Win's Myanmar exemplified the characteristics of a predatory state—marked by policy rigidity, institutional fragility, and an extractive logic that inhibited innovation and undermined long-term growth.

These findings reinforce and extend existing theories of authoritarian development. They support the proposition that military regimes are not inherently developmental or destructive;

rather, their outcomes hinge on the interaction between leadership orientation, state capacity, and economic strategy (Evans, 1995; Slater, 2010; Svoblik, 2012). By situating the South Korea–Myanmar divergence within both structural contexts and policy choices, the study demonstrates that authoritarian regimes can follow markedly different developmental trajectories, and that their outcomes are critically shaped by the interaction of leadership vision, institutional strength, and strategic orientation.

At the same time, the study acknowledges its limitations. The small number of comparison units ($n=2$) constrains the generalizability of the findings, and the parallel trends assumption, while supported visually, cannot be verified with the statistical rigor afforded by larger datasets. Moreover, the analysis does not fully capture other structural and geopolitical variables—such as Cold War alliances, foreign aid regimes, or the legacies of colonial state formation—that may have interacted with domestic policy choices. Recognizing these limitations is important to avoid overstating the causal weight of leadership and policy orientation alone.

Building on these limitations, future research should extend the scope of analysis beyond the two indicators employed here. While GDP per capita and urbanization provide robust measures of economic transformation, they cannot capture the full spectrum of developmental dynamics under military rule. Additional indicators—such as foreign aid inflows, trade dependence, or sectoral performance in manufacturing and agriculture—could yield deeper insights into how external linkages and internal capacities interacted over time. Incorporating such variables, ideally within larger- N panel datasets or extended designs like triple-difference estimation, would allow for more systematic testing of how global integration, sanctions, and external support shaped the developmental possibilities of authoritarian regimes. Such extensions would not only strengthen the generalizability of the findings but also situate the South Korea–Myanmar divergence within a broader comparative framework of authoritarian development.

In this regard, it is important to recognize that the South Korea–Myanmar comparison does not exhaust the possible trajectories under military rule. A broader comparative perspective shows that not all military regimes fit neatly into the categories of developmental success or stagnation. In this spectrum, Thailand occupies a revealing intermediate position. Thailand benefited from Cold War alignment with the United States, attracting substantial military and financial assistance during the Vietnam War era, as well as significant Japanese and Western investment. Its geographic position further reinforced its role as a regional hub for transport and tourism, helping the country achieve sustained growth and partial industrialization. As a result, Thailand advanced to middle-income status but has struggled to escape what is widely described as the “middle-income trap.” This trajectory illustrates partial modernization—outcomes more advanced than Myanmar's stagnation but falling short of South Korea's consolidated transformation.

Nevertheless, the present study deliberately restricts its quantitative scope to South Korea and Myanmar. This

narrower design enhances causal clarity by treating their divergence as a quasi-natural experiment: two countries with nearly contemporaneous military takeovers that pursued sharply contrasting economic strategies, resulting in maximally divergent outcomes. Expanding the dataset to include Thailand would undoubtedly enrich the typological range but would also require broader archival research, additional economic indicators, and alternative identification strategies—such as triple-difference estimation or expanded panel approaches—that lie beyond the scope of this article. This is not to dismiss Thailand's importance; rather, it reflects a conscious decision to prioritize methodological precision in the present analysis while identifying Thailand's intermediate path as a valuable direction for future comparative work.

Taken together, these results offer significant theoretical and policy insights. If South Korea illustrates the potential of a fully consolidated developmental state and Myanmar exemplifies the costs of a predatory state, Thailand highlights how recurring military intervention, weak party institutionalization, and policy volatility can yield partial modernization without developmental consolidation. For contemporary policymakers and scholars, especially in regions like Africa and Southeast Asia where military interventions remain politically salient, these findings underscore the importance of institutional design and policy coherence in determining whether authoritarian rule entrenches stagnation, produces partial but unstable gains, or enables long-term transformation.

Data availability statement

The datasets analyzed in this study are publicly available from the World Bank's World Development Indicators and the Maddison Project Database. Further inquiries should be directed to the corresponding author/s.

Author contributions

AL: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Funding

The author declares that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2025.1623139/full#supplementary-material>

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