Authoritarian winds in a warming world: Climate change, securitization, and democracy

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Abstract

The securitization of climate change represents a significant shift in addressing this global challenge, transforming it from an environmental and economic issue into a matter of security. Previous literature has highlighted the benefits and drawbacks of securitizing climate change, but there is a need for a deeper understanding of its democratic implications. This thesis explores the theoretical implications of climate change securitization, the tension between security and democracy, and the roles of civil society and activism in mitigating risks. It begins by introducing securitization theory and the framing of climate change as a security issue, highlighting its transnational and long-term nature. It then delves into the inherent tension between security and democracy, discussing the democratic deficit and risks of authoritarianism, especially through states of emergency. Finally, it examines the roles of civil society and activism in promoting democratic climate governance. The main findings indicate that while securitization can mobilize resources and political will, it also poses risks to democratic values. This underscores the necessity of strengthening democratic institutions, fostering inclusive public participation, and ensuring transparent governance to balance security concerns with democratic values, thereby achieving effective and equitable climate action.

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"Avoiding climate breakdown will require cathedral thinking. We must lay the foundation while we may not know exactly how to build the ceiling." — Greta Thunberg

Introduction

Climate change represents one of the most significant challenges of the 21st century, posing complex threats to ecosystems, economies, and human societies globally. Traditionally viewed as an environmental and economic issue, climate change is increasingly being framed within the context of security. This process, known as the securitization of climate change, involves the portrayal of climate change as an existential threat that necessitates emergency measures and prioritizes national security concerns. While this framing can mobilize resources and political will, it also raises critical questions about the implications for democratic governance and civil liberties.

The social relevance of this topic cannot be overstated. The securitization of climate change has profound implications for how societies understand and respond to environmental threats. As governments adopt security-driven approaches to climate change, there are significant consequences for public policy, resource allocation, and the balance of power between state and society. Securitization can lead to the prioritization of short-term security measures over long-term sustainability goals, potentially sidelining efforts to address the root causes of climate change. Moreover, the framing of climate change as a security issue can legitimize the use of extraordinary measures that may infringe on civil liberties and democratic processes.

Academically, the securitization of climate change intersects with several fields, including political theory, international relations, and environmental studies. It provides a rich case study for examining how security discourses shape political agendas and influence governance structures. This topic contributes to the broader literature on securitization theory,

which explores how issues are framed as security threats and the political consequences of such framings. It also engages with debates on the tension between security and democracy, a central theme in political theory, and the potential for securitization to lead to authoritarianism. By focusing on climate change, this thesis adds to the growing body of scholarship on the intersection of environmental and security issues, highlighting the unique challenges posed by non-traditional security threats.

The research problem at the heart of this thesis is the tension between the securitization of climate change and democratic governance. Securitization can concentrate power in the hands of the state, justify the use of extraordinary measures, and prioritize security concerns over democratic values and human rights. This tension raises critical questions about the risks of authoritarianism and the erosion of democratic principles in the context of climate governance.

The central research question guiding this thesis is: *How does the securitization of climate change influence democratic governance, and what strategies can mitigate the risks of authoritarianism while ensuring effective climate action?* This question aims to explore both the theoretical and practical implications of climate change securitization, examining the potential threats to democracy and identifying ways to balance security concerns with democratic values.

To address this research question, the thesis is organized into three chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of the problem.

The first chapter provides the theoretical foundation for the thesis, introducing securitization theory and its key concepts. Securitization is defined as the process by which an issue is framed as a security threat, necessitating emergency measures, and prioritizing national security. The chapter discusses how this process transforms ordinary political issues

into matters of existential concern, concentrating power and justifying extraordinary actions. The chapter then applies securitization theory to climate change, highlighting its unique characteristics as a non-traditional security issue due to its transnational and long-term nature. By framing climate change as a security threat, the chapter sets the stage for examining the normative implications of this framing in subsequent chapters.

The second chapter delves into the core of the research problem, exploring the tension between security and democracy in political theory. It begins with an overview of the inherent conflict between these two concepts, defining security in terms of protection from existential threats and democracy as a system of governance based on participation, accountability, and the protection of civil liberties. The chapter then examines the democratic deficit of securitization, discussing how the concentration of power and the use of extraordinary measures can undermine democratic principles. Following this, the chapter addresses the risk of authoritarianism, using historical and contemporary examples to illustrate how securitization can erode democratic institutions and lead to the rise of authoritarian regimes. Finally, the chapter discusses states of emergency, examining how they can justify the suspension of democratic norms and the long-term implications for governance. The unique challenges of climate change securitization are then explored, highlighting how these dynamics specifically influence climate governance.

The final chapter focuses on strategies to mitigate the risks identified in the second chapter, ensuring that climate action remains effective and democratic. It begins by discussing the role of civil society in maintaining democratic governance, emphasizing the importance of transparency, accountability, and public participation. The chapter then examines the role of activism in countering the authoritarian tendencies of securitization, highlighting how grassroots movements can democratize climate governance and promote social justice. By analyzing the activities and impacts of civil society and activist groups, the chapter

underscores their potential to balance security concerns with democratic values, offering pathways for inclusive and participatory climate governance.

Chapter 1: Weathering the storm: Climate's emergence on the security stage

1.1 Introduction to securitization theory

The concept of securitization originates from the Copenhagen School of security studies, primarily developed by scholars such as Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan. Securitization theory emerged as a response to the traditional realist focus on military threats and state-centric perspectives on security. In contrast, the Copenhagen School introduced a broader understanding of security that includes economic, societal, environmental, and political dimensions.

Wæver was one of the pioneering figures in developing the concept of securitization, which he defined as the process by which state actors transform subjects into matters of security through "speech acts" (1998, p. 60). In this framework, security is not an objective condition but a result of a particular social construction. When an issue is securitized, it is framed as an existential threat that requires emergency measures and justifies actions outside the bounds of normal political procedures.

Barry Buzan, in collaboration with Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, further expanded on this concept in their seminal work *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (1998). They articulated the idea that securitization involves a securitizing actor, who makes a speech act to convince an audience that a specific referent object is under threat. If the audience accepts this framing, the issue becomes securitized, leading to extraordinary measures to address the perceived threat.

The Copenhagen School's approach has significantly influenced contemporary security studies by shifting the focus from objective threats to the processes through which threats are socially constructed. This theoretical framework has been applied to various issues, including migration, terrorism, and, more recently, climate change (Trombetta, 2011, p. 146).

Securitization theory rests on several key concepts that interrelate to form a comprehensive understanding of how issues are constructed as security threats. The securitizing actor is the individual or group that performs the securitizing move, typically state actors such as political leaders or government agencies. However, non-state actors, including NGOs and media, can also play this role (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 40). The securitizing actor's credibility and authority significantly influence the likelihood of successful securitization. Actors must possess the necessary legitimacy and expertise to convincingly frame an issue as a security threat. For instance, in the context of climate change, scientists and environmental organizations often play critical roles in articulating the security implications of environmental degradation.

The referent object is what is perceived to be under threat. In traditional security discourse, this is often the state or its sovereignty (Lipschutz, 1998, pp. 7-8). In the context of climate change, the referent object can be more diverse, encompassing human populations, ecosystems, or global stability. The flexibility in defining the referent object allows securitization theory to be applied to a broad range of issues beyond conventional military threats. For example, sea-level rise poses a direct threat to coastal communities, making them a referent object in the securitization of climate change.

The audience is critical in the process of securitization as it must accept the securitizing actor's framing for the issue to be successfully securitized. This can include the wider public, policymakers, or specific interest groups. The audience's acceptance is crucial as it legitimizes the shift from normal politics to emergency measures (McDonald, 2008, p.

572. The process of persuasion involves not only logical arguments but also emotional appeals and the strategic use of symbols and narratives. For instance, framing climate change as a threat to national security can resonate more strongly with certain audiences, prompting swifter and more decisive action.

Central to securitization theory is the concept of the speech act, wherein the securitizing actor declares that a particular issue constitutes an existential threat (Wæver, 1998). This declaration aims to persuade the audience to accept emergency measures to counter the threat. The effectiveness of a speech act depends on the actor's ability to communicate urgency and severity convincingly. Speech acts are not limited to verbal statements; they can also include written texts, policy documents, and visual representations. The repetition and reinforcement of these messages across different platforms can help solidify the securitized status of an issue.

These concepts interact to create a process where political issues are transformed into security concerns, leading to the implementation of extraordinary measures. This transformation depends not only on the articulation of threats by securitizing actors but also on the social and political context that shapes the audience's reception of these threats (Balzacq, 2011, pp. 11-15). For example, the securitization of climate change in small island developing states often resonates more deeply due to their immediate vulnerability to rising sea levels and extreme weather events. The local context and specific vulnerabilities play a crucial role in how securitization is received and acted upon.

Securitization transforms ordinary political issues into security concerns by shifting the discourse from a realm of normal politics to one of exceptional measures and urgent action. Through the process of securitization, an issue is framed as an existential threat that necessitates immediate and extraordinary responses, often bypassing standard political procedures and deliberations. This transformation is typically initiated by securitizing actors

— such as political leaders, governmental agencies, or influential organizations — who articulate the threat through speech acts. These declarations are intended to persuade the relevant audience, which can include the public, policymakers, or specific interest groups, to perceive the issue as an imminent danger requiring emergency measures.

The power of securitization lies in its ability to reframe an issue, thus legitimizing the use of exceptional measures that might otherwise be deemed unacceptable. For example, when climate change is securitized, it shifts from being seen as a gradual environmental issue to being perceived as an urgent security threat. This can lead to the mobilization of resources, the implementation of stringent policies, and even the suspension of certain democratic processes to address the perceived threat. However, this process also involves significant normative implications, as it can justify the concentration of power and the erosion of civil liberties under the guise of addressing an existential threat (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998).

1.2 Climate change and securitization

Climate change has increasingly been framed as a security issue in both political and academic discourse — marking a significant shift from traditional security concerns. This reframing is rooted in the recognition that climate change poses substantial risks to global stability and human security. Unlike traditional security threats — such as military conflicts or terrorism, which are immediate and localized — climate change is characterized by its gradual and pervasive impact, affecting multiple regions and sectors simultaneously. This complexity requires a reevaluation of what constitutes a security threat and how such threats should be addressed.

One of the central arguments for framing climate change as a security issue is its role as a threat multiplier. Scholars like Matthew (2013) argue that climate change exacerbates

existing vulnerabilities, such as resource scarcity, socio-economic inequalities, and political instability, thereby increasing the likelihood of conflict (p. 92). For instance, changes in climate patterns can lead to severe droughts or floods, which in turn can trigger competition over water and arable land, potentially leading to violent conflicts. This perspective aligns with the broader understanding of security advocated by the Copenhagen School, which includes environmental, economic, and societal dimensions (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998).

Another important aspect of the theoretical framing is the concept of environmental security. Environmental security broadens the scope of traditional security studies to include the protection of natural resources and ecosystems as integral to maintaining national and global stability. Scholars like Barnett (2003) emphasize that environmental degradation, driven by climate change, directly threatens the livelihoods and well-being of millions of people, particularly in vulnerable regions (pp. 14-15). This approach underscores the interconnectedness of environmental health and human security, suggesting that addressing climate change is essential not only for ecological sustainability but also for preventing socio-political crises.

The securitization of climate change also involves a shift in policy and governance approaches. Traditionally, security policies are characterized by their focus on immediate threats and the use of military and state-centric measures. However, the transnational and long-term nature of climate change challenges these conventional strategies. As Joshua Busby notes, effective climate security requires international cooperation, long-term planning, and a focus on resilience-building rather than merely reactive measures. This necessitates a departure from the state-centric view of security towards more comprehensive and inclusive frameworks that integrate environmental governance with security policies (2008, p. 504).

Furthermore, the framing of climate change as a security issue has significant implications for political discourse and public perception. By securitizing climate change, political actors can elevate its importance on the policy agenda, mobilizing resources and public support for climate action. However, this framing also carries the risk of justifying authoritarian measures and the curtailment of civil liberties under the guise of emergency response (Floyd, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to balance the urgency of climate action with the principles of democratic governance and human rights.

One of the defining characteristics that make climate change a non-traditional security concern is its transnational and long-term nature. Unlike conventional security threats, which often involve state actors and defined geographical boundaries, climate change transcends national borders and has far-reaching temporal impacts. This transnational dimension means that no single country can effectively address climate change on its own; it requires coordinated international efforts and global governance mechanisms (Busby, 2008).

Climate change does not respect political boundaries, making it a truly global issue. The emissions of greenhouse gases in one country can have significant climatic impacts across the world, leading to rising sea levels, altered weather patterns, and increased frequency of extreme weather events. For instance, the industrial activities in major economies contribute to global warming, which in turn affects weather patterns and sea levels globally, impacting countries that may not contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions themselves (IPCC, 2014). This interconnectedness necessitates international cooperation and multilateral agreements, such as the Paris Agreement, which aims to unite countries in efforts to mitigate climate change and adapt to its impacts.

The long-term nature of climate change poses additional challenges for securitization. Traditional security threats are typically immediate and urgent, prompting swift responses. In contrast, the effects of climate change unfold over decades or even centuries, making it

difficult to sustain political and public attention. Political systems and policy frameworks, which are often geared toward short-term decision-making and immediate results, struggle to address the slow-onset nature of climate impacts. This temporal mismatch complicates the policy response, as Adger et al. (2011) argue, making it harder to prioritize and invest in long-term solutions.

Moreover, the long-term impacts of climate change necessitate a shift from reactive to proactive measures — traditional security approaches often focus on immediate threats and the use of military force or coercive measures to address them. However, addressing climate change requires a focus on building resilience and adaptive capacity over the long term — this includes investing in sustainable infrastructure, enhancing disaster preparedness, and promoting policies that reduce vulnerability to climate impacts (Barnett, 2003). The emphasis on resilience highlights the need for holistic strategies that integrate climate adaptation into broader development and security policies.

The transnational and long-term aspects of climate change also challenge existing international institutions and frameworks. Current global governance structures are often ill-equipped to handle the complexity and scale of climate-related security risks. Effective governance requires not only cooperation among states but also the involvement of non-state actors, including international organizations, civil society, and the private sector. These actors play crucial roles in advocating for climate action, sharing best practices, and mobilizing resources for mitigation and adaptation efforts (Keohane & Victor, 2011, p. 15).

Furthermore, the pervasive and enduring nature of climate change exacerbates existing global inequalities. Vulnerable regions, particularly in the Global South, are disproportionately affected by climate impacts despite contributing the least to greenhouse gas emissions. This disparity underscores the need for climate justice, which calls for fair and equitable solutions that consider the differing capacities and responsibilities of countries.

Addressing these inequalities requires a global commitment to providing financial and technical support to developing nations to help them adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change (Roberts & Parks, 2007).

Framing climate change as a security issue carries significant normative implications that influence governance, policy-making, and societal values. One of the foremost concerns is that securitization might justify extraordinary measures that could undermine democratic principles and civil liberties. When climate change is framed as an existential threat, governments might adopt authoritarian measures, bypassing standard political processes and reducing public participation in decision-making. This centralization of power can lead to the erosion of democratic accountability, as emergency measures often prioritize efficiency and rapid response over transparency and inclusivity (Floyd, 2014).

Moreover, the securitization of climate change can shift resource allocation, prioritizing military and security expenditures over other critical areas such as social services, education, and healthcare. While investment in security infrastructure might enhance resilience to climate impacts, it can also divert funds from addressing the root causes of vulnerability, such as poverty and inequality. This misallocation of resources can exacerbate existing social injustices, disproportionately affecting marginalized and disadvantaged communities that are already bearing the brunt of climate change (Conca, 2006).

At the international level, framing climate change as a security issue influences global governance and international relations — it can create a sense of urgency and foster international cooperation on climate action. However, it may also lead to competitive behaviors and zero-sum thinking, where countries prioritize national security over global cooperation. This tension between national and global interests complicates efforts to develop effective and equitable climate policies — the securitization framework can also reinforce the

dominance of powerful states and international institutions, marginalizing the voices and concerns of smaller and less influential nations (Dalby, 2009).

Ethical considerations of climate justice are central to the normative implications of climate securitization. The impacts of climate change are unevenly distributed, with vulnerable populations in developing countries experiencing the most severe effects despite contributing the least to greenhouse gas emissions. Addressing this injustice requires policies that acknowledge the historical responsibilities of industrialized nations and provide support for adaptation and mitigation efforts in the Global South. Securitizing climate change should promote fair and inclusive solutions that protect the rights and livelihoods of all affected communities (Roberts & Parks, 2007).

The framing of climate change as a security issue also affects public discourse and societal values. It can heighten awareness and mobilize action by presenting climate change as an urgent and critical issue. However, it can also create a climate of fear and anxiety, potentially leading to fatalism and disengagement. Effective communication strategies are essential to balance the urgency of climate action with messages of hope and empowerment, encouraging proactive and collective efforts to address climate change (Oels, 2012).

Moving toward the the next chapter, these normative implications highlight the need to critically examine the tensions between security and democracy in the context of climate change. The following chapter will explore these tensions in detail, analyzing how the securitization of climate change can impact democratic governance and increase the risk of authoritarianism. It will delve into the ways security measures can be designed to uphold democratic values and human rights, ensuring that climate action does not come at the expense of civil liberties and social justice.

Chapter 2: Cloudy horizons: Democracy's struggle against authoritarian currents

This chapter explores the complex relationship between security and democracy within the context of climate change securitization. By examining political theory and the practical implications of securitization, the risks posed to democratic governance and civil liberties are made clear. The chapter is structured into three main sections: the tension between democracy and security in political theory, the authoritarian drift risk associated with securitization (including a discussion on states of emergency), and the specific challenges posed by climate change as a non-traditional security issue.

2.1 Security and democracy in political theory

The relationship between security and democracy has long been a focal point in political theory — marked by an inherent tension between the need for collective safety and the preservation of individual freedoms and democratic processes. This tension becomes particularly pronounced during times of perceived threats — where the prioritization of security often leads to more authoritarian governance structures. Security, in the context of political theory, refers to the protection of a state and its citizens from external and internal threats. It encompasses a range of measures designed to safeguard the political, economic, and social stability of a society. This includes maintaining territorial integrity, preventing violence and terrorism, and ensuring the continuity of government functions. Security measures often require the exercise of state power to enforce laws, regulate behavior, and sometimes, restrict freedoms to prevent or respond to threats.

Democracy, on the other hand, is characterized by principles such as individual freedoms, rule of law, accountability, transparency, and popular participation in governance. Democratic processes rely on open debate, public scrutiny, and checks and balances to prevent the concentration of power. The inherent tension arises because the measures needed to ensure security can conflict with the principles of democracy.

One influential theorist who explored this dynamic is Carl Schmitt. Schmitt argued that sovereignty is fundamentally defined by the power to decide on the state of exception, wherein normal legal frameworks can be suspended in the interest of security (1922/2005). His perspective highlights how security concerns can justify extraordinary measures that undermine democratic norms, suggesting a fundamental conflict between the imperatives of security and the principles of democracy. For Schmitt, the decision on the state of exception is a sovereign act that places the protection of the state above the rule of law and democratic procedures, potentially leading to the concentration of power in the executive branch.

In contrast, Hannah Arendt offers a critical perspective on this dynamic, emphasizing the dangers of sacrificing democratic values for the sake of security. Arendt (1951/2017) argued that the erosion of public freedom and political participation in the name of security leads to the dehumanization and disempowerment of citizens, ultimately weakening the fabric of democracy itself. Her insights stress the importance of maintaining democratic engagement and safeguarding civil liberties even in times of crisis. Arendt warned against the potential for totalitarianism, where security becomes an excuse for absolute control and the suppression of dissent.

Contemporary scholars continue to explore these themes, particularly in the context of modern security challenges such as terrorism. Didier Bigo (2002) examines how security practices can reinforce state control and limit political freedoms. His work suggests that security measures often result in the marginalization of public discourse and the reduction of democratic oversight, as security imperatives are placed above democratic values. Bigo's analysis highlights how the language of security can be used to justify intrusive surveillance, curtail civil liberties, and concentrate power in the hands of the state.

The inherent tension between democracy and security is thus rooted in the different priorities and operational logics of each domain. Democracy thrives on openness,

participation, and the diffusion of power, while security often necessitates secrecy, control, and the centralization of authority. This tension raises critical questions about the potential for an authoritarian drift when security becomes the overriding concern. The risk of such a drift is particularly pronounced in the context of states of emergency, where the normal balance of power can be disrupted in favor of executive authority. In the next section, I will explore how the invocation of states of emergency can lead to a concentration of power and the erosion of democratic norms, highlighting the need for vigilance and checks and balances to prevent the slide towards authoritarianism.

The inherent tension between security and democracy becomes particularly acute when security measures threaten the core principles and functioning of democratic governance. Democratic principles such as individual freedoms, rule of law, accountability, transparency, and popular participation can be undermined by the overreach of security policies and practices. This section explores how security, when prioritized excessively, poses a threat to these fundamental democratic values.

One of the most significant threats posed by heightened security measures is the erosion of individual freedoms. In democratic societies, citizens are granted civil liberties such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and the right to privacy. However, in the name of security, governments may implement measures that restrict these freedoms. For instance, surveillance programs designed to monitor and prevent terrorist activities can intrude on the privacy of ordinary citizens. The American PATRIOT Act, enacted in response to the 9/11 attacks, expanded government surveillance capabilities but also raised concerns about violations of privacy and civil liberties — such measures can create a climate of fear and self-censorship, inhibiting open discourse and political participation (Cole & Dempsey, 2006).

The rule of law is another cornerstone of democratic governance that can be compromised by security imperatives. The rule of law ensures that all individuals and institutions are subject to and accountable under the law. However, during states of emergency or heightened security threats, governments may bypass legal norms and processes. This can lead to arbitrary detention, torture, and extrajudicial actions that violate human rights. The Guantanamo Bay detention camp, established to hold suspected terrorists, exemplifies how security concerns can lead to the suspension of legal rights and due process, resulting in prolonged detention without trial and allegations of torture (Margulies, 2007).

Accountability and transparency are also jeopardized by the expansion of security measures. Democratic governance relies on the accountability of public officials and the transparency of government actions to maintain public trust and legitimacy. Security operations often require secrecy, which can hinder oversight and accountability. The use of classified information and covert operations can prevent legislative bodies, the media, and the public from scrutinizing security practices. This lack of transparency can lead to abuses of power and corruption, as seen in various intelligence agencies' overreach (Rosenbach & Peritz, 2009).

Furthermore, excessive focus on security can undermine popular participation in democratic processes. When security is framed as the paramount concern, other democratic priorities such as social justice, economic development, and environmental protection may be sidelined. Citizens may feel disempowered and alienated if they perceive that their voices and concerns are not being heard or addressed. This can weaken the social contract and erode the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

The trade-offs between security and democracy are evident in the ways that security measures can undermine the very principles they aim to protect. To mitigate these risks, it is crucial to establish robust checks and balances that ensure security policies are implemented within a framework that respects democratic values. This includes judicial oversight, legislative scrutiny, and active civil society engagement to hold security apparatuses accountable.

2.2 Authoritarian drift

The process of securitization, which frames certain issues as existential threats necessitating immediate and exceptional measures, poses significant risks of authoritarianism. By its very nature, securitization often leads to the centralization of power, the erosion of democratic norms, and the potential for authoritarian practices to take root and flourish.

Securitization tends to prioritize security over civil liberties, justifying intrusive and often repressive measures. These measures include mass surveillance, arbitrary detention, and restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly. Such actions undermine the foundational democratic principles of individual rights and freedoms. Didier Bigo's concept of the "governmentality of unease" explains how the constant emphasis on security creates a climate of fear and justifies the expansion of state control over citizens' lives (Bigo, 2002, p. 62). This environment of fear can be exploited by authoritarian leaders to consolidate power and suppress dissent.

Moreover, securitization often involves a narrative that frames the state as the sole protector against existential threats — fostering a paternalistic relationship between the government and its citizens. This narrative can delegitimize opposition and dissent — portraying them as threats to national security rather than legitimate expressions of

democratic engagement. In this context, political opponents, activists, and journalists may be targeted and silenced under the guise of maintaining security.

The risk of authoritarianism is further exacerbated by the lack of transparency and accountability that often accompanies securitization. Security measures are frequently implemented with little public oversight or debate, relying on classified information and secretive operations. This lack of transparency prevents citizens from understanding and challenging the actions taken in their name, weakening the democratic accountability mechanisms designed to prevent abuses of power. Edward Snowden's revelations about the National Security Agency's surveillance programs highlighted the extent to which secrecy can shield potentially unconstitutional activities from public scrutiny (Greenwald, 2014, p. 190).

The surveillance apparatus of modern states provides a concrete example of how securitization can lead to authoritarian practices. Extensive surveillance networks, justified by the need to protect national security, can monitor and control the populace, stifling free expression and assembly. China's use of surveillance technology to monitor its citizens, particularly in regions like Xinjiang, where Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities are subject to intense surveillance and repression, illustrates the potential for securitization to underpin authoritarian governance (Roberts, 2018, p. 252).

In addition, securitization can distort the political agenda by prioritizing security over other democratic concerns such as social justice, economic equality, and environmental sustainability. This shift in focus can marginalize vulnerable groups and exacerbate social inequalities, as resources and attention are diverted from addressing pressing social issues to maintaining security. The disproportionate impact of counter-terrorism measures on minority communities, for example, illustrates how securitization can deepen existing social divides and perpetuate injustice (Huq & Muller, 2008).

Securitization also fosters an environment where dissent is easily labeled as a security threat. This undermines democratic pluralism and the right to political opposition. Authoritarian regimes can use the rhetoric of security to justify crackdowns on political opponents, civil society organizations, and the media. The anti-terrorism laws in Russia, which have been used to target political activists and opposition figures, demonstrate how securitization can serve as a tool for political repression (Amnesty International, 2024)

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is a gradual erosion of democratic norms and the entrenchment of authoritarian practices. This section highlights how the securitization process can lead to authoritarianism, emphasizing the need to carefully consider the balance between security measures and the preservation of democratic values. The next section will delve into the specific risks posed by the invocation of states of emergency and how they further exacerbate the drift towards authoritarianism.

States of emergency, often invoked during crises, pose a significant threat to democratic governance — while they can be justified in certain situations, such as the immediate response to natural disasters where rapid action is essential to protect lives and infrastructure, in the long term these measures lead to the erosion of democratic norms and the entrenchment of authoritarian practices. By granting governments extraordinary powers, states of emergency can result in the centralization of power and the suspension of civil liberties.

Carl Schmitt's theory of sovereignty asserts that the sovereign is "he who decides on the exception", underscoring the profound impact of states of emergency on political order (Schmitt, 2005, p. 58). When governments declare states of emergency, they can bypass normal legislative processes and curtail judicial oversight. This concentration of power in the executive branch undermines the checks and balances essential to democratic governance.

Historical and contemporary examples illustrate the dangers of states of emergency. The Reichstag Fire Decree of 1933, invoked after the burning of the German parliament building, allowed Adolf Hitler to suspend civil liberties and arrest political opponents, paving the way for the Nazi dictatorship (Mommsen, 1996, p. 542). More recently, Turkey's state of emergency following the 2016 coup attempt granted President Erdoğan sweeping powers to arrest and dismiss thousands of military personnel, civil servants, and journalists, significantly weakening democratic institutions and civil society, write Esen and Gumuscu (2017, p. 363).

States of emergency can also normalize the use of extraordinary measures, making them a permanent fixture in governance. Giorgio Agamben's concept of the "state of exception" describes how temporary emergency measures can become normalized, eroding the distinction between normalcy and exception (Agamben, 2005, p. 86). This blurring of boundaries undermines the rule of law and perpetuates a state of perpetual crisis, which authoritarian leaders can exploit to justify their hold on power.

The invocation of states of emergency can also marginalize vulnerable communities. Measures taken under the guise of national security often disproportionately target minority groups, exacerbating social inequalities and fostering division. For instance, France's state of emergency following the 2015 Paris attacks led to thousands of warrantless searches and house arrests, disproportionately affecting Muslim communities (Fekete, 2018, p. 110).

In conclusion, states of emergency, while intended to address urgent threats, pose significant risks to democratic governance. By concentrating power in the executive, curtailing civil liberties, and normalizing extraordinary measures, they can erode the democratic principles and institutions that safeguard freedom and justice. Understanding these risks is crucial for balancing the need for security with the preservation of democratic values. The next section will explore how these dynamics specifically relate to climate change as a

non-traditional security issue, further complicating the balance between security and democracy.

2.3 Climate change, security, and democracy

As discussed in the first chapter, securitizing climate change presents unique challenges that significantly impact the balance between security and democracy, particularly by exacerbating authoritarian tendencies. Unlike traditional security threats, climate change is complex, long-term, and transnational, necessitating a different approach to securitization that often conflicts with democratic principles and risks fostering authoritarianism.

One primary challenge is the transnational nature of climate change — traditional security threats involve identifiable adversaries and clear national boundaries, allowing states to mobilize resources and public support against a tangible enemy. In contrast, climate change affects the entire planet and demands international cooperation. This global scope complicates traditional notions of security, which are centered on national interests and borders. Climate change requires collaborative efforts and shared responsibilities, but securitization often focuses on national security — potentially undermining the collective action needed to address global environmental issues effectively (Dalby, 2013). When states prioritize their national security interests over global cooperation, it can lead to fragmented and inefficient responses to climate change — exacerbating the problem rather than mitigating it.

The long-term nature of climate change also poses significant challenges. Traditional security threats typically demand immediate responses to imminent dangers, whereas climate change involves gradual, long-term processes that unfold over decades or even centuries. This temporal aspect makes it difficult to maintain sustained political and public attention, which is crucial for effective action. Securitization, with its emphasis on urgent and exceptional measures, may not be well-suited to the slow-moving and complex dynamics of climate

change. It risks promoting short-term, reactionary policies rather than the comprehensive, forward-looking strategies needed to mitigate and adapt to climate impacts (Corry, 2011). The demand for immediate action often leads to the concentration of power in the executive branch, bypassing legislative scrutiny and public deliberation, thereby undermining democratic processes.

The securitization of climate change can lead to the militarization of environmental policy. Viewing climate change through a security lens often invokes a military response, framing the issue as a threat to be countered with force rather than a problem to be solved through sustainable development and cooperation. This approach can divert resources away from crucial areas such as renewable energy, conservation, and social resilience towards military spending and border security. The militarization of climate policy also risks exacerbating tensions between states and within societies, as it can frame environmental migrants and resource scarcity as security threats rather than humanitarian challenges (Floyd, 2014). The use of military solutions to address environmental issues can lead to the suppression of dissent and the criminalization of environmental activism, further eroding democratic freedoms.

Moreover, the securitization of climate change poses a direct threat to democratic accountability and transparency. Security measures often involve increased surveillance, restricted freedoms, and concentrated executive powers. When applied to climate change, these measures can lead to the suppression of environmental activism and civil society, which are vital for holding governments accountable and driving meaningful climate action. For instance, framing climate protests as security threats can justify repressive actions against activists and limit public participation in environmental decision-making processes (Oels, 2012). This erosion of civil liberties can create a climate of fear and repression, stifling public debate and hindering the development of inclusive and democratic climate policies.

Climate change securitization can deepen existing social inequalities. Vulnerable communities, who are often the most affected by climate impacts, may also be the most targeted by security measures. This double burden can marginalize these groups further, exacerbating social divides and undermining efforts towards climate justice. Indigenous populations, for example, who fight to protect their lands from environmental degradation, may find themselves criminalized under security laws that prioritize resource extraction and economic interests over human rights and environmental protection (Adger et al., 2014). This marginalization of vulnerable communities not only perpetuates social injustice but also weakens the overall societal resilience needed to effectively address climate change.

The narrative of climate change as a security threat can overshadow its other critical dimensions — such as environmental sustainability, economic development, and social equity. This narrow focus can result in policies that address symptoms rather than root causes — neglecting the comprehensive, integrative approaches needed to tackle climate change effectively. It can also lead to a fatalistic outlook, where the emphasis on threat and danger discourages proactive, positive engagement with climate solutions (McDonald, 2012). By prioritizing security over sustainability and equity, states may implement measures that are counterproductive in the long run — such as investing in short-term defensive infrastructure rather than long-term adaptive strategies.

Furthermore, securitization inherently involves the concentration of power in the hands of a few, which can exacerbate authoritarian tendencies. In the context of climate change, this can lead to the justification of extraordinary measures and the bypassing of democratic checks and balances. For example, governments may invoke states of emergency to implement drastic measures without legislative oversight or public consultation. While such measures might be justified in immediate response to natural disasters, their prolonged use can erode democratic institutions and processes (Schmitt, 2005). The normalization of

emergency powers can set a dangerous precedent, where the executive branch gains disproportionate control over climate policy, sidelining other branches of government and civil society.

In conclusion, while the securitization of climate change can raise awareness and prompt urgent action, it also presents significant challenges that threaten democratic principles and risk fostering authoritarianism. The transnational and long-term nature of climate change complicates traditional security responses and can lead to the militarization of environmental policy, erosion of democratic accountability, marginalization of vulnerable communities, and the overshadowing of comprehensive climate strategies. The next chapter will explore potential ways to mitigate these risks, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a vibrant civil society and leveraging the role of activist groups in framing climate change as a democratic issue.

Chapter 3: Winds of change: Activism's force against climate authoritarianism

The previous chapters explored the complex relationship between securitization and democracy, particularly in the context of climate change. The examination highlighted how the securitization of climate change can lead to authoritarian tendencies, the erosion of democratic accountability, and the marginalization of vulnerable communities. This chapter aims to explore strategies to mitigate these risks and promote a democratic and just approach to climate governance. By emphasizing the role of civil society, and proactive climate activism, it is possible to develop a more balanced and inclusive framework for addressing climate change.

3.1 Civil society

Civil society plays a crucial role in mitigating the risks associated with the securitization of climate change, particularly in maintaining democratic accountability,

fostering public participation, and promoting equitable climate policies. By providing a platform for diverse voices and facilitating grassroots activism, civil society organizations (CSOs) help ensure that climate policies are not solely driven by security imperatives but also by principles of justice, sustainability, and inclusiveness.

One of the primary functions of civil society in the context of climate change is to act as a watchdog over governmental actions. CSOs, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community groups, and advocacy networks, monitor the implementation of climate policies and hold governments accountable for their commitments. This is essential in a securitized context, where the concentration of power in the executive branch can lead to a lack of transparency and diminished legislative and public oversight. By demanding transparency and accountability, civil society helps to prevent the misuse of emergency powers and the erosion of democratic norms (Albert, 2023).

Civil society also fosters public participation in climate governance, ensuring that the voices of ordinary citizens are heard in policy-making processes. This is particularly important in countering the top-down approaches often associated with securitization, which can marginalize local communities and ignore their specific needs and perspectives. By organizing public forums, facilitating community consultations, and advocating for participatory mechanisms, CSOs enable a more inclusive and democratic approach to climate governance. This participatory approach not only enhances the legitimacy of climate policies but also ensures that they are more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the affected populations (Albert, 2023).

Moreover, civil society organizations play a vital role in promoting climate justice. They advocate for policies that address the disproportionate impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities and strive to ensure that these communities have a voice in climate decision-making processes. This is crucial in a securitized context, where the focus on

national security can often lead to the neglect of social equity considerations. By highlighting the intersections between climate change and social justice, CSOs push for a more holistic approach to climate policy that prioritizes the rights and well-being of marginalized groups (Fischer, 2017).

Civil society also contributes to the framing of climate change in ways that emphasize cooperation and resilience rather than conflict and threat. By promoting narratives that highlight the opportunities for sustainable development, community solidarity, and global cooperation, CSOs counter the fear-based rhetoric of securitization. This positive framing can mobilize broader public support for climate action and foster a sense of collective responsibility and agency. For instance, movements such as the Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion have successfully galvanized public support by framing climate change as an urgent but solvable crisis, emphasizing the power of collective action and the need for systemic change (Fridays for Future, 2020).

In addition, civil society often acts as an incubator for innovative solutions to climate challenges. By fostering collaboration between scientists, activists, policymakers, and local communities, CSOs facilitate the development and dissemination of innovative practices and technologies. These bottom-up solutions are often more adaptable and context-specific than top-down security measures, making them more effective in addressing the diverse and dynamic challenges of climate change. Initiatives such as community-based adaptation projects and local renewable energy cooperatives exemplify how civil society can drive practical, scalable solutions that enhance both environmental sustainability and social resilience (Evans, 2017

3.2 The role of activism

Activism plays a pivotal role in shaping climate governance and addressing the challenges posed by the securitization of climate change. Activist movements and grassroots organizations have been instrumental in raising awareness, advocating for policy changes, and holding governments accountable. Their efforts help ensure that climate action remains rooted in democratic principles, social justice, and sustainability, countering the top-down approaches often associated with securitization.

Climate activism has significantly influenced public discourse and policy agendas by bringing the urgency of climate change to the forefront. Movements such as Fridays for Future, initiated by Greta Thunberg, and Extinction Rebellion have mobilized millions of people worldwide. These movements highlight the inadequacies of current climate policies and demand immediate and ambitious action from governments and corporations (Thunberg, 2019, pp. 14-16; XR, 2021).

Activists play a crucial role in democratizing climate governance — by organizing protests, rallies, and public demonstrations, they provide a platform for diverse voices, particularly those of marginalized communities most affected by climate change. This inclusivity ensures that climate policies are not only more equitable but also more effective, as they consider the perspectives and needs of all stakeholders. However, it is essential to acknowledge and critically examine the critique that mainstream climate activism has often been characterized by “whiteness” — with a lack of representation and leadership from communities of color (Wong et al., 2024, p. 11). This lack of diversity can lead to the marginalization of voices from the Global South and Indigenous communities, who are disproportionately impacted by climate change. Addressing this critique involves actively working towards more inclusive and representative climate movements that prioritize the leadership and experiences of those most affected by environmental injustices.

Moreover, activism fosters a participatory approach to climate governance, where citizens are actively engaged in decision-making processes and hold authorities accountable. This participatory approach not only enhances the legitimacy of climate policies but also ensures they are more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the affected populations (Klein, 2014).

One of the key contributions of activism is its ability to challenge and reshape the dominant narratives around climate change. Activists often criticize the securitization framework, which tends to emphasize national security and military responses, arguing that it overlooks the root causes of the climate crisis and perpetuates social injustices. Instead, they advocate for holistic approaches that address the systemic drivers of climate change, such as economic inequality, environmental degradation, and social injustice. By promoting alternative narratives, activists encourage a more comprehensive understanding of climate change that goes beyond security concerns to include issues of justice and sustainability (Boswell, 2018).

Furthermore, activism can drive policy innovation and implementation. Activists often propose bold and innovative solutions to climate challenges that go beyond the incremental changes typically favored by policymakers. For example, the Green New Deal, advocated by various activist groups, calls for a radical transformation of the economy towards sustainability, emphasizing renewable energy, green jobs, and social equity. These visionary proposals can serve as blueprints for comprehensive climate policies that align with democratic values and long-term sustainability goals (Pettifor, 2020).

Activists also play a crucial role in maintaining pressure on policymakers to act on climate change. Through sustained campaigns, lobbying, and advocacy, they ensure that climate issues remain high on the political agenda. This persistent pressure is essential in a securitized context, where other pressing security concerns may overshadow climate action.

By keeping the focus on climate change, activists help to ensure that it receives the attention and resources necessary for effective mitigation and adaptation efforts (Boswell, 2018).

Moreover, activism promotes global solidarity and cooperation in addressing climate change. Climate change is a global problem that requires coordinated international efforts, and activists often work across borders to build transnational networks and coalitions. These networks facilitate the sharing of knowledge, resources, and strategies, enhancing the global capacity to tackle climate challenges. For instance, international climate strikes and global summits organized by activist groups bring together diverse stakeholders to collaborate on climate solutions, fostering a sense of global community and shared responsibility (Carter, 2020).

Finally, activism can help to protect democratic values and institutions in the face of climate securitization. By advocating for transparency, accountability, and participation, activists help to safeguard democratic processes and prevent the erosion of civil liberties that can accompany emergency measures. Their vigilance and resistance to authoritarian tendencies ensure that climate action remains grounded in democratic principles.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted to examine how the securitization of climate change transforms it from an environmental and economic issue into an existential threat, potentially undermining democratic values. The first chapter introduced securitization theory, demonstrating how framing issues as security threats centralizes power and reduces accountability. The second chapter explored the tension between security and democracy, highlighting the democratic deficit and risk of authoritarianism. The final chapter emphasized the role of civil society and activism in mitigating these risks and promoting democratic governance in climate action.

Based on the findings of this thesis, several policy recommendations and best practices can be proposed. Strengthening democratic institutions is paramount. This entails reinforcing mechanisms to ensure that emergency measures do not erode the rule of law, accountability, or transparency. It is crucial to maintain checks and balances, protect civil liberties, and ensure that security measures are proportionate and time-bound. Governments must be vigilant in upholding democratic principles even when addressing urgent security threats like climate change.

Promoting public participation in climate governance is equally essential. Creating inclusive spaces for dialogue and engagement, ensuring that diverse voices are heard, and fostering a culture of deliberative democracy can build public support for climate policies and enhance their legitimacy. Public participation can lead to more informed and equitable decision-making processes, ensuring that climate policies are responsive to the needs and concerns of all stakeholders, including marginalized and vulnerable communities.

Supporting civil society organizations and activist groups is crucial for maintaining democratic governance in the face of climate securitization. Providing funding, legal protections, and platforms for engagement empowers these groups to act as watchdogs, holding governments accountable and advocating for transparent and inclusive climate policies. Civil society and activism play vital roles in promoting transparency and accountability, preventing the abuse of power, and ensuring that climate policies are implemented effectively and equitably.

Ensuring transparency and accountability in climate governance is critical. Governments should be transparent about their decision-making processes, resource allocation, and the impacts of their policies. Establishing independent oversight mechanisms to monitor and evaluate climate actions can maintain public trust and ensure accountability.

Transparency and accountability help prevent the misuse of power and foster a culture of openness and trust in government actions.

Balancing security and sustainability is imperative for effective climate governance. Policymakers should adopt integrated approaches that address the root causes of climate change while ensuring that security measures do not undermine environmental and social objectives. This balance can help maintain focus on long-term sustainability goals alongside immediate security concerns, promoting a holistic approach to climate governance.

This thesis highlights several areas for further research that could deepen the understanding of climate change securitization and its implications for democratic governance. Comparative studies across different countries and regions could provide valuable insights into how climate change securitization manifests in diverse political contexts. Such studies could identify best practices and common challenges, informing more effective and context-specific policy responses.

Examining the impact of climate change securitization on vulnerable communities, including indigenous peoples, low-income populations, and marginalized groups, is another crucial area for further research. Investigating the social justice dimensions of climate governance can inform more equitable policy approaches, ensuring that climate policies do not disproportionately impact those who are already vulnerable.

Longitudinal studies exploring the long-term implications of climate change securitization for democratic governance could provide deeper insights into how climate policies evolve over time. Tracking the impacts of these policies on democratic institutions and the effectiveness of mitigation strategies can help policymakers design more resilient and sustainable climate governance frameworks.

The role of international organizations in the securitization of climate change and their potential to promote democratic governance is another important area of study. Examining the policies and practices of organizations like the United Nations, the European Union, and regional bodies can provide insights into their influence on climate securitization and democratic processes. Understanding the dynamics at the international level can inform more coordinated and effective global responses to climate change.

While this thesis provides a comprehensive analysis of climate change securitization, it is important to acknowledge its weaknesses and limitations. The scope of the analysis is limited to the interaction between security and democracy in the context of climate change, without exploring other important dimensions such as economic impacts, technological innovations, and cultural factors. A more holistic approach could provide a fuller understanding of the issue, addressing the multifaceted nature of climate change and its implications for governance.

This thesis has discussed topics of serious concern, some at length and some only briefly. While the influences of climate change — those yet to come and those already felt across the world — are troublesome, I do not wish to finish this paper on too pessimistic a note. As such, I want to end with a quote from Naomi Klein: “Can we pull it off? All I know is that nothing is inevitable. Nothing except that climate change changes everything. And for a very brief time, the nature of that change is still up to us” (2014, p. 28).

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