



Silent Chambers, Active Power: The Political Sociology of Performative Inactivity in Authoritarian Parliaments

Edmore Ntini*

School of Social Sciences (Howard College), University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

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Corresponding Author

Edmore Ntini*

Email: eddiemza@gmail.com

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Abstract

Across many authoritarian and hybrid regimes, parliamentary chambers are characterised by conspicuous patterns of silence, limited questioning, ritualised affirmation, and restrained legislative engagement despite their formal mandate to deliberate and scrutinise executive power. This paper examines this paradox and challenges prevailing interpretations that treat parliamentary inactivity primarily as evidence of institutional weakness, democratic decline, or political apathy. Drawing on a qualitative, interpretive, and theory-building approach that synthesises parliamentary records, observational materials, and extant scholarship across selected authoritarian and hybrid contexts, the study identifies recurring behavioural patterns through which legislative inactivity acquires political significance. The analysis demonstrates that parliamentary silence and minimal engagement function as structured forms of political behaviour embedded within broader regimes of surveillance, patronage, institutional discipline, and symbolic power. Rather than representing the absence of politics, these observable patterns contribute to the reproduction of legislative order, the management of political risk, and the maintenance of regime stability. Building on these insights, the paper advances Performative Inactivity Theory (PIT) as a novel interpretive framework for explaining how patterned inactivity operates as a politically functional mode of legislative participation under conditions of authoritarian constraint. By shifting analytical attention from what legislators fail to do to what observable inactivity accomplishes within institutional settings, the paper offers a new behavioural perspective on authoritarian governance, legislative politics, and political sociology.

Keywords

Authoritarian legislatures; Legislative behaviour; Performative Inactivity Theory; Political sociology; Symbolic compliance; Symbolic power

1. Introduction

In many contemporary parliamentary chambers, particularly within authoritarian and hybrid political systems, the spectacle of representation is marked less by deliberation than by silence. Legislators sit in orderly rows, offering ritualised applause, procedural affirmations, and limited intervention, while sustained questioning and open dissent remain uncommon. However, these chambers continue to function procedurally and symbolically as representative institutions. This contrast between institutional form and behavioural practice raises a central

puzzle: how do institutions established for deliberation continue to operate when deliberation itself is persistently constrained? Rather than representing an incidental deficiency, this recurring pattern suggests a broader transformation in political participation under authoritarian conditions (Gandhi, 2008; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Truex, 2016).

Existing scholarship has largely interpreted legislative passivity as evidence of authoritarian control, executive dominance, or institutional weakness. Studies of authoritarian legislatures commonly portray parliaments as “rubber-stamp” institutions that legitimise executive decisions while exercising little autonomous influence (Blaydes, 2011; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007). Likewise, deliberative democratic theory regards the absence of debate as a departure from the ideals of representation, accountability, and public reasoning (Habermas, 1996). Although these perspectives explain why legislatures become constrained, they remain primarily institution-centred and pay comparatively little attention to the behavioural processes through which political order is reproduced. Consequently, legislative inactivity is generally treated as an outcome of authoritarian rule rather than as a political phenomenon requiring explanation in its own right.

This paper advances a different interpretation by treating parliamentary inactivity as a structured mode of political participation rather than as the absence of politics. It proceeds from the premise that legislators operating within environments characterised by surveillance, patronage, and political risk develop recurring behavioural adaptations that align with institutional expectations while minimising personal exposure to sanction (Magaloni, 2006; Svobik, 2012). Parliamentary silence, restrained intervention, and ritualised compliance are therefore understood not as isolated behaviours but as patterned practices embedded within broader regimes of discipline and symbolic power. Drawing on insights from governmentality, symbolic power, and dramaturgical sociology, the paper argues that these observable behavioural patterns contribute to the management of political risk, the signalling of compliance, and the reproduction of authoritarian governance (Bourdieu, 1991; Foucault, 1977; Goffman, 1959).

The study addresses two related questions: why do parliamentarians adopt inactivity where deliberation is institutionally expected, and how can such behaviour be theorised beyond existing institutional explanations? It argues that parliamentary silence should be understood as a patterned and politically consequential form of legislative behaviour rather than simply as evidence of institutional decline. Observable practices such as sustained silence, limited questioning, restrained engagement, and ritualised affirmation constitute structured modes of participation through which compliance becomes publicly visible. Without attributing subjective intentions to individual legislators, the analysis interprets these recurring behavioural patterns as adaptive responses to institutional environments characterised by surveillance, patronage networks, and disciplinary expectations (Scott, 1990; Wedeen, 1999). In this way, patterned inactivity contributes to the maintenance of legislative order and the reproduction of authoritarian authority.

Despite substantial advances in the study of authoritarian legislatures, one behavioural problem remains under-theorised. Existing research explains executive dominance, party discipline, patronage and institutional control, but it rarely treats visible inactivity itself as an object of explanation. The unresolved question is therefore not simply why legislators are constrained, but how recurrent silence, restrained questioning and ritualised affirmation become normalised and politically consequential forms of conduct. This gap motivates Performative Inactivity Theory (PIT).

The paper proceeds by reviewing scholarship on parliamentary behaviour and authoritarian legislatures before identifying the behavioural gap that existing approaches leave unresolved. It then develops a theoretical framework integrating governmentality, symbolic power, and dramaturgical analysis, outlines the interpretive methodology, presents comparative empirical illustrations, and formally advances Performative Inactivity Theory. By shifting analytical attention from institutional structures to observable behavioural practice, the paper demonstrates that parliamentary inactivity is not merely the absence of political participation but a structured, politically functional, and institutionally consequential mode of legislative behaviour through which authoritarian governance is reproduced.

2. Literature Review

The study of parliamentary behaviour has long been anchored in normative assumptions about deliberation, representation, and accountability. However, empirical realities across authoritarian and hybrid regimes increasingly challenge these assumptions. Parliamentary chambers in contexts such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Uganda are frequently marked by limited debate, constrained questioning, and visible disengagement. This disjuncture between institutional design and behavioural practice raises a central analytical problem: existing theories explain what parliaments are expected to do or why they fall short, but they do not adequately explain what inactivity itself accomplishes within systems of power.

Classical parliamentary theory, grounded in deliberative democratic traditions, conceptualises legislatures as arenas of reasoned debate in which competing arguments are subjected to public scrutiny (Habermas, 1996). Legitimacy, in this framework, derives from active participation, justification, and communicative engagement. Subsequent scholarship has expanded this perspective by recognising multiple dimensions of representation, including descriptive, substantive, and symbolic forms (Pitkin, 1967; Urbinati & Warren, 2008). More recent contributions acknowledge that deliberation is often mediated by institutional hierarchies, party dominance, and executive influence, even within formally democratic systems (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Disch, van de Sande & Urbinati, 2019). In the Global South, these constraints are intensified by historical legacies of centralised authority, patronage politics, and uneven institutionalisation (Awortwi & Helmsing, 2014).

Although these developments provide a more nuanced understanding of representation and deliberation, they continue to privilege speech, debate, and visible participation as the defining indicators of legislative activity. Consequently, parliamentary silence remains conceptualised primarily as an institutional deficiency rather than as an observable behavioural phenomenon that requires an independent theoretical explanation. While deliberative theory explains what legislatures ought to do, it offers limited analytical leverage for explaining why patterned inactivity itself emerges as the dominant behavioural performance within legislatures operating under authoritarian and hybrid conditions. This limitation necessitates a framework that moves beyond normative expectations towards an explanation of inactivity as structured political behaviour.

The literature on authoritarian legislatures provides a more empirically grounded account of constrained parliamentary environments. Early scholarship characterised such institutions as instruments of executive dominance, designed to formalise decisions rather than to contest them (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007). Subsequent work has nuanced this view by demonstrating that legislatures can serve important functions within authoritarian systems, including elite co-optation, information aggregation, and conflict management (Gandhi, 2008; Truex, 2016).

In China, for instance, legislative institutions have been shown to provide controlled channels for feedback while reinforcing regime authority (Manion, 2014; Heilmann, 2008). Similarly, in Russia and Kazakhstan, legislatures contribute to regime stability by integrating elites and managing intra-elite competition (Anceschi & Silvan, 2026; Reuter & Robertson, 2015).

African scholarship further contextualises these dynamics by highlighting the interplay between formal institutions and informal systems of power. Studies in Uganda, Ethiopia, and Rwanda demonstrate that legislatures operate within dense networks of patronage, executive control, and political surveillance, which shape both incentives and behavioural expectations (Barkan, 2009). In South Africa, concerns about strong party discipline, executive encroachment, and the marginalisation of dissent have raised questions about the depth of parliamentary oversight despite the persistence of democratic procedures (February 2021). These accounts collectively depict legislatures as sites of negotiated power rather than arenas of autonomous deliberation.

This literature substantially advances understanding of the institutional functions performed by authoritarian legislatures, including elite management, information aggregation, conflict management, and regime legitimation. However, its principal concern remains the institutional purposes of legislatures rather than the behavioural dynamics occurring within them. Parliamentary inactivity consequently appears primarily as a consequence of authoritarian constraint rather than as a patterned mode of legislative conduct requiring independent conceptual explanation. The recurring visibility of silence, restrained participation, ritualised affirmation, and limited intervention is recognised but not theorised as a distinct behavioural phenomenon. As a result, existing authoritarian institutionalism explains constrained legislatures more effectively than it explains constrained legislative behaviour.

Rational choice and institutional perspectives successfully explain why legislators respond to incentives, sanctions, and organisational constraints. However, these approaches primarily interpret behaviour as instrumental decision-making and pay comparatively little attention to how inactivity becomes publicly enacted, institutionally recognised, and politically meaningful. They explain the incentives surrounding parliamentary conduct but not the observable behavioural forms through which compliance is repeatedly performed. Consequently, they cannot adequately account for the patterned reproduction of legislative inactivity that constitutes the central concern of this study.

Recent developments in political sociology and critical theory offer a more promising lens by foregrounding the performative nature of political behaviour. Scholars have increasingly emphasised how power is reproduced through symbolic practices, public displays, and ritualised performances that signal alignment and reinforce authority (Bayart, 2009; Wedeen, 1999). In Syria, for example, public acts of compliance function as performative affirmations of regime power, even when they are widely understood to lack sincerity (Wedeen, 1999). Similar dynamics are evident in Zimbabwe and Ethiopia, where visible displays of loyalty operate as strategies of political survival within constrained environments (Aalen & Tronvoll, 2009). These studies suggest that political behaviour cannot be fully understood without attending to its symbolic and performative dimensions.

Political sociology comes closest to recognising the symbolic and performative dimensions of political conduct. Nevertheless, existing scholarship has concentrated primarily on public rituals of loyalty, symbolic domination, and performative compliance rather than on patterned legislative inactivity itself. The specific phenomenon of sustained parliamentary silence, re-

strained participation, and observable non-engagement has therefore remained theoretically underdeveloped. What remains absent is a framework capable of explaining why inactivity becomes the dominant behavioural performance through which authoritarian governance is reproduced inside legislative institutions. This unresolved analytical problem provides the immediate foundation for the development of Performative Inactivity Theory.

Across these literatures, a common limitation is evident. Deliberative theory specifies what legislatures ought to do; authoritarian institutionalism explains why legislatures are constrained; rational-choice accounts identify incentives; and political sociology clarifies how power is symbolically reproduced. However, none fully explains how recurrent non-engagement becomes a stable, recognisable and politically useful behavioural repertoire inside legislatures. PIT addresses this behavioural gap by theorising inactivity as structured conduct rather than residual absence.

3. Theoretical Framework

The patterned silence observed in parliamentary chambers across authoritarian and hybrid regimes requires a theoretical lens that moves beyond institutional description towards an analysis of how power is internalised, enacted, and reproduced through everyday political conduct. Existing theories explain control, constraint, and co-optation, but they do not adequately account for why inactivity becomes the dominant and visible mode of participation. This section advances a focused synthesis of governmentality, symbolic power, dramaturgical analysis, and hidden transcripts to conceptualise parliamentary inactivity as a structured and performative political practice, laying the groundwork for Performative Inactivity Theory (PIT).

Governmentality provides the first analytical anchor by explaining how power operates through the internalisation of norms rather than direct coercion alone (Foucault, 1977; Dean, 2010). Contemporary extensions of this concept show that political actors increasingly regulate their own behaviour in response to diffuse systems of surveillance and evaluation (Bröckling et al., 2021; Rose et al., 2006). In parliamentary contexts such as Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia, this manifests as anticipatory compliance, in which legislators align their conduct with perceived regime expectations in advance of sanctions (Aalen & Tronvoll, 2009). Silence, in this setting, reflects internalised discipline. It is not necessarily imposed in each instance but emerges as a rational adaptation to an environment in which deviation carries risk. Inactivity thus becomes a form of self-governance, embedded in the conduct of political actors.

While governmentality explains how behaviour is disciplined, it does not fully capture how inactivity acquires political value. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power provides this extension by showing how practices gain legitimacy through recognition within a field (Bourdieu, 1991). Recent work emphasises that symbolic capital is accumulated not only through visible achievement but also through demonstrations of conformity and alignment (Swartz, 2020; Wacquant, 2023). In parliamentary settings, silence can function as such capital. By refraining from dissent, legislators signal loyalty, reliability, and discipline to those who control access to political resources. In South Africa, where party hierarchies shape political trajectories, alignment often outweighs independent engagement (February, 2021). Similarly, in Rwanda and Kazakhstan, visible compliance operates as a marker of trustworthiness within ruling coalitions (Anceschi & Silvan, 2026). Inactivity, therefore, circulates as a recognised and valued political signal rather than as mere absence.

To understand how this behaviour is enacted, it is necessary to consider its performative dimension. Drawing on dramaturgical theory, parliamentary conduct can be interpreted as staged interaction in which actors manage impressions before specific audiences (Goffman, 1959). Contemporary scholarship highlights how institutional settings structure such performances, particularly in highly visible environments such as legislatures (Alexander, 2017; Rai, 2021). Parliamentary chambers operate as stages where behaviour is continuously observed and interpreted by party leadership, state actors, and the public. Within this environment, inactivity becomes a visible enactment of compliance. The act of remaining silent, refraining from questioning, or engaging minimally is directed at multiple audiences, signalling alignment while avoiding scrutiny. In contexts such as Zimbabwe and Uganda, where deviation carries consequences, this performance becomes normalised through repetition (Barkan, 2009).

However, silence cannot be reduced to compliance alone. The concept of hidden transcripts introduces an important distinction between public performance and private belief (Scott, 1990). In constrained political environments, visible conformity often coexists with unexpressed dissent, producing a dual structure of political expression. Recent scholarship demonstrates how actors navigate this tension through strategic ambiguity and controlled visibility (Bayart, 2009; Wedeen, 1999). In parliamentary contexts such as those in Ethiopia and South Africa, legislators may privately disagree with policy or leadership yet publicly comply by remaining inactive (Awortwi & Helmsing, 2014). Silence thus operates as both concealment and communication, allowing actors to manage risk while maintaining alignment. The integration of these perspectives enables a more precise conceptualisation of parliamentary inactivity. Governmentality explains the internalisation of constraint; symbolic power reveals the value attached to conformity; dramaturgical analysis shows how inactivity is enacted as performance; and hidden transcripts clarify that silence does not necessarily indicate agreement. Together, these frameworks demonstrate that inactivity is neither accidental nor purely imposed. It is structured, meaningful, and embedded within broader configurations of power.

This synthesis also clarifies the limits of existing explanations. Theories of authoritarian control and institutional constraint account for why legislators face restrictions, but do not fully explain why inactivity becomes normalised as visible behaviour. Similarly, rational choice approaches capture incentives but understate the symbolic and performative dimensions through which behaviour is enacted and interpreted. By bringing these elements together, this framework establishes the conditions under which inactivity becomes both rational and expected. On this basis, the paper advances Performative Inactivity Theory as a framework explaining inactivity as the product of interacting forces rather than isolated constraints. Parliamentary silence emerges through the alignment of internalised discipline, symbolic incentives, performative expectations, and strategic ambiguity. It is not reducible to coercion, nor is it simply a sign of institutional weakness. Instead, it represents a patterned adaptation to specific configurations of power in which visibility, risk, and legitimacy are tightly interwoven.

3.1 How Performative Inactivity Theory Differs from Existing Explanations

The preceding discussion demonstrates that Performative Inactivity Theory (PIT) is informed by several established traditions in political sociology and comparative politics without being reducible to any one of them. Rather than replacing these perspectives, the theory integrates selected analytical insights while addressing an explanatory problem that none resolve independently: why patterned parliamentary inactivity emerges as the dominant observable behavioural performance within authoritarian and hybrid legislatures. PIT, therefore, occupies a distinct analytical position by explaining behavioural reproduction rather than institutional

design or political constraint.

Rubber Stamp Theory explains how authoritarian legislatures legitimate executive authority by formally endorsing decisions taken elsewhere. While this perspective successfully accounts for institutional subordination, it treats legislative inactivity largely as an institutional consequence of executive dominance. Performative Inactivity Theory shifts attention from institutional function to observable behavioural practice by explaining how recurrent inactivity itself becomes a politically functional mode of participation through which authoritarian authority is continually reproduced.

Explanations centred on party discipline similarly account for how organisational hierarchies regulate legislative behaviour through formal rules, sanctions, and expectations of loyalty. These approaches clarify why legislators conform to party directives but provide comparatively limited insight into how visible inactivity acquires symbolic political meaning within parliamentary settings. PIT extends beyond organisational control by examining inactivity as a publicly enacted behavioural performance rather than simply an outcome of disciplinary enforcement.

Patronage-based explanations emphasise the importance of political incentives, elite networks, and resource dependence in shaping legislative conduct. Although these perspectives illuminate why conformity may be rewarded, they primarily explain incentive structures rather than the behavioural forms through which conformity becomes publicly recognisable. PIT complements this literature by explaining how observable inactivity functions as a politically meaningful expression of alignment within patronage-driven political systems.

The literature on symbolic power and political performance demonstrates how authority is reproduced through ritual, symbolism, and public displays of legitimacy. These insights provide an important foundation for understanding parliamentary behaviour, but do not specifically theorise sustained legislative inactivity as a distinct behavioural phenomenon. PIT, therefore, extends symbolic approaches by identifying observable inactivity itself as the principal performative mechanism through which political order is enacted inside legislative institutions.

Rational choice approaches explain legislative behaviour as strategic responses to incentives, costs, and expected outcomes. While these models account for why legislators may avoid risky forms of engagement, they generally interpret behaviour as instrumental decision-making rather than as patterned public performance. PIT retains the importance of institutional incentives but demonstrates that observable inactivity functions not merely as an individual calculation but as a socially recognised and institutionally reproduced behavioural practice.

These comparisons locate PIT at a distinct explanatory level. It does not replace theories of executive dominance, party discipline, patronage, rational calculation or symbolic power; it specifies the behavioural mechanism through which these conditions are repeatedly enacted in legislative settings. Its contribution is therefore to explain how constrained environments are converted into patterned, publicly legible inactivity that helps reproduce institutional order.

An important implication of this framework is that its primary object of explanation is legislative behaviour rather than legislative institutions. Existing scholarship has largely focused on institutional design, executive dominance, party systems, and authoritarian governance structures as the principal units of analysis. Performative Inactivity Theory, by contrast, explains how observable behavioural patterns emerge, become institutionalised through repetition, and contribute to the reproduction of authoritarian governance. Institutions provide the context

within which inactivity occurs, but the theory explains the patterned behavioural practices through which those institutional environments are enacted and sustained.

This theoretical move is not without limitations. Emphasising performativity risks overstating agency in contexts where coercion remains significant. In highly restrictive environments, silence may reflect necessity as much as strategy. Variations across political systems may produce different configurations of inactivity, requiring further comparative refinement. These limitations are acknowledged by situating performative inactivity within broader regimes that combine coercion, incentives, and symbolic practices. Despite these constraints, the PIT framework offers a clear analytical advance. It shifts the focus from institutional outcomes to behavioural processes and from inactivity as absence to inactivity as structured action. By doing so, it provides a coherent foundation for understanding why silence becomes the dominant mode of participation in many parliamentary settings and prepares the ground for the formal articulation of Performative Inactivity Theory in the next section.

4. Methodology

4.1 Empirical Materials

Although this study is primarily conceptual and theory-building in orientation, its analytical claims are grounded in the systematic interpretation of observable parliamentary behaviour drawn from multiple documentary and observational sources. The empirical materials comprise official parliamentary Hansard debates, parliamentary video recordings, publicly available livestreams of legislative proceedings, official parliamentary records and proceedings, scholarly case studies, and legislative reports documenting parliamentary practice across selected authoritarian and hybrid political systems. These materials were examined not to produce quantitative measures of legislative activity but to identify recurring behavioural patterns capable of informing conceptual development through interpretive analysis and concept formation (Swedberg, 2020; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Tight, 2019).

The study focuses on illustrative materials drawn from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Uganda, China, and Russia. These cases were selected because they represent different configurations of authoritarian and hybrid governance while sharing institutional characteristics relevant to the research problem, including executive dominance, varying degrees of party discipline, patronage-based political organisation, and constrained legislative autonomy. Their selection follows the logic of theoretically informed comparative case illustration, commonly employed in concept-building research, in which cases are chosen for their analytical value rather than for statistical representativeness (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012; Gerring, 2012).

Particular analytical attention was directed towards recurrent forms of parliamentary conduct, including prolonged silence, limited questioning, restrained legislative intervention, ritualised affirmation, coordinated applause, and visible disengagement during parliamentary proceedings. Rather than treating these observations as isolated events, the analysis sought to identify repeated behavioural regularities across multiple parliamentary settings through an abductive movement between empirical observation and theoretical explanation (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). These recurring patterns constitute the empirical foundation for the development of Performative Inactivity Theory, enabling the study to connect observable legislative conduct with broader political-sociological explanations of authoritarian governance.

4.2 Case Selection

The selection of South Africa, Zimbabwe, Uganda, China, and Russia was guided by theoretical rather than statistical considerations. Collectively, these cases represent diverse configurations of constrained legislative politics spanning hybrid regimes, competitive authoritarian systems, and consolidated authoritarian regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Svobik, 2012). Although these political systems differ in institutional design, electoral competitiveness, and levels of executive dominance, they share a common analytical characteristic: legislative institutions operate within environments where meaningful parliamentary autonomy is constrained by varying combinations of party discipline, executive authority, patronage relations, and political surveillance. Examining these contrasting institutional settings enables theoretical comparison across different expressions of authoritarian governance, allowing the analysis to determine whether patterned parliamentary inactivity constitutes a recurring behavioural phenomenon rather than a context-specific anomaly (Gerring, 2012; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). The objective is therefore not to compare national political systems per se, but to identify recurring behavioural regularities that transcend particular institutional contexts and inform the development of Performative Inactivity Theory.

4.3 Pattern Identification and Analytical Strategy

The analytical emphasis was placed on identifying recurrent patterns of observable parliamentary behaviour rather than interpreting isolated legislative events. Particular attention was directed towards repeated manifestations of prolonged silence, limited or absent questioning of executive actors, ritualised applause, coordinated affirmation of parliamentary proceedings, visible behavioural disengagement, including sustained attention to mobile devices during legislative sessions, and repeated non-intervention during debates where substantive parliamentary scrutiny would ordinarily be expected. These behavioural indicators were examined across multiple parliamentary settings and documentary sources to determine whether they represented recurring patterns rather than episodic occurrences.

Pattern identification followed an abductive analytical logic in which repeated empirical observations were iteratively interpreted alongside existing theoretical perspectives to develop new conceptual explanations (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). The emphasis, therefore, remained on identifying behavioural regularities that persisted across different institutional contexts rather than attributing subjective intentions to individual legislators. The recurring nature of these observable practices provided the empirical foundation for theorising Performative Inactivity as a patterned, politically functional, and institutionally consequential mode of legislative behaviour.

In addition, the analysis draws on secondary literature, including scholarly studies and policy analyses of legislative behaviour and authoritarian governance. These sources are treated as part of the empirical base, contributing to the identification of patterns and contextual variation rather than serving merely as background (Tight, 2019). The combination of observational material and secondary data strengthens the robustness of the analysis by situating observed behaviour within broader political and institutional contexts (Gandhi, 2008; Truex, 2016).

The analytical strategy is based on abductive reasoning, which involves iteratively linking empirical observations with theoretical insights to generate new conceptual explanations (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). In this study, the persistent and patterned nature of parliamentary inactivity is treated as an anomaly that existing frameworks do not fully explain. This prompts the development of a new conceptual lens that can account for

these dynamics. Concept-building is central to this process. Rather than applying predefined categories, the study develops analytical concepts through the interaction between observation and theory, allowing performative inactivity to emerge as a meaningful explanatory construct (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012; Swedberg, 2020). This approach aligns with recent calls for more rigorous concept formation in political sociology as a basis for theoretical innovation (Gerring, 2012; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012).

4.4 Observational Scope and Analytical Limits

The analytical claims advanced in this study are confined to observable parliamentary behaviour rather than legislators' subjective intentions or motivations. The documentary and observational materials provide evidence of recurring practices, including silence, restrained participation, ritualised affirmation, and visible non-engagement, but they do not permit direct inference about personal beliefs or political calculations. Accordingly, the analysis explains how these recurring behavioural patterns function within authoritarian and hybrid institutional settings rather than why individual legislators behave as they do. This focus is consistent with the study's interpretive and abductive methodological orientation (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015).

This design is appropriate because the study seeks to theorise parliamentary inactivity as an observable behavioural phenomenon rather than measure individual motivations. Combining interpretive analysis, observational synthesis, and abductive reasoning provides a coherent basis for developing Performative Inactivity Theory while acknowledging that reliance on documentary and secondary materials limits conclusions about internal motivations.

5. Empirical Illustration and Analytical Cases

Parliamentary chambers across authoritarian and hybrid regimes exhibit recurring behavioural patterns that challenge conventional understandings of legislative participation. Rather than functioning as arenas of sustained deliberation, these institutions are frequently characterised by prolonged silence, restrained questioning, ritualised affirmation, and visible disengagement despite continuing procedural activity. Although such behaviour is often interpreted as evidence of institutional weakness or democratic decline, closer examination suggests a more structured and politically consequential pattern of legislative conduct. Across cases drawn from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Russia, and China, what appears to be inactivity is more convincingly understood as a recurrent behavioural repertoire embedded within broader configurations of executive dominance, institutional discipline, political surveillance, and regime maintenance (Svolik, 2012).

5.1 South Africa

In South Africa, parliamentary institutions continue to operate within a constitutional framework that formally guarantees legislative oversight and deliberation. However, parliamentary practice frequently reveals a pronounced disparity between procedural activity and substantive engagement. Oversight proceedings, particularly those involving investigations into governance failures at Eskom and related parliamentary committee hearings, have often concentrated sustained questioning among a relatively small group of legislators, while many members contribute little beyond procedural participation or routine affirmation (February 2021; Southall, 2022). Parliamentary video recordings, livestreams, and official committee proceedings from selected sittings repeatedly show extended periods during which numerous legislators remain visually disengaged, including sustained attention to mobile devices. In contrast, pro-

ceedings continue, despite the formal continuation of parliamentary business. These observable behavioural patterns suggest that inactivity coexists with procedural compliance rather than institutional absence. This illustrates how Performative Inactivity Theory interprets visible legislative restraint as a patterned behavioural adaptation through which parliamentary order is reproduced without requiring continuous substantive participation.

5.2 Zimbabwe

Comparable dynamics emerge in Zimbabwe, where parliamentary activity operates within a more overtly constrained political environment. Proceedings surrounding the adoption of the Constitutional Amendment (No. 2) Act illustrated legislative sessions in which substantive debate was largely concentrated among party leadership. At the same time, many parliamentarians participated primarily through formal voting and procedural attendance. Official parliamentary records reveal highly structured proceedings characterised by limited intervention despite the constitutional significance of the reforms. Rather than reflecting individual legislative incapacity, these recurring behavioural patterns indicate a parliamentary environment in which restrained participation functions as a stable mode of legislative conduct within broader systems of executive dominance and political discipline. This illustrates how Performative Inactivity Theory explains patterned inactivity as a politically functional behavioural performance that reinforces institutional authority while minimising visible contestation.

5.3 Uganda

In Uganda, similar behavioural patterns were particularly evident during parliamentary deliberations on the Constitutional (Amendment) Act of 2017, which removed the presidential age limit. Although the proceedings generated considerable national political contestation, parliamentary participation remained uneven, with sustained interventions concentrated among relatively few legislators. At the same time, many members participated primarily through attendance, voting, or limited procedural engagement. Parliamentary proceedings consistently reveal observable patterns of restrained participation despite the constitutional significance of the legislative process. This illustrates how Performative Inactivity Theory interprets recurring legislative restraint as a behavioural response that simultaneously preserves procedural legitimacy and accommodates prevailing configurations of executive authority and political risk.

5.4 Russia

Comparable behavioural regularities are evident in Russia, where proceedings within the State Duma surrounding the 2020 constitutional amendments were characterised by rapid legislative approval, overwhelming parliamentary support, and comparatively limited visible contestation despite the constitutional significance of the reforms (Reuter, 2021; Gel'man, 2015). Legislative procedures remained formally intact, yet observable behavioural patterns consistently prioritised consensus, procedural compliance, and limited intervention over sustained deliberation. This illustrates how Performative Inactivity Theory explains legislative inactivity not as institutional weakness but as a patterned behavioural mechanism through which political consensus is publicly enacted, and authoritarian governance is reinforced.

5.5 China

Likewise, annual sessions of China's National People's Congress continue to demonstrate highly structured legislative proceedings in which major policy decisions are accompanied by overwhelming approval rates, limited public disagreement, and carefully coordinated parlia-

mentary participation (Truex, 2016; Manion, 2014). Official proceedings and parliamentary broadcasts consistently display highly regulated patterns of participation in which visible restraint accompanies formal legislative activity. Rather than representing institutional inactivity, these recurring behavioural patterns demonstrate how observable restraint itself forms part of an institutionalised repertoire of political participation. This illustrates how Performative Inactivity Theory conceptualises patterned inactivity as a publicly visible behavioural practice through which legislative conformity contributes to the reproduction of political authority.

5.6 Comparative Synthesis

Across these diverse parliamentary settings, several behavioural regularities recur with striking consistency. Prolonged silence, limited questioning of executive authority, ritualised applause, coordinated affirmation, repeated non-intervention during substantive debates, and observable behavioural disengagement emerge across different institutional configurations despite considerable variation in constitutional design and political context. These recurring patterns are identified across multiple documentary and observational sources rather than isolated parliamentary episodes, providing the empirical basis for theory building. Collectively, the cases demonstrate that Performative Inactivity Theory explains not the institutional design of authoritarian legislatures, but the patterned behavioural processes through which observable inactivity becomes politically functional and contributes to the reproduction of authoritarian governance.

6. Theory Building: Performative Inactivity Theory

The preceding analysis establishes that parliamentary inactivity is neither incidental nor merely imposed but systematically produced through interacting mechanisms that render silence a rational, visible, and politically consequential mode of action. Performative Inactivity Theory (PIT) is advanced as a framework that captures this process. It departs from interpretations that equate inactivity with institutional failure and instead reconceptualises it as a structured form of participation embedded within regimes of power, surveillance, and symbolic exchange. Inactivity is thus understood not as absence but as a patterned and intelligible political practice that contributes to regime durability and elite reproduction.

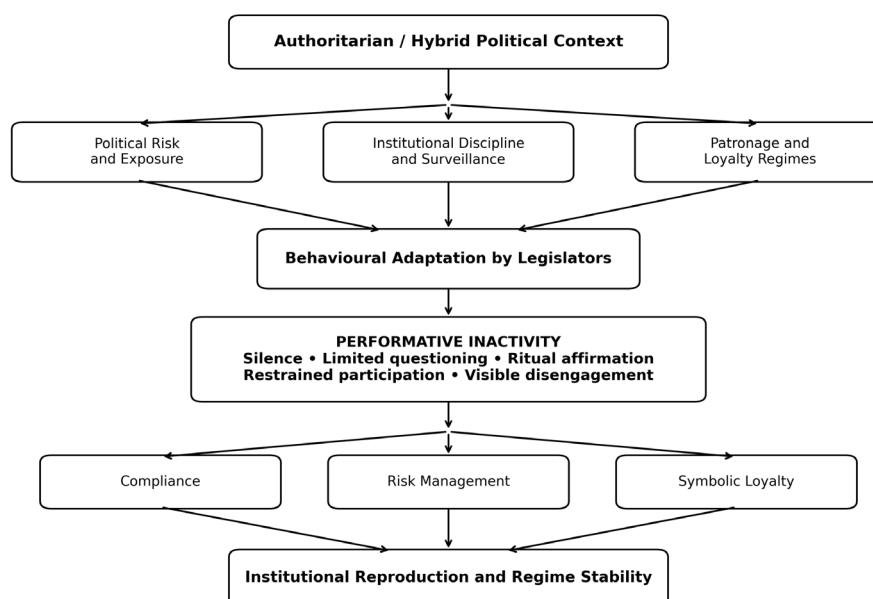


Figure 1. Conceptual architecture of Performative Inactivity Theory (PIT)

Figure 1 illustrates how authoritarian and hybrid political environments generate performative inactivity through interacting mechanisms of political risk, institutional discipline, and patronage-based control. Observable behavioural adaptation is expressed through patterned parliamentary inactivity, which in turn contributes to compliance, symbolic loyalty, institutional reproduction, and regime stability.

Figure 1 summarises the central causal architecture of Performative Inactivity Theory. Rather than proposing a single linear explanation, the framework conceptualises parliamentary inactivity as the behavioural outcome of interacting structural, institutional, and symbolic processes that collectively reproduce authoritarian governance.

6.1 Conceptual Consistency

Before elaborating on the theory's mechanisms, it is important to clarify the terminology used throughout this paper. Although the literature employs a variety of expressions—including parliamentary silence, legislative inactivity, non-engagement, passivity, and restrained participation—these terms are not treated here as interchangeable analytical concepts. Rather, they describe observable manifestations of a broader behavioural phenomenon. Performative Inactivity is introduced as the overarching theoretical construct that integrates these observable behaviours into a single explanatory framework. Parliamentary silence, limited questioning, ritualised affirmation, visible disengagement, and repeated non-intervention are therefore interpreted not as separate phenomena but as empirical expressions of Performative Inactivity operating within authoritarian and hybrid legislative environments.

Accordingly, the discussion that follows uses Performative Inactivity consistently as the principal analytical term. Descriptive expressions such as 'parliamentary silence' or 'limited engagement' are retained only when referring directly to observable parliamentary behaviour. This distinction is important because the theory does not seek to explain silence in isolation, nor inactivity as a mere absence of participation. Instead, it explains Performative Inactivity as a patterned, politically functional, and institutionally consequential mode of legislative behaviour through which compliance is publicly enacted, political risk is managed, and authoritarian governance is reproduced. Maintaining this conceptual distinction ensures analytical precision and reinforces the theory's explanatory coherence throughout the remainder of the paper.

6.2 What Performative Inactivity Theory Explains Beyond Existing Approaches

PIT explains a different dependent variable from most existing approaches: the institutionalisation of observable inactivity as a mode of legislative participation. Rubber-stamp, party-discipline, patronage and rational-choice accounts identify sources of constraint and compliance. In contrast, PIT explains how those conditions are translated into recurrent behavioural performances that become normalised, recognised and consequential within the chamber. The theory, therefore, shifts analysis from the existence of constraint to the behavioural reproduction of constraint.

6.3 Generative Mechanisms and Broader Applicability

Although PIT is developed from parliamentary behaviour, its broader applicability should be treated as a testable extension rather than an established conclusion. Comparable patterns may arise in other hierarchical institutions, including bureaucracies, political parties, courts and universities, where actors remain formally present while limiting visible contestation under

conditions of surveillance, reputational risk or organisational dependency. Future comparative research should determine whether the same mechanisms operate beyond legislatures and where the theory's scope conditions cease to hold.

At the core of PIT is the proposition that inactivity emerges through the interaction of four generative mechanisms that operate simultaneously and reinforce one another, producing a behavioural equilibrium in which silence becomes expected and rewarded. The first is the risk minimisation mechanism, which reflects the asymmetry of political environments characterised by surveillance and selective sanction. In such contexts, particularly in Zimbabwe, Uganda, and contested democratic settings such as South Africa, speaking carries potential costs that outweigh its benefits (Green, 2010). Contemporary analyses of authoritarian resilience emphasise how uncertainty and uneven enforcement heighten perceptions of risk, encouraging survival-centred precautionary strategies (Svolik, 2022; Kendall-Taylor et al., 2021). Silence, in this configuration, is a calculated response to exposure. Parliamentarians internalise these risks and regulate their behaviour accordingly, producing inactivity as anticipatory compliance.

This mechanism is reinforced by patronage alignment. In many authoritarian and hybrid systems, political advancement depends less on legislative competence than on demonstrated loyalty to party leadership and executive authority (Svolik, 2012). Patronage networks structure access to resources, positions, and protection, creating incentives for behavioural conformity. In this context, inactivity becomes a signal of alignment. By refraining from independent intervention, legislators avoid disrupting hierarchical relations and reinforce their position within patronage systems. Evidence from Rwanda, Kazakhstan, and Russia indicates that visible conformity is interpreted as a sign of reliability, shaping inclusion in ruling coalitions (Anceschi & Silvan, 2026; Reuter, 2021). Inactivity, therefore, functions not only as a safe option but as a politically advantageous one.

Institutional conditioning constitutes the third mechanism, capturing how norms, routines, and procedural expectations shape behaviour over time. Legislatures are structured environments in which certain forms of conduct are normalised and others marginalised. In contexts such as South Africa and Uganda, strong party discipline and hierarchical control over parliamentary procedures limit opportunities for spontaneous engagement and reinforce compliance (February 2021). Repeated exposure to these norms produces behavioural scripts that guide conduct within the chamber (Alexander, 2017; Rai, 2021). Inactivity becomes self-reinforcing as new entrants adapt to established expectations, learning that silence is appropriate and rewarded. Over time, this generates institutional habituation, in which inactivity is no longer perceived as a deviation but as the standard mode of participation.

The fourth mechanism, symbolic performance, highlights the communicative dimension of inactivity. Parliamentary chambers are highly visible spaces in which behaviour is continuously observed and interpreted by multiple audiences. Political conduct in such settings is not only instrumental but performative, oriented towards signalling alignment and managing impressions (Bayart, 2009; Wedeen, 1999). Inactivity becomes a visible enactment of compliance. The act of remaining silent, refraining from questioning, or engaging minimally signals loyalty while avoiding scrutiny. In China, legislative sessions prioritise visible unity over open contestation, embedding inactivity within broader systems of political communication (Mansion, 2014; Heilmann, 2008). Similar patterns in Zimbabwe and Uganda indicate that inactivity functions as a performative affirmation of regime stability. These mechanisms converge to produce a structured behavioural output. Authoritarian pressure, surveillance, and patronage

dependency constitute the conditions within which parliamentarians operate. These conditions generate performative inactivity as a rational response. The political outcome is twofold. At the regime level, inactivity contributes to stability by minimising visible conflict and reinforcing the appearance of consensus. At the elite level, it facilitates reproduction by rewarding conformity and marginalising dissent. This relational model underscores the central claim of PIT: inactivity is not a passive condition but a mechanism for maintaining political order. To systematise the interaction of these mechanisms, Table 1 presents the layered architecture through which performative inactivity is produced and sustained.

Table 1. Core mechanisms of performative inactivity in authoritarian parliaments

Analytical Level	Core Mechanism	Function	Analytical Implications
Structural Conditions	Surveillance, patronage networks, institutional control	Establish constraints and an incentive environment	- Legislators operate under visibility and risk - Political advancement tied to loyalty - Behaviour shaped by party hierarchy and executive dominance
Internalisation	Governmentality (internalised discipline)	Produces anticipatory compliance	- Self-censorship becomes routine - Silence emerges without direct coercion - Behaviour aligned with perceived expectations
Symbolic Economy	Loyalty as symbolic capital	Rewards conformity and alignment	- Silence signals reliability and trustworthiness - Conformity enhances political security - Non-engagement becomes politically valuable
Performative Layer	Visible compliance (dramaturgical performance)	Translates alignment into observable behaviour	- Ritualised applause and affirmation - Minimal questioning or debate - Strategic visibility without substantive engagement
Behavioural Output	Performative Inactivity	Stabilised mode of participation	- Sustained silence as patterned conduct - Normalised disengagement (e.g., device use) - Presence without deliberation
Political Outcomes	Regime reproduction and stability	Reproduces power structures	- Minimises visible conflict - Reinforces the appearance of consensus - Masks erosion of deliberative democracy

Table 1 clarifies that inactivity is not incidental but emerges from the alignment of structural constraints, internalised discipline, symbolic incentives, and performative expectations, culminating in stabilising political outcomes. A key extension of this argument is captured in the compliance visibility paradox. Conventional democratic theory assumes that active participation enhances legitimacy. In authoritarian and hybrid contexts, the inverse often holds. The less a parliamentarian speaks or intervenes, the more they are perceived as reliable and aligned with regime expectations. Visibility is achieved through restraint rather than expression. Empirical observations from Russia, Kazakhstan, and Rwanda indicate that legislators who maintain low profiles are often better positioned within ruling coalitions than those who assert independent voices (Gel'man, 2015; Anceschi & Silvan, 2026). This inversion challenges dominant assumptions about participation and legitimacy and highlights the need for a framework that accounts for such dynamics. Performative Inactivity Theory thus reconceptualises parliamentary behaviour by integrating internalised discipline, symbolic incentives, performative expectations, and strategic ambiguity into a coherent explanatory model. It extends existing theories by shifting attention from coercion alone to the patterned practices through which power is reproduced. At the same time, it recognises that coercion, surveillance, and institutional design remain central in shaping the conditions under which these practices emerge.

This theoretical intervention is not without limitations. Emphasising performativity risks overstating agency in contexts where coercion is pervasive. In highly restrictive environments, silence may reflect necessity as much as strategy. Furthermore, variations across political sys-

tems may produce different configurations of inactivity, requiring further comparative refinement. These limitations point to the need for continued empirical and theoretical development. Despite these constraints, Performative Inactivity Theory offers a significant contribution to the study of legislative behaviour and authoritarian governance. It provides a conceptual vocabulary and analytical lens through which the political significance of inactivity can be understood. By demonstrating that silence is structured, strategic, and consequential, the theory reframes inactivity as a central mechanism of contemporary governance. It shows that what appears as absence is, in fact, an organised and meaningful form of political action that sustains regimes and reproduces power.

7. Discussion and Implications

The analysis advanced in this paper compels a rethinking of core assumptions underpinning democratic theory, legislative studies, and the political sociology of institutions. At its most immediate level, the findings unsettle the equation between institutional presence and meaningful participation. Parliamentary systems in contexts such as South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe continue to function procedurally. However, the patterned inactivity observed within them reveals that presence does not translate into substantive engagement. Conventional indicators of democratic functioning, including attendance and procedural compliance, therefore fail to capture the quality of political participation (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Disch, van de Sande & Urbinati, 2019). Performative Inactivity Theory advances a more critical lens, distinguishing between the appearance of participation and its enactment.

This distinction has significant implications for how democracy is understood and evaluated. Contemporary debates have highlighted the persistence of institutions that remain formally intact while their substantive functions are diminished (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). The empirical patterns examined here suggest that parliamentary inactivity constitutes a behavioural mechanism through which this transformation is normalised. Rather than relying solely on overt repression, regimes can sustain control by reconfiguring participation into silence. Legislative chambers continue to operate, but engagement is reorganised into compliance, restraint, and controlled visibility. In this sense, institutional continuity coexists with behavioural transformation, reshaping the practice of representation without dismantling its formal structure (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner & Lust, 2018). This shift necessitates a reconsideration of representation. Classical theories assume that representation entails the articulation of interests through active engagement (Pitkin, 1967; Urbinati, 2019). However, the phenomenon of performative inactivity reveals a form of representation in which presence does not guarantee expression. In contexts such as South Africa and Uganda, where party discipline and patronage networks shape legislative conduct, MPs may prioritise alignment with political hierarchies over responsiveness to constituents (Green, 2010). Silence, in this configuration, does not simply indicate disengagement but reflects a reorientation of representation towards internal political audiences rather than the electorate. Representation becomes mediated through compliance rather than articulation.

Importantly, this outcome is not incidental but produced through the interacting mechanisms identified in Performative Inactivity Theory. Risk minimisation discourages visible dissent, patronage alignment rewards conformity, institutional conditioning normalises inactivity, and symbolic performance renders silence legible as political alignment. These mechanisms generate a form of representation that is simultaneously present and substantively constrained. This aligns with recent scholarship on symbolic representation, which highlights how institutions maintain legitimacy through visible performance even in the absence of substantive respon-

siveness (Ankersmit, 2002; Saward, 2020). The analysis extends this literature by demonstrating how silence itself operates as a central medium of political signalling. The implications for accountability are equally significant. Accountability is conventionally associated with questioning, debate, and oversight (Schedler, 1999; Bovens, 2007). In parliamentary contexts characterised by performative inactivity, these mechanisms are weakened. The absence of sustained questioning limits legislatures' capacity to scrutinise executive action, while visible compliance maintains the appearance of institutional functioning. This produces an accountability deficit that is not immediately visible, as procedural continuity masks substantive disengagement (Grigorescu, 2007). This masking effect is evident in cases such as Zimbabwe and Russia, where legislative processes continue to operate formally while substantive oversight remains limited (Gel'man, 2015). Parliamentary inactivity serves as political camouflage, concealing the concentration of power within executive structures. Legislative sessions become sites where authority is affirmed rather than contested, reinforcing stability through controlled non-engagement.

The paper's principal theoretical contribution is to connect micro-level behavioural regularities to meso-level institutional reproduction. Repeated acts of silence and restrained participation become consequential when they are socially recognised, rewarded and routinised. PIT therefore extends work on symbolic and performative politics by placing non-action at the centre of explanation: power is reproduced not only through what political actors say and do, but also through patterned conduct in which withholding intervention becomes publicly intelligible.

The broader implication is that political analysis must attend not only to what is expressed but also to what is systematically withheld. Inactivity, when patterned and visible, is not neutral. It reflects strategic adaptation to specific configurations of power and contributes to their reproduction. Performative Inactivity Theory provides a framework for analysing these dynamics, offering a more nuanced understanding of how political systems operate under constraints. This perspective also raises important normative questions. If legislative institutions can function procedurally without substantive participation, what constitutes meaningful representation? If silence becomes a rational and rewarded strategy, how can accountability be strengthened? Addressing these questions requires rethinking both the metrics used to evaluate legislative performance and the institutional conditions that shape political behaviour. The findings of this study challenge the tendency to interpret inactivity as failure. Parliamentary silence is a structured and consequential form of political action that reflects deeper transformations in governance. Recognising this shifts the analytical focus from institutional form to behavioural practice and opens new avenues for understanding the relationship between power, participation, and representation in contemporary political systems.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper examined a persistent but under-theorised feature of parliamentary politics: recurrent legislative inactivity where deliberation is formally expected. It challenged interpretations that reduce such behaviour to apathy, incapacity or institutional decline and developed Performative Inactivity Theory to explain how silence, restrained questioning, ritualised affirmation and limited intervention can become structured modes of participation. The theory identifies four interacting mechanisms—risk minimisation, patronage alignment, institutional conditioning and symbolic performance—through which constrained political environments are converted into observable behavioural regularities.

The central implication is that authoritarian or hybrid legislative order may be reproduced through behavioural normalisation rather than overt coercion alone. Once inactivity becomes routinised, new entrants encounter it as an institutional script: restraint appears appropriate, politically safe and sometimes advantageous. PIT thus explains how formal legislative continuity can coexist with substantive contraction in deliberation and oversight. Its analytical value lies in distinguishing the institutional conditions that constrain legislators from the behavioural practices through which those conditions are enacted and reproduced.

These findings carry important implications for theory, policy, and practice. At the theoretical level, there is a need to move beyond frameworks that equate participation with vocal engagement and to develop analytical tools that recognise silence and non-engagement as meaningful forms of political action. Future research should extend Performative Inactivity Theory across comparative contexts to examine how different configurations of power shape the emergence and variation of inactivity. At the policy level, the study underscores the limitations of existing metrics for assessing legislative effectiveness. Indicators such as attendance, procedural compliance, and legislative output fail to capture the quality of participation. More nuanced measures are required that focus on the depth of engagement, the frequency of independent intervention, and the extent of substantive oversight. Such measures would make visible the patterns of inactivity currently obscured in formal institutional assessments.

At the practice level, strengthening parliamentary performance requires addressing the incentives and norms that sustain inactivity. This includes recalibrating party discipline mechanisms that discourage independent engagement, enhancing institutional protections for dissent, and fostering legislative cultures that value deliberation. Responsibility for these changes extends beyond individual parliamentarians to party leadership, parliamentary administrations, and oversight bodies that shape the conditions under which legislative behaviour unfolds. The image of the silent parliamentary chamber should not be mistaken for political emptiness. Rather, it reflects a profound reorganisation of legislative participation in which visible behavioural restraint becomes politically meaningful, institutionally rewarded, and publicly enacted. Performative Inactivity Theory demonstrates that authoritarian governance is reproduced not only through coercive institutions or executive dominance, but also through the repeated normalisation of observable behavioural practices that transform parliamentary participation into an organised performance of compliance. By shifting analytical attention from institutional constraints to behavioural reproduction, the theory offers a new political-sociological framework for understanding how authoritarian rule is sustained through everyday legislative conduct. Performative Inactivity Theory suggests that one of authoritarianism's most enduring achievements is not the complete silencing of opposition, but the institutionalisation of Performative Inactivity as a recognised, legitimate, and publicly visible mode of political participation.

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