

Shadows of power: The global struggle between democratic erosion and authoritarian resurgence

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Abstract

In recent years, something unsettling has been happening around the world: democracies are weakening, while authoritarian leaders are growing stronger. This double-edged crisis reveals just how fragile democratic systems can be and how cleverly authoritarian regimes adapt to reclaim power. On one hand, democracies are slowly eroding—courts lose their independence, opposition voices are silenced, and elections become less fair, often under the guise of protecting national security or catering to populist demands. On the other hand, authoritarian leaders are using technology, global instability, and shifting international alliances to tighten their grip and spread their influence far beyond their borders.

This paper dives into these interconnected trends, showing how issues like economic inequality, deep political divides, and the decline of global cooperation have created the perfect storm for authoritarianism to thrive. By looking at real-world examples from different regions, it uncovers the many ways democracies are being undermined—from sneaky legal changes to outright repression—and how authoritarian regimes support each other through global networks.

But this isn't just about politics—it's about people. The rise of authoritarianism threatens human rights, international stability, and the very idea of fair governance. This research is a call to action: to strengthen democratic values, rebuild global partnerships, and find creative ways to push back against authoritarian forces. At its core, it's a plea to rethink how we protect democracy in a world facing unprecedented challenges, ensuring it remains a force for freedom and justice in the years to come.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding, authoritarian resurgence, populism, international stability, political repression

Introduction

1. The Global Shift in Democratic Norms

The Erosion of Democracy in the 21st Century

Democracy, once hailed as the pinnacle of fair governance, is facing serious challenges in the 21st century. While the 20th century saw a significant rise in democratic governance, fueled by decolonization, the fall of the Soviet Union, and globalization, the current century has witnessed alarming democratic erosion. This phenomenon, known as democratic backsliding, involves the gradual weakening of democratic institutions, often driven by elected leaders who exploit democratic systems to consolidate power.

Once thought to be a thing of the past, authoritarianism has made a comeback, taking various forms across the world. Leaders like Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Narendra Modi in India, and Donald Trump in the United States have been accused of undermining democratic principles while maintaining a façade of electoral legitimacy. This has created a paradox: democracies still exist on paper, but core principles—like checks and balances, media freedom, judicial independence, and civil liberties—are under attack.

According to Freedom House's 2023 [12, 15, 20] "Freedom in the World" report, democracy has declined for the 17th consecutive year. The report notes that authoritarian regimes now govern 38% of the world's population, with hybrid regimes—blending democratic and autocratic features—on the rise. This troubling trend poses significant risks to global stability, economic growth, human rights, and international relations.

2. Research Objective

This research aims to understand the growing issue of democratic backsliding and the resurgence of authoritarianism worldwide. The main goals are to define

and conceptualize democratic backsliding, examining what constitutes it and how it differs from traditional authoritarian takeovers. The study will also analyze the mechanisms of democratic erosion, focusing on the strategy's leaders use to weaken democratic institutions and the role of legal and institutional manipulations in enabling authoritarian rule.

Additionally, the research will explore case studies of democratic decline, specifically looking at Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, India, and the United States, and offering a comparative analysis of democratic erosion across various regions. The study will assess the impact of democratic backsliding on human rights, governance, civil liberties, and the broader economic and geopolitical consequences of the rise in authoritarianism.

Lastly, the research will propose strategies to counteract democratic erosion, focusing on institutional safeguards against decline and examining the roles of civil society, media, and international organizations in preserving democratic values.

3. Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach, incorporating comparative case study analysis, historical examination, and policy analysis. The methodology includes:

- **Literature Review:** Analysis of academic works, reports, and books on democratic backsliding.
- **Case Study Methodology:** Examination of key countries exhibiting democratic decline.
- **Data Collection:** Use of Freedom House, V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy), The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), and World Bank reports.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Evaluating similarities and differences between different cases of backsliding.

4. Theoretical Framework

To analyze democratic backsliding and authoritarian resurgence, this research applies several theoretical frameworks:

1. Levitsky and Ziblatt's "How Democracies Die" Model

- Examines how elected leaders dismantle democracy from within by eroding norms rather than staging military coups.
- Identifies warning signs of democratic erosion, such as weakening independent institutions, demonizing political opponents, and undermining electoral legitimacy.

2. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's Competitive Authoritarianism Theory

- Suggests that many modern authoritarian regimes maintain the appearance of democracy while controlling the media, judiciary, and elections.
- Examples include Russia under Vladimir Putin and Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro.

3. Nancy Bermeo's Six Mechanisms of Democratic Backsliding

- **Executive Aggrandizement:** Gradual expansion of executive powers at the cost of other branches.
- **Strategic Manipulation of Elections:** Using laws, gerrymandering, or voter suppression to influence outcomes.
- **Curtailing Media Freedoms:** Silencing dissenting voices through legal and financial pressures.
- **Restricting Civil Society:** Controlling NGOs, activism, and opposition movements.
- **Judicial Capture:** Politicizing the judiciary to serve government interests.
- **Undermining Checks and Balances:** Weakening legislative and oversight bodies.

5. Literature Review

Democratic backsliding is broadly understood as the gradual weakening of democratic institutions, norms, and practices, leading to the erosion of political freedoms and the rule of law (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) ^[6]. Unlike outright coups or sudden authoritarian takeovers, backsliding occurs through legal and procedural means, such as the manipulation of elections, judicial control, and media restrictions (Bermeo, 2016) ^[3].

Populism has played a significant role in democratic backsliding, particularly in Europe, Latin America, and Asia (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Populist leaders often position themselves as the voice of the "true people" against a corrupt elite, using this narrative to justify undermining democratic norms. Research shows that once in power, populists frequently erode institutional checks and balances, weaken judicial independence, and suppress dissent under the pretense of "restoring order" (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Case studies of Hungary (Orbán), Turkey (Erdoğan), and Brazil (Bolsonaro) illustrate how populist rhetoric can transform into authoritarian governance. These leaders have systematically weakened democratic institutions while maintaining the façade of legitimacy through manipulated elections and controlled media (Ágh, 2019) ^[2].

The rise of digital authoritarianism has significantly altered the landscape of democratic backsliding (Feldstein, 2020).

Governments increasingly use surveillance technologies, internet censorship, and disinformation campaigns to control political discourse and suppress opposition. China and Russia, for instance, have pioneered sophisticated digital repression tactics, which other authoritarian regimes have adopted (Morozov, 2011).

Recent studies suggest that hybrid regimes—those that blend democratic and autocratic elements—are becoming more common, blurring the distinction between democracy and authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2020). These regimes hold elections but manipulate them to maintain control, creating an illusion of democracy while suppressing true political competition.

Scholars and policymakers have debated potential strategies to counter democratic erosion. Some advocate for stronger international cooperation, economic sanctions, and diplomatic pressure to deter authoritarian tendencies (Svolik, 2019). Others emphasize the need for domestic resilience, including civic education, institutional reforms, and grassroots activism (Carothers & Youngs, 2017) ^[4].

Studies also highlight the role of social movements in resisting authoritarianism. The Arab Spring, Hong Kong protests, and pro-democracy movements in Belarus and Myanmar demonstrate both the power and limitations of popular uprisings in reversing democratic decline (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). However, many of these movements have struggled to achieve long-term democratic transitions, often facing severe state repression (Ghonim, 2012).

6. Structure of the Research Paper

This paper is organized into six chapters:

- **Chapter 1 (Introduction):** Provides an overview of democratic backsliding, research objectives, methodology, and theoretical framework.
- **Chapter 2 (Understanding Democratic Backsliding):** Examines the mechanisms, causes, and indicators of democratic erosion.
- **Chapter 3 (Case Studies of Democratic Decline):** Analyzes Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, India, and the United States.
- **Chapter 4 (Consequences of Democratic Erosion):** Explores political, economic, and human rights implications and the Role of International Institutions and Global Governance in Addressing Democratic Backsliding.
- **Chapter 5 (Countering Democratic Backsliding):** Proposes policy solutions to protect democracy.
- **Chapter 6 (Conclusion):** Summarizes key findings and future implications.

Understanding Democratic Backsliding

Democratic backsliding refers to the gradual decline of democratic systems, institutions, and practices. Unlike traditional authoritarian takeovers, which often involve military coups or sudden regime changes, democratic backsliding is a more subtle and systematic process driven by elected leaders. It typically unfolds through legal and institutional manipulations, making it difficult to recognize until significant damage has already been done. As Nancy Bermeo (2016) ^[3] explains, democratic backsliding doesn't mean a complete collapse of democracy, but rather a slow weakening of its core principles, which often makes it harder to detect. By the time the damage becomes visible,

democratic structures may already be too fragile to fully restore.

Key signs of democratic backsliding include the erosion of checks and balances, manipulation of electoral systems, curbing civil liberties, and the concentration of power in the executive. These actions allow leaders to gradually undermine democratic institutions. Backsliding often occurs through both legal changes and violations of informal norms, making it tough to pinpoint exactly when a democracy is lost.

Several indicators can help identify the early stages of democratic decline. Organizations like Freedom House, The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), and the V-Dem Project track these patterns. Weakening democratic institutions is a primary warning sign. For example, judicial manipulation happens when leaders fill courts with loyalists or alter the process for selecting judges to secure favourable rulings. Legislative control is another sign, as ruling parties may gradually take over parliament, turning it into a tool for their own power. Electoral manipulation is another key indicator, with election bodies coming under political pressure, undermining their impartiality. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has reshaped the judiciary to keep his party, Fidesz, in control.

Political leaders often follow a systematic strategy to consolidate power and push backsliding forward. The process begins with undermining the autonomy of key institutions like the judiciary, military, and election commissions. Leaders expand their power through constitutional amendments or executive orders to prevent challenges to their authority. They then focus on controlling the media and suppressing civil society by targeting independent journalists and NGOs. Opposition leaders are often attacked using anti-corruption laws, while security forces intimidate protestors. Elections are manipulated by changing voting laws, gerrymandering, or suppressing voters, and some leaders declare victory despite evidence of fraud. These actions are often justified as necessary to maintain stability or order, with external crises used as a pretext for further repression.

Globally, democratic backsliding has become a widespread issue. According to the 2023 Democracy Index by The Economist Intelligence Unit, the number of full democracies has steadily declined, while hybrid and authoritarian regimes have increased. Only 21 countries are now considered full democracies, down from 26 in 2015. Freedom House also reports that nearly 38% of the global population now lives under authoritarian rule, a clear sign of the growing trend of democratic erosion. Furthermore, over 75% of countries have seen a decline in press freedom since 2010, reflecting the global shift toward authoritarianism.

Case Studies of Democratic Decline

This chapter explores democratic erosion in five countries—Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, India, and the U.S.—where leaders have undermined democratic norms while maintaining a façade of legitimacy.

Hungary: Orbán's Autocratic Grip

Once a democratic success story, Hungary has slid into "electoral autocracy" under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Since 2010, his Fidesz party has centralized power, weakened judicial independence, and restructured elections to ensure its dominance. Media and civil society face severe

restrictions, and despite EU criticism, Orbán has resisted consequences, exposing the EU's weakness in handling internal democratic decline.

Turkey: Erdoğan's Power Consolidation

Turkey's democracy has sharply declined under President Erdoğan, especially after the failed 2016 coup. The 2017 constitutional referendum granted him unchecked executive power, while independent judges were purged, media suppressed, and opposition leaders jailed. His growing authoritarianism has strained Turkey's global ties and left the country classified as only "Partly Free."

Brazil: Bolsonaro's Democratic Strain

Jair Bolsonaro's presidency (2018–2022) saw attacks on media, judiciary, and electoral institutions. He placed military officials in key positions, undermined judicial independence, and cast doubt on election integrity. Though Brazil remains democratic, Bolsonaro's leadership deepened political polarization and eroded public trust in institutions.

India: Modi's Centralization of Power

India, the world's largest democracy, has seen increasing centralization under Narendra Modi's BJP. Opposition struggles to compete, while journalists and activists face intimidation. Policies like the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's autonomy and the Citizenship Amendment Act have fuelled concerns about rising authoritarianism and religious polarization. While democracy endures, its foundational values face growing strain.

United States: Democratic Vulnerabilities Exposed

Under Donald Trump, U.S. democracy faced unprecedented challenges, particularly after the 2020 election. Trump's false claims of voter fraud and the January 6 Capitol riot highlighted deep political fractures. His attacks on media, judiciary, and opposition figures further eroded democratic norms. While American institutions have shown resilience, the country must work to restore trust in democracy.

Consequences of Democratic Erosion – Exploring Political, Economic, and Human Rights Implications and The Role of International Institutions and Global Governance in Addressing Democratic Backsliding

Democratic decline has far-reaching consequences, affecting not just politics but also economies, human rights, and social stability. As power consolidates, opposition is silenced, leading to uncertainty and the erosion of freedoms. Political institutions such as parliaments, courts, and electoral bodies lose their independence, becoming tools for those in power. Elections are manipulated through gerrymandering, voter suppression, and biased electoral commissions, while authoritarian leaders emerge, using populist rhetoric to divide society and suppress opposition. As democratic norms erode, citizens become disillusioned, weakening political participation and enabling further authoritarian control.

Economically, democratic backsliding leads to unpredictability in government policies, discouraging investment. Corruption flourishes as elites loyal to the regime control resources, exacerbating inequality and inefficiency. Foreign investors become wary of political instability, and international sanctions may further harm the economy. Human rights protections suffer most immediately, as governments restrict freedom of speech,

crack down on independent media, and target critics, resulting in widespread harassment and imprisonment. The decline in democratic governance thus destabilizes political, economic, and social systems, fostering a dangerous environment for citizens and the country as a whole.

The Role of International Institutions in Addressing Democratic Backsliding

The European Union (EU) has been a staunch advocate of democracy and human rights, requiring member states to uphold these values through the Copenhagen Criteria. The European Parliament and European Commission play central roles in monitoring and promoting democratic norms, using tools such as Rule of Law reports. In cases of democratic backsliding, the EU can impose sanctions or suspend voting rights, as seen with Hungary, where Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union was triggered in response to its erosion of democratic norms. The EU's European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership also aim to support countries like Ukraine and Georgia in building democratic institutions through financial and technical assistance.

However, the EU's effectiveness in preventing democratic backsliding within its borders has been challenged. Countries like Hungary and Poland have increasingly resisted EU norms and used their veto power to block EU sanctions or stronger actions. Internal divisions between member states, especially between Germany and France, hinder a unified response to democratic erosion. Often, economic cooperation is prioritized over human rights concerns, and the EU's decision-making process, requiring consensus, allows member states facing democratic backsliding to block more substantial actions against them. The United Nations (UN) promotes democracy through bodies like the Human Rights Council (HRC) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and through instruments like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The UN also engages in diplomatic efforts to address violations and intervene in conflict or post-conflict settings, as seen in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, the UN's ability to take meaningful action against democratic backsliding is often limited by the political interests of powerful Security Council members, like Russia and China, who can veto sanctions or interventions against authoritarian regimes. As a result, while the UN can issue recommendations and conduct investigations, its actions are often undermined or ignored by governments, limiting its effectiveness.

The World Bank indirectly supports democracy through its focus on economic development, good governance, and anti-corruption efforts. Many of its funding programs require recipient countries to implement democratic reforms as a condition for receiving financial assistance. The World Bank works to strengthen the rule of law and improve anti-corruption frameworks, which can help mitigate the effects of democratic backsliding. However, its focus on economic development limits its ability to directly address political repression. In authoritarian regimes, the World Bank's influence on political reform is constrained, as its main priority is economic development rather than political

change, making it less effective in fostering democratic governance in such contexts.

Strategies for Countering Democratic Backsliding and Promoting Resilience

Democracy is not self-sustaining; it requires constant vigilance, strong institutions, and active civic participation to withstand challenges. When democratic backsliding occurs, it typically begins with weakening independent institutions, suppressing dissent, and eroding civil liberties. Preventing such decline requires a multi-pronged strategy that includes strengthening democratic institutions, ensuring media freedom, mobilizing civil society, and utilizing international mechanisms to uphold democratic norms. This chapter explores key strategies to counter authoritarian resurgence and promote democratic resilience.

1. Strengthening Democratic Institutions

1.1 The Role of an Independent Judiciary

An independent judiciary is essential to democracy, ensuring the rule of law and preventing abuse of power. Authoritarian regimes often undermine judicial independence through political interference and intimidation. To counteract this, legal frameworks must protect judicial impartiality, and international organizations like the International Bar Association must monitor threats to judicial independence. Countries like Turkey and Poland have demonstrated the need for stronger institutional safeguards against judicial overreach.

1.2 A Transparent and Accountable Legislature

A legislature must act as a check on executive power, but authoritarian regimes often manipulate elections and consolidate power. Strengthening parliamentary transparency, anti-corruption laws, and public accountability measures is crucial. Empowering opposition parties and ensuring fair electoral competition helps maintain a vibrant democracy. The legislative dominance seen in countries like Russia and Venezuela highlights the dangers of unchecked executive power.

2. Ensuring Media Freedom and Combating Disinformation

1.1 The Press as a Democratic Watchdog

A free press is essential for holding governments accountable. Authoritarian regimes often censor independent media, harass journalists, and manipulate state-run outlets to control public perception. Legal protections for journalists and laws against government censorship are necessary to safeguard media independence. Countries like Hungary and China have heavily restricted press freedom, illustrating how media control can lead to democratic decline.

1.2 Countering Digital Manipulation and Disinformation

Digital platforms have allowed authoritarian regimes to manipulate public opinion through disinformation campaigns. Governments and civil society must promote digital literacy to help citizens identify fake news and propaganda. Social media companies also play a role in regulating disinformation. Recent cases in Brazil and the United States demonstrate how disinformation can undermine democratic processes, making proactive countermeasures essential.

3. International Strategies for Defending Democracy

1.1 Diplomatic Pressure and Targeted Sanctions

International organizations like the UN, EU, and OAS play significant roles in pressuring authoritarian governments to uphold democratic norms. Diplomatic interventions can include sanctions on corrupt officials and incentives for democratic reforms. The EU has previously imposed sanctions on Hungary and Poland, illustrating the effectiveness of international pressure.

1.2 Financial and Legal Support for Democratic Movements

Global financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF can support democratic governance through financial aid and withholding funds from regimes engaged in political repression. International legal bodies like the ICC and ECHR also hold authoritarian leaders accountable for human rights abuses, reinforcing legal deterrents against democratic erosion.

4 Empowering Civil Society and Grassroots Movements

1.1 The Role of Civil Society in Defending Democracy

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a vital role in resisting authoritarianism and promoting democracy. These organizations mobilize citizens through protests, campaigns, and public education. Pro-democracy movements in Belarus and Hong Kong demonstrate the power of civic engagement in challenging authoritarian rule. International support strengthens the impact of civil society in these movements.

1.2 Overcoming Repression of Civil Society

Authoritarian governments often attempt to suppress civil society through legal restrictions and violent crackdowns. To counter this, international human rights organizations must provide legal and financial support to activists. Digital security training and secure communication platforms can protect activists from government surveillance. Countries like Russia and Egypt have implemented harsh laws restricting NGOs, making international solidarity crucial for sustaining pro-democracy movements.

Conclusion

This study has examined the growing erosion of democracy worldwide, revealing how economic crises, social inequality, and rising populism fuel democratic decline. When political institutions are manipulated, democratic norms weaken, allowing authoritarian leaders to consolidate power. Economic instability often accelerates this process, creating opportunities for populist movements that prioritize control over political freedom.

Common strategies in democratic backsliding include media control, electoral manipulation, and suppressing opposition through security forces. Case studies from Hungary, Venezuela, and Turkey demonstrate how these tactics unfold across different political landscapes, highlighting the global scale of the problem.

Beyond identifying causes and mechanisms, this study underscores the far-reaching consequences—from weakened human rights to fragile political institutions. New challenges, such as cyber threats and digital propaganda, further complicate efforts to protect democracy, demanding

innovative solutions and stronger international collaboration.

Despite these threats, democracy is not beyond saving. Strengthening institutions, addressing economic inequalities, and protecting civil liberties can help counteract authoritarian trends. The global community must take an active role in supporting democratic movements and reinforcing democratic norms. Only through collective action can we secure the future of democracy in an increasingly authoritarian world.

Future Implications

- The rise of authoritarianism threatens the future of global democracy, with potential for more countries to slide toward autocratic regimes. Democratic norms and institutions will require strong defense from both domestic and international forces.
- Economic instability will continue to be a major consequence of democratic erosion. As political systems become more authoritarian, economic inequality deepens, and foreign investment declines, exacerbating the challenges faced by vulnerable populations.
- The erosion of democratic systems often results in a crackdown on freedom of speech, press freedom, and political dissent. Human rights violations increase, and opposition movements face greater repression.
- Strengthening democratic institutions such as the judiciary, media, and election commissions is essential for combating democratic erosion. Civil society must also play a role in advocating for democratic reforms and upholding human rights.
- Global efforts to combat democratic backsliding must involve international organizations and governments. Diplomatic pressure, sanctions, and support for democratic movements are critical in reversing authoritarian trends.
- Technological manipulation through disinformation, cyberattacks, and social media control poses a new challenge to democracy. Efforts to safeguard against digital threats and protect electoral integrity will be crucial for the future of democratic systems.
- In conclusion, while democratic backsliding presents significant challenges, a concerted effort to strengthen institutions, promote civic engagement, and address economic disparities can mitigate its impact. The international community's role in supporting democracy will be essential in ensuring the resilience of democratic systems worldwide.

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