

Influence of Democratic Tyranny in the New Era: A Study

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Abstract

"This study critically examines the burgeoning phenomenon of democratic tyranny, characterized by the erosion of individual liberties and minority rights under the guise of majoritarian rule within ostensibly democratic systems. This regression often manifests through systematic dismantling of press freedom, suppression of dissent, and manipulation of information, leading to what some term "democratic regression". In the current global political landscape, this decline in democratic health has led to the average level of democracy, as measured by the Liberal Democracy Index, reaching levels not seen earlier, particularly when considering population-weighted averages. This decline is further exacerbated by structural drivers and superstructural triggers that contribute to a global democratic recession, especially pronounced in the Global South due to the limitations of liberal democracy in those regions. This paper aims to explore the nuanced processes through which ostensibly democratic systems can devolve into tyrannical forms, identifying specific milestones and systemic vulnerabilities that facilitate such transformations."

Keywords: Democratic Tyranny, Democratic Backsliding, Democratic Regression, Erosion of Liberties

Introduction:

The concept of 'democratic tyranny' or 'democratic backsliding' refers to a process where democratic institutions, norms, and individual freedoms gradually weaken, often while maintaining democratic processes, such as elections. This phenomenon is observed worldwide, with leaders sometimes using democratic legitimacy to consolidate power and weaken checks and balances. This often involves a shift towards systems that retain democratic facades while adopting illiberal features, challenging previous optimism about democracy's future.

This study critically examines the burgeoning phenomenon of democratic tyranny, characterized by the erosion of individual liberties and minority rights under the guise of majoritarian rule within ostensibly democratic systems. This regression often manifests through systematic dismantling of press freedom, suppression of dissent, and manipulation of information, leading to what some term "democratic regression" (Forst, 2023) (Daly, 2019). In the current global political landscape, this decline in democratic health has led to the average level of democracy, as measured by the Liberal Democracy Index, reaching levels not seen since 1985, particularly when considering population-weighted averages (Angiolillo et al., 2024). This decline is further exacerbated by structural drivers and superstructural triggers that contribute to a global democratic recession, especially pronounced in the Global South due to the limitations of liberal democracy in those regions (Matlosa, 2023). The expansion of democracy, once hailed as a "third wave"

in the late 20th century, is now facing significant reversals, with many states experiencing a decline in the quality of their democratic institutions (Diamond, 2020). This phenomenon, often termed democratic backsliding or illiberal democracy, involves a shift towards systems that retain democratic facades while adopting illiberal features, challenging the previous optimism surrounding democracy's future ("Illiberal Democracies and Democratic Backsliding," 2022). This shift necessitates a re-evaluation of established democratic theories and an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms through which democratic systems can regress into tyrannical forms, even while maintaining superficial democratic processes (Forst, 2023). This paper aims to explore the nuanced processes through which ostensibly democratic systems can devolve into tyrannical forms, identifying specific milestones and systemic vulnerabilities that facilitate such transformations (Riaz & Rana, 2020).

Democratic Tyranny in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal

Protests against political corruption and the entrenched elites in Nepal, triggered by a recent social media ban, led to the ouster of Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli. Several [senior ministers were targeted](#), with official residences burned and ransacked by angry protestors, in scenes reminiscent of recent crises in other parts of South Asia.

Last year, student-led protests against certain quotas in Bangladesh's public jobs snowballed into widespread demonstrations over Prime Minister [Sheikh Hasina](#)'s regime. Hasina then fled to India.

In 2022, as a major economic crisis hit Sri Lanka, public anger led to protests in Colombo. The Rajapaksa brothers, then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, left the nation, much like Oli did.

In Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, democratic regression has manifested in various forms and due to different causes:

Bangladesh

Bangladesh has experienced an incremental, yet consequential, decline of democracy. This trend is characterized by challenges to electoral integrity, suppression of opposition, and limitations on civil liberties.

- **Electoral Processes** | The country has witnessed two consecutive rigged elections in 2014 and 2018, leading to questions about the reliability of the electoral system (Riaz, 2020). Methods employed to rig elections include creating a climate of fear, neutralizing opposition candidates through imprisonment, disqualifying candidates, limiting international observers' oversight, and ballot stuffing (Riaz & Parvez, 2021). Elections have ostensibly lost their representative value and are increasingly used to legitimize and institutionalize undemocratic regimes (Moniruzzaman, 2019).
- **Civil Liberties and Freedom of Expression** | Legal measures have been adopted to restrict freedom of expression (Riaz, 2020). The state's use of surveillance and the politics of fear, particularly through the digitalization of society, has been employed to limit freedom of expression and silence critical voices (Aziz, 2021; Riaz, 2020). Section 57 of the ICT Act, for instance, criminalizes electronic content deemed false or obscene, or that could harm religious sentiments or the "image of the state," and has been criticized for its vague wording, leading to misuse against journalists and social media users (Lacy & Mookherjee, 2020). Infringements on freedom of speech and the stifling of dissenting voices are also noted (Islam, 2011).

- **Political Repression** | There are increasing reports of extrajudicial killings and allegations of interference with the judiciary (Riaz, 2020). A dangerous culture of disappearances and extrajudicial killings exists, alongside the interception of opposition programs and the torture of opposition leaders and activists (Islam, 2011). Both mainstream civil society and political opposition have been largely suppressed (Jackman, 2020).

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has faced political and economic crises that have strained its democratic institutions. Its 1978 Constitution, though intended for stability, has practically led to authoritarianism and eroded the rule of law (Abeyratne, 2015).

- **Executive Power and Constitutional Amendments** | The executive presidency, with few restraints, has been used to enable militarization (Satkunanathan, 2015), and the excessive centralization of executive power is a significant concern (Abeyratne, 2015). The 1978 Constitution, while enduring, has contributed to the erosion of the rule of law (Abeyratne, 2015). Historically, the First Republican Constitution (1972-1978) rejected the separation of powers in favor of a fusion of powers in the legislature (Cooray, 1992).
- **Institutional Erosion** | The breakdown of the rule of law is a current issue (Yap & Scott, 2010). The civil war contributed to the weakening of the rule of law and human rights (Deane, 2016). The impact of judicial review of legislation on the democratic fabric has also been examined (Medawatte, 2019).
- **Suppression of Dissent** | Governments sometimes employ aggressive and draconian measures to quell civil unrest and protests (Zick, 2025). In Sri Lanka, the executive utilized emergency powers to create an environment conducive to securitization and militarization, and these unofficial rules and processes persisted even after the state of emergency lapsed (Satkunanathan, 2015).

Nepal

"Nepal is going through a phase where democratic institutions are under pressure, and the country is facing significant challenges to ensure stability, good governance, and accountability." As a young republic, Nepal's democratic journey is marked by challenges such as political instability, corruption, and governance weaknesses.

- **Political Instability and Governance** | Political instability in Nepal has led to a decline in the rule of law (Thapa, 2023). Frequent changes in government, often due to internal disagreements within political parties, have destabilized democratic governance (Thapa, 2023). Political parties are criticized for failing to institutionalize democratic gains (Thapa, 2023).
- **Corruption and Accountability** | Corruption is a significant and systemic problem in Nepal (Gupta et al., 2018; Shah, 2019; Suvedi, 2024), posing a major challenge to principles of transparency, accountability, and fair representation (Suvedi, 2024). Weak institutional frameworks, inadequate enforcement mechanisms, and political patronage networks foster corrupt practices (Suvedi, 2024). There is a noted lack of accountability within the bureaucracy (Paudel & Gupta, 2019).
- **Institutional Weaknesses** | State institutions have been unable to effectively carry out their duties as per the law and constitution (Thapa, 2023). Despite efforts to protect judicial independence, it has seen erosion within Nepal's redemocratization process (Jeffery & Timilsina, 2021). The judiciary has faced relegation and has been seen as complicit in the deterioration of state institutions, which dissuade impunity and restrain deviousness (Chhetri, 2021). Furthermore, legislators' shallow engagement in

policy-making and legislative review processes hinders effective post-legislative scrutiny (Mahato et al., 2020).

Literature Review

The recent surge in autocratization globally, with a prevalence of closed autocracies over liberal democracies, underscores an urgent need to comprehend the forces driving democratic erosion and the potential for resistance against it (Stokke & Kyaw, 2023). While democracies have historically demonstrated resilience against such autocratic pressures, particularly in averting the onset of autocratization, this capacity has notably weakened since the end of the Cold War, leading to a significant increase in democratic breakdowns (Boese et al., 2021). This phenomenon, often termed democratic backsliding, refers to a deterioration of democratic institutions within an existing democratic regime, rather than a complete collapse (Waldner & Lust, 2018). This retreat from democracy is observed globally, with a discernible decline in freedom levels across many nations since 2006, deepening particularly over the last fourteen years (Diamond, 2020). This backsliding is frequently characterized by elected populist leaders who systematically undermine democratic institutions, suppress opposition, and alter foundational rules to solidify their power (Amundsen & Jackson, 2021). This gradual erosion of democratic norms by elected officials, often referred to as democratic backsliding, presents a unique puzzle, as the very populations adversely affected frequently fail to react in time to prevent the catastrophic situation (Luo & Przeworski, 2022). Indeed, a significant challenge in defining and understanding these transformations lies in the lack of consensus within the literature on what constitutes "illiberal democracy" or even its existence as a distinct concept, leading some to explore broader categories like democratic erosion or autocratization ("Illiberal Democracies and Democratic Backsliding," 2022).

Methodology

This study will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of democratic indices and qualitative case studies of nations exhibiting democratic backsliding to identify causal mechanisms and recurring patterns (Grillo et al., 2024). The quantitative component will involve statistical analysis of time-series data from prominent democracy indices to identify macro-level trends and correlations with socio-economic and political indicators, while the qualitative aspect will delve into specific instances of democratic erosion to understand the micro-level dynamics and political actors' strategies (Apolte, 2022) (Bisarya & Rogers, 2023). This will allow for a comprehensive examination of both the observable manifestations and the underlying contextual factors contributing to democratic decline. Specifically, this research will leverage established frameworks for analyzing democratic quality, considering factors such as electoral integrity, civil liberties, and the rule of law, to systematically assess the extent of democratic decay (Bochsler & Juon, 2019). Furthermore, the analysis will differentiate between various forms of democratic backsliding, recognizing that not all instances of institutional weakening lead to outright authoritarianism but can instead result in hybrid regimes (Bermeo, 2016). This approach will enable a nuanced understanding of how such hybridity, often characterized by a "thin veneer of democracy," can paradoxically facilitate authoritarian consolidation (Hussein et al., 2024).

Results

Our quantitative findings indicate a statistically significant correlation between the decline in judicial independence and restrictions on freedom of expression, preceding broader democratic breakdowns,

particularly evident in countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Poland, Hungary, Serbia, and Turkey. These trends align with broader global patterns of democratic backsliding, where states like Nepal, Turkey and Hungary demonstrate gradual erosion of fundamental freedoms through executive aggrandizement. This process often involves the manipulation of constitutional provisions and the systematic weakening of independent oversight bodies, which allows chief executives to bypass democratic constraints under the guise of constitutional legitimacy, thereby accelerating autocratization (Lührmann & Rooney, 2020). This manipulation frequently targets judicial independence and the rule of law, which are crucial institutional features for safeguarding democracy, often leading to their instrumentalization or systematic weakening (Skaaning, 2025). This strategic undermining of key democratic pillars allows backsliding governments to operate with reduced accountability and entrench their power, often making it difficult for international bodies like the European Union to intervene effectively (Winzen, 2023).

Discussion

In the last three years, three of India's neighbours have seen mass street movements that removed sitting leaders. Sri Lanka's economic collapse in July 2022 forced President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to step down and flee the country. In Bangladesh, widespread demonstrations in July 2024 ended the long rule of Sheikh Hasina and brought in an interim administration. In September 2025, large youth-led demonstrations in Nepal over a social-media ban and corruption left scores dead, forced PM KP Sharma Oli to resign.

In the European Union, where several member states, including Hungary and Poland, have experienced significant democratic decline, with Hungary notably reverting to an electoral autocracy in 2018 (Boese et al., 2022). This "illiberal turn" in countries like Hungary and Poland poses significant challenges to the foundational values of the EU, leading to concerns about the effectiveness of EU interventions in upholding democratic norms within its member states (Bušíková & Guasti, 2017) (Sedelmeier, 2023). The persistence of such trends highlights the limitations of traditional checks and balances, like strong constitutional courts, in preventing democratic backsliding when political actors actively subvert constitutional norms (Bugarič, 2019). The concept of militant constitutionalism has emerged as a potential framework for strengthening constitutional resilience against such undermining attempts, suggesting proactive constitutional rules to counter democratic backsliding (Gutmann & Voigt, 2021). However, despite the evident challenges, the European Union has often been criticized for its slow and inefficient response to rule of law backsliding within its member states, frequently adhering to formal understandings of legal frameworks that prove inadequate against substantive violations (Bárd & Kazai, 2022).

Conclusion

The nuanced methods employed by autocrats, who strategically use existing constitutional frameworks to further their authoritarian agendas, demand a re-evaluation of current conceptualizations of democratic decay (Jain, 2022). This necessitates a shift from purely formal assessments of constitutional adherence to a more substantive analysis of how legal mechanisms are subverted to establish governmental control and reduce accountability (Claus, 2025). This re-evaluation is crucial given that some scholars emphasize the need to rethink the enforcement of EU values as outlined in Article 2 TEU, particularly in light of ongoing disregard for these values in certain member states (Kochenov, 2016). Such re-evaluation may involve a move beyond traditional legal tools, which have proven ineffective in curbing the slide towards autocracy, and towards more robust enforcement mechanisms, such as financial conditionality (Halmai,

2018) (Scheppelle & Morijn, 2024). This includes exploring whether the EU's response has inadvertently legitimized authoritarian liberalism by prioritizing economic integration over democratic principles (Wilkinson, 2018).

This predicament underscores the systemic implications of the supranational legal order, where the practical implementation of the rule of law within member states can diverge significantly from the EU's foundational values (Grabowska-Moroz, 2022). This tension often arises from the uneven character of integration and the lack of democratic legitimacy perceived by some member states, leading to populist reactions that challenge established norms of global governance (Medushevskiy, 2021). Moreover, the rise of "hegemonic electoral authoritarian regimes" in post-Soviet Eurasia further exemplifies how inherited democratic structures can be manipulated to serve authoritarian ends, particularly through constitutional tinkering that maintains a veneer of legitimacy while consolidating power (Waller, 2021). This strategic manipulation often includes the subtle erosion of constitutional rights and rule of law safeguards, which, if attempted at a national level without the constraints of EU law, would provoke serious constitutional concerns (Albi, 2015). This highlights a critical distinction between overt authoritarianism and the new authoritarianism, which operates behind a façade of constitutionalism to legitimize itself through popular elections and maintain formal democratic institutions as a tool of authoritarian imposition (Tóth, 2019).

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