

The Growing Influence of Authoritarianism: A Challenge to Democracy Worldwide

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Abstract

In recent years, authoritarianism has become increasingly popular in the world, challenging the democratic foundations and values. This article aims at analysing the global tendency toward authoritarianism, at the same time referring to the cases of democratic regression in Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela. The discussion explores the rationale of such dynamics, which include economic divide, political divide, social divide, technological divide, and globalization divide. Through analyzing various types of authoritarianism, from electoral one to the mixed ones, the article enlightens the reader about the ways such systems undermine the principles of democracy. The article goes on to expand on the effects of authoritarianism to democracy, which are the fading of free elections, freedom of speech, and independent judiciaries. It looks at how authoritarian leaders seek to strengthen their control by controlling the media and quelling protests, on how disinformation and foreign meddlers have influenced a nation's election. As a result, the article analyzes the efficacy of international organisations and coalitions countering authoritarianism and underlines the necessity to promote democratisation and appreciate civil society within autocratic states. The article ends with a discussion on the future of democracy to



stress the necessity of developing strong measures to support the strengthening of authoritative institutions and enhance people's activity and awareness of the importance of democratic principles.

Key words: *Authoritarianism, Democracy, civic engagement, technology, globalization*

Introduction

Authoritarianism has been on the increase across the world and it can be said to be a major threat to democracy. In the previous decade, many nations have observed a disturbing tendency for the deterioration of the democratic system and the strengthening of the authoritarian one. A clear example for this development is the weakening of democratic standards in Hungary, Turkey and Venezuela where the executive branch deliberately dismantled the democratic institutions (Levitsky and Roberts 2020). The return to autocratic politics does not only strain the democracy of these societies but also threatens the safety of the world and its standards. This introduction will briefly look at why this rise is happening and the consequence for racy across the globe.

Whereas authoritarianism is associated with strong central power and restricted political liberties, democracy focuses on citizens' freedoms, elections, and the law (Diamond 2019). It is posited that there are several factors as to why authoritarianism is on the rise; these include the following; Economic inequality, political polarization, globalization and the rise of technology (Mounk 2020). Greed linked with higher economic status and growing political polarization contribute to the creation of the environment that is susceptible to authoritarian rulers who guarantee security and restoration of national pride. Also, technology has aided authoritarianism in recent years; through surveillance and manipulation of social media to strengthen power and stifle opposition (Pappas 2021).

The effects of growing authoritarian presence and tendencies on democratic structures are far reaching and diverse. Authoritarian regimes can distort the principles of free elections, limit freedom of speech and weaken the independence of judiciary that in turn causes the society to lose its confidence in the legal system and lose civil liberties (Levitsky and Roberts 2020). This deterioration is not only applicable to the domestic governance but also to the international governance that goes against the norms of democracy. Thus, the democratic states and the international organizations have to elaborate the efficient ways to challenge the authoritarian processes and to promote the democratic initiatives worldwide (Diamond 2019). The subsequent sections of this paper will present more detailed insight into these aspects, which include the measures taken by authoritarian governments, as well as the counteractions and initiatives of the global community as one of the most vital global tasks.

The Global Rise of Authoritarianism

Over the last few years, many nations have witnessed acute erosion of democracy; thus, the topic reflects the tendencies of the worldwide authoritarian surge. In its report for the year 2023, Freedom House has noted a worrisome tendency of the growing number of countries that it categorizes as “Not Free.” For example, Hungary under Victor Orban’s leadership has witnessed a gradual erosion of democracy and freedom of speech and press making it an “illiberal democracy” according to Kornai (2021). Likewise, Turkey under President Recep Tayip Erdoğan has eroded the judiciary autonomy, restricted media freedom and political prisoners targeting the opponents reflecting the authoritarianism (Esen and Gumuscu 2016). Venezuela under the leadership of Nicolás Maduro has impoverished democracy and democratically elected government through vote-rigging and stifling of opposition voices which has led to a severe political and humanitarian crisis (Corrales 2020).

The key causes of the authoritarianism include the economic inequity and political divide. When people are economically insecure, they turn to social conflict, and authoritarian leaders use this by offering order and a rebirth of the nation (Mounk 2018). Partisan media and polarisation produce a situation in which democratic values and practices are undermined, and authoritarian actions may be popular (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). The optimistic and stable economic globalization process also produces cultural concern and economic threats that the authoritarian leaders use for their political ascendancy. Surveillance technologies, and increase in the use of digital communication platforms give authoritarian regimes more efficient means to monitor and suppress their population (Guriev and Treisman 2020). These connected phenomena shape the conditions that give rise to and strengthen authoritarian regimes globally.

The Impact of Authoritarianism on Democracy

Authoritarianism changes the paradigm of democracy on the state level and challenges its core values including free elections, freedom of speech, and independent judiciary. In many countries undergoing democratic erosion, electoral processes are being rigged in the incumbent’s favor thus making them less free and fair (Diamond 2015). For example, in Russia, Presidential administration of Vladimir Putin employs legal and non-legal measures to prevent opposition parties’ candidates from gaining competitive chances and manipulating voter’s choice to get electoral success which are often perceived as undemocratic (Gel’man 2015). Likewise, the decline in the freedom of press is visible in the countries such as Turkey and Hungary, whereby the media that are independent are suppressed through censorship, threatened, and shut down (Freedom House 2023). Additionally, the independence of the judiciary is often in jeopardy as the authoritarian leaders establish their cronies in the judiciary meaning that the judiciary cannot challenge the power of the executive (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

Authoritarianism also negatively affects the civil society, civil liberties, the culture of the civil society organizations (CSOs) that are very essential in democratic participation and governance are often under attack by authoritarian governments. The types of practices these

regimes use to undermine CSOs and quell opposition include legal measures, financial restrictions, and intimidation (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014). Political rights decline, and there is more oppression of people's rights, and cases of arbitrary arrests, torture, and extra-judicial killings increase to deal with anyone who raises their voice against the wrongdoing (Hathaway 2019). The rule of law erodes since the laws are applied selectively for the regime's benefit with increased corruption and misuse of authority. Thus, a systematic weakening of democratic values leads to the deterioration of people's confidence in democracy and democratic institutions due to the perceived ineffectiveness and manipulation of political systems (Norris 2017).

The Strategies of Authoritarian Regimes

Totalitarian heads of state use several strategies to control the population and achieve the objectives of sustaining their rule over political frameworks. There is always manipulation of electoral processes as one of the most used strategies. This range from, manipulating electoral districts, legal restrictions to opposition parties, and manipulation of electoral commissions to yield desired results (Schedler, 2013). Also, authoritarian regimes have access to state funds to finance their campaigns and offer spoils to their sympathizers; thus, consolidating their rule. Another strategy entails the deliberate elimination of all political rivals through the use of threats, arrests and in some cases, extra-judicial killings of rivals and political opponents (Levitsky and Way 2010). This means that by limiting the political competition and eradicating competitors authoritarian leaders remain the only ones in charge of their nations.

It is crucial to notice that such things as disinformation and propaganda are among the main factors that weaken democracy and strengthen authoritarianism. Political indoctrination is achieved through controlling the state media and other forms of government information dissemination (Guriev and Treisman 2019). Thus, the state can manage the information which it provides to the public to construct a narrative that would be favorable to the regime and portray it as safeguarding the stability and economic well-being of the nation. Facebook is also used to spread fake news and conspiracy theories which create confusion and doubt in the minds of the people (Tucker et al. 2017). In addition, the role of interference by foreign actors in democratic elections has become alarming, with countries such as Russia launching cyberattacks, hacking, and propaganda with the aim of influencing electoral processes in other nations (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014). Such actions erode the credibility of democracy and also leads to the weakening of the people's confidence in the democratic system.

The Response of Democratic Countries

Authoritarian rulers employ several tactics to manage the populace and ensure the goals of maintaining their leadership over political systems. One of them is always the manipulation of electoral processes that is always among the most used strategies. These include; gerrymandering, legal measures that are placed on other parties, control of electoral commissions to produce the intended results (Schedler, 2013). Also, authoritarian regimes are endowed with state money to

fund their campaigns and reward their supporters; therefore, entrenching their power. Another tactic involves a process of systematically dismantling all political competitors with the help of threats, arrests and in some cases even political killings of competitors and oppositionists (Levitsky and Way 2010). This means that through reducing the political competition and extinguishing competitor's authoritarian leaders are the only ones left to rule their countries.

It is important to point out that things like disinformation and propaganda are among the primary drivers of democracy decline and authoritarianism rise. Containing the state media and other channels of government information dissemination is how political indoctrination is made (Guriev and Treisman 2019). Therefore, the state can control the information which it feeds to the public in order to create a story that would be beneficial for the regime and depict it as the one which is protecting the stability as well as economic prosperity of the country. Facebook is also used to circulate fake news and conspiracy which breed confusion and uncertainty among the people (Tucker et al. 2017). Moreover, a new form of interferences in democratic elections by foreign actors is now a cause of concern; for instance, Russia have had to launch cyberattacks, hacking, and propaganda to influence electoral processes in other countries (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014). This means that such actions bring negativity to the credibility of democracy, and this in turn contributes to the degradation of people's trust in the democratic process.

Promoting democracy and civil society within the authoritarian states is another important component of the response from the democracies. Financial support; training of local players; and international pressure offer support to the opposition and keep up democracy from within (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014). The funding from the National Endowment for Democracy and other likeminded organizations, Open Society Foundations and other such grant-making bodies offer resources for civil society organisations and independent media and grassroots mobilisations (Walker 2018). However, such support must be offered cautiously for authoritarian governments tend to label such organizations as foreign agents, and this is used to crack down on the organizations (Levitsky and Way 2010). Thus, while the risks are real, the cultivation of strong and healthy civil societies remains one of the most effective ways of combating creeping authoritarianism and building long-term democratic defence in the face of authoritarian aggression.

The Future of Democracy

Democracy in the 21st century faces numerous challenges that include populism, authoritarianism, technology, and fake news. It has become a global phenomenon that people are becoming more polarized politically and this is a problem in democracies since it weakens social fabric and hampers governance (Mounk 2018). Also, economic inequality and declining stability of the middle class affect people's disillusionment with democracy and democratic institutions (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). The fast rate of technological advancement is also a major concern since social media and other platforms can be used as a tool for cyber warfare to influence voting

processes, and poll results (Persily 2017). These factors acting in synergy ensure that existent democracy is under constant threat thus requiring strong and flexible measures.

Democratic institution building involves the identification of structural vulnerabilities and remedial measures in addition to changing the perceptions of societies. Measures like ranked choice voting and campaign finance regulation can be employed to reduce electoral manipulation and increase the representation of the populace's interests (Norris, P 2019: p 241). Also, the independence of judiciary and other overseeing institutions is a point that needs to be underlined for check and balances within the government (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Media literacy and backing of independent media is one of the important ways to tackle fake news and encourage well-informed population (Guess et al. 2020). Another key factor is that international cooperation and support of democratic processes can also help strengthen democracies worldwide by comparing experiences, and sharing ideas and support in resisting pressures from authoritarian regimes (Diamond 2019).

Democracy in its purest form requires people to be engaged in politics and to be educated on the same. Voting, engaging in community activities, and advocating for change guarantees that various individuals and groups' interest is considered in the political processes (Putnam 2000). As pointed out by Galston (2001), when civic education programs focus on reason, democracy and political voting, it enhances the citizen's capacity to be competent in the political affairs. Furthermore, understanding and valuing the existence of the opponent's perspective is highly important in combating the phenomenon of polarization and creating a society that is more unified at its core (Mouffe 2005). In this way, a democracy can foster a population that would remain steadfast and adapt to new situations as a true democracy.

Conclusion

Authoritarianism is spreading across the globe constituting a strong threat to democracy and its institutions, thus challenging the fundamental tenets of democratic government. This article has taken a look at all these aspects of this threat, starting with the strategies used by authoritarian leaders to assume more power to the consequences that it has had on democracy, civil society, and people's rights. Democracy's reaction and the actions of Intergovernmental organizations, economic measures, and civil society show that the fight against authoritarianism is a process that does not have an easy and clear-cut solution. Since autocratic regimes are still evolving and learning how to strengthen their grip on the people, democracies should not sit and wait but fight for the recognition of the democratic principles. Using the future lens, it can be forecasted that the effective development of democracy requires democratic institution's reinforcement, the promotion of civics and voters' education. Efforts to confront authoritarianism should also focus on combating factors that lead to it, including economic inequality and political polarization, while also using technology in a way that strengthens, rather than threatens, democracy. Thus, the role of international cooperation and solidarity in backing the democratic initiatives and to resist the authoritarian forces cannot be considered as unimportant. Altogether, the threats are

immense, but the optimism for democracy and for change exists. Recruitment of effective institutions for democracy, voters, and international relations, democracies are in a position to overcome the challenges that come with the modern world in the twenty first century to ensure that democracy continues to prosper.

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