



DRG CENTER LEARNING AGENDA OPENING UP DEMOCRATIC SPACES ORIGINAL RESEARCH: SUMMARY REPORT

JULY 2023

Prepared under Contract No.: GS-I0F-0033M / 7200AA18M00016, Tasking N068

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DRG LEARNING, EVALUATION, AND RESEARCH ACTIVITY II

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DISCLAIMER

The authors' views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

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DEDICATION

In memory of USAID's Maryanne Yerkes, an inspirational and compassionate advocate for the values of democracy, human rights, inclusion, and good governance.

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INTRODUCTION

The erosion of democratic governance in a significant number of countries over the past two decades has become a major source of debate among scholars and policymakers alike. This original research examines the nature and sources of democratic “backsliding,” and identifies potential strategies to enhance the resilience of democratic norms, practices, and institutions where they are threatened by autocratic forces.

In contrast to military coups, insurgent takeovers, and other, more abrupt forms of democratic “breakdown,” processes of contemporary democratic backsliding are notable for their gradual or incremental character and the central role played by actors within democratic institutions themselves—in particular, elected officeholders. Under backsliding, incumbents subvert democracy from within, using democratic institutions themselves to concentrate powers and dismantle regime checks and balances. Although complete democratic breakdowns have been concentrated in countries at lower levels of economic development, processes of backsliding are identifiable in high and low-income countries alike. Backsliding may be both a cause and an effect of political polarization—the division of the political sphere into mutually antagonistic “Us vs. Them” camps, and the resulting drive to tilt the democratic playing field to empower one camp while excluding the other. Polarization is often associated with the rise of populist leaders who capitalize on societal discontents to mobilize mass constituencies against established elites.

This report summarizes the results of case studies of 15 countries that have experienced a process of democratic backsliding since the year 2000, with analysis of the opportunities for opening democratic spaces in these contexts. **A key finding is that in most of these countries (13/15), democratic backsliding was attributable mainly to the efforts of elected executive branch leaders, sometimes in collusion with allied actors, to concentrate powers and weaken or eliminate legislative and judicial checks on their authority.** They were, therefore, cases of executive aggrandizement (Bermeo 2016), with varying degrees of success.

- Two cases, however, exemplify different types of backsliding. Elitist democracy in Indonesia involves multiple elite stakeholders across the society colluding to share in a patronage system that weakens democratic representation and inclusion, but also involves power sharing arrangements that prevent any particular leader from becoming fully autocratic.
- The South Korean case (and early Turkish and Venezuelan cases) also demonstrates a type of careening or reciprocal backsliding, whereby the excesses of executive incumbents elicit institutional excesses by opposition actors seeking to enforce restraints on the executive. The ineffectiveness of opposition strategies in Turkey and Venezuela suggests that this reciprocal pattern may be a high-risk strategy.

Depending on their democratic level starting points and how long they endured backsliding, the countries varied considerably in the extent of democratic resilience, and the extent to which autocratic incumbents succeeded or were constrained in their efforts to suppress opposition political parties or curtail the independence of societal actors like the media and civil society organizations.

In most cases, backsliding was an incremental process that involved sequential actions and episodes over an extended period. These episodes were a product of interactions between incumbents and their

political and institutional opponents, whose dynamics shaped the path of backsliding and opportunities for democratic resilience. In no case did backsliding start with a military coup; only one case, Tunisia in 2021, could be considered an auto-golpe or self-coup where the incumbent president dismissed the parliament and the prime minister (with military support) and proceeded to rule by decree. In most other countries, executive authorities worked through established legislative and judicial bodies to try to capture or at least neutralize them as independent actors. In two countries, Venezuela and Ecuador, newly elected presidents decreed popular referendums to bypass opposition-controlled legislatures, elect new constitutional assemblies, and re-found regime institutions more amenable to their control.

Opportunities for opening democratic spaces occur across all forms and degrees of democratic backsliding, although with different expectations for the extent of democratic opening and with some clear patterns according to the degree and time of backsliding experienced. In cases of democratic recovery, aspiring executive autocrats were blocked by electoral opposition political party coalitions, the autonomy of courts, the fragility of their own ruling coalitions, and/or media oversight and civil society mobilization often including popular protest. Early identification and awareness of autocratizing strategies allows pro-democracy agents to propose and enact successful strategies to constrain legislative, media, or other institutional takeovers by the executive. Pro-democracy actors' agency to pursue moderate (rather than polarizing or radical) electoral appeals, broad electoral opposition coalitions (rather than competing internally), supporting institutional checks and balances such as an autonomous judiciary if it exists (rather than seeking extra-institutional redress such as coups or establishing parallel governments), preserve independent and professional media and supporting pluralistic media information campaigns, and mobilizing citizens through democratic protests and garnering popular support is critical to success.

CASE CATEGORIES

The 15 case studies are grouped into three categories, each with countries drawn from different world regions. These categories are as follows:

1. **Backsliding and Recovery.** This category includes countries that experienced a process of backsliding, followed by a partial or complete recovery of democratic checks and balances.
 - a. Case studies for this category include Brazil, Ecuador, Malawi, and Moldova, all cases of executive-led backsliding, and South Korea, a case of reciprocal backsliding.
2. **Partial Backsliding.** This category includes countries that experienced an intermediate level of backsliding without either recovery or continued decline. They are, then, countries where a backsliding process has caused democracy to erode, but not break down or transition to autocracy.
 - a. Case studies for this category include India and Poland as cases of executive-led backsliding, along with Indonesia, a case of elite collusion and power-sharing.
 - b. These case studies also include initially partial backsliding, downgraded to severe backsliding for Benin and Tunisia (both cases of executive-led backsliding).

3. **Severe Backsliding.** This category includes countries where severe and continuous backsliding culminated in a process of regime change from democracy to autocracy. In some cases, this entailed a competitive or “electoral” form of autocracy, whereas in other cases backsliding culminated in a closed or non-competitive autocracy.
 - a. Case studies for this category include Hungary, Nicaragua, and Serbia, all cases of executive-led backsliding, along with Turkey and Venezuela, both cases that started with reciprocal patterns but ended with predominantly executive-led backsliding.

Across the three categories, there are opportunities for democratic openings. In potential strategies for opposition electoral coalitions, these are fairly constant across the categories (and constraints come from internal divisions among the autocratic opponents). In some countries opposition parties followed a strategy of building broad multi-party and cross-ideological electoral coalitions to challenge autocratic incumbents in the electoral arena. In other countries, however, opposition parties failed to coalesce, opting instead to compete with one another for leadership of the opposition camp—a strategy that made it easier for incumbents to practice “divide and conquer” tactics. In some cases, hardline opposition parties adopted tactics of boycotting elections or even supporting coups or strikes aimed at toppling autocratic rulers—tactics that typically exacerbated political polarization, divided opposition forces, and risked entrenching autocrats in power.

In strategies for civil liberties and political rights, and pushing back against executive aggrandizement and institutional capture, the strategies for democratic opening vary quite dramatically across the three categories based on room for maneuver, actors involved, and targeted outcomes. Where courts, the media, and civil society maintained some independence from executive control, they provided political and institutional spaces for opposition forces to challenge backsliding efforts. Social protest also played an important role in the resistance to backsliding in several countries. Opposition strategies thus combined social resistance—in the media, civil society organizations, and social protest—with institutional strategies (such as the courts and elections) designed to contest and, wherever possible, occupy any institutional spaces that remained open. These latter strategies sometimes allowed opposition forces to maintain a foothold in regime institutions, at least at local levels, and to exercise oversight functions, maintain public communications, and develop connections with voters. The combination of social resistance with institutional strategies was found to have a positive interactive effect, enabling judicial actors and opposition parties to capitalize on perceived public support for democracy.

See the companion document for the full case studies and Appendix 3 for full methodology of case selection.^{6,7}

⁶ The accompanying summary report appendix document can be found at https://dec.usaid.gov/dec/content/Detail_Presto.aspx?ctID=ODVhZjk4NWQtM2YyMi00YjRmLTkxNjktZTcxMjM2NDBmY2Uy&rID=NjE4NDYw&inr=VHJlZQ%3d%3d&dc=YWRk&rrtc=VHJlZQ%3d%3d&bckToL=.

⁷ The companion case study report can be found at <https://dec.usaid.gov/dec/content/Detail.aspx?vID=47&ctID=ODVhZjk4NWQtM2YyMi00YjRmLTkxNjktZTcxMjM2NDBmY2Uy&rID=NjE4NDYy>.

OVERVIEW OF THE CASES AND CATEGORIES

Backsliding and Recovery. Our cases of recovery—South Korea, Malawi, Moldova, Ecuador, and Brazil—experienced one or more episodes of backsliding of varied durations, but aspiring autocrats were *unable* to build and sustain broad, cohesive popular majorities, control their allies and successors and/or capture institutions, muzzle civil society and weaken opposition, in ways that would have allowed them to stay in power and continue the backsliding process. In each case, autocrats lost power and a process of democratic recovery ensued, although stability and sustainability were far from guaranteed. Incumbent autocrats were **defeated electorally** in Brazil and Moldova by **broad opposition coalitions**, while in Ecuador the designated **successor** to Rafael Correa won election but then **broke with his predecessor and rolled back many of his backsliding reforms, thus fracturing the autocratic ruling party**. In South Korea, **media reports and mass protests against corruption made it possible to form a bipartisan coalition** in Congress in support of an **impeachment** of President Park Geun-hye, which was subsequently upheld by the constitutional court. However, the quality of South Korean democracy has begun to decline again in 2019. In Malawi, poor economic performance undermined popular support for a ruling autocrat, leading to **social protests helping to buttress the independence of a constitutional court that played a major role in upholding presidential term limits and election integrity**.

Non-concurrent legislative and executive elections strengthened the independence of the legislature in South Korea, while a stable constitutional framework, and weak legacy of frequent constitutional amendments since democratic transition in 1988 weakened the incumbent's ability to capture institutions. Political parties supporting autocratic incumbents in most of these cases did not have sufficient electoral support, in fragmented party systems with more proportional electoral systems, to reliably capture and subordinate legislative bodies and local governments. Courts, therefore, were able to maintain significant political independence and provide multiple veto points. The media, civil society, and social protest movements offered stiff resistance despite incumbent efforts to muzzle them. Broad, **multi-party and cross-ideological electoral coalitions were vital** to the defeat of autocrats in Moldova and Brazil, and in general opposition forces opted to contest rather than boycott elections in these cases. **The political opposition thus combined social resistance—in the media, civil society, and social protest—with institutional strategies designed to contest and, wherever possible, occupy any institutional spaces that remained open.**

- I. Our cases of intermediate or **Partial Backsliding**—Poland, India, and Indonesia—have experienced significant erosion in their quality of democratic governance, without either a recovery or a definitive breakdown of democracy culminating in a transition to authoritarian rule. The political opportunities and constraints that led to these intermediate outcomes vary considerably across the cases, however. In Indonesia, the strategic alignments of political and social elites are central to the story. Political **collusion** among rival elites in different parties—including opportunistic post-election bandwagoning—has fostered a patronage-based spoils system that is largely dominated by oligarchic actors as they collude to keep other voices out and share government spoils among media, bureaucratic, military, religious, and economic elites. **Fragmentation and competition among these oligarchs and the parties they control, however, has prevented any single ruler from concentrating power in his own hands, preserving at least some measure of checks and balances at a low level of democratic quality.** These leaders have largely refrained from polarizing populist or mass mobilization of anti-elite sentiments or ethno-religious cleavages that might disrupt the fragile

equilibrium produced by elite collusion, though they do occasionally polarize on a religious pluralism-Islamist cleavage for electoral purposes.

By contrast, highly polarizing populist leaders have intentionally politicized the “formative rifts” associated with Hindu ethno-religious nationalism versus secularism and the Muslim minority in India, and religious-cultural Christian nationalism and reconciliation with a troubled history shaped by foreign domination and persecution of ethnic-religious minorities in Poland, specifically for electoral purposes. In so doing, they have mobilized sufficient popular support to capture executive office, win reelection, and begin to concentrate powers while threatening democratic rights. Although India’s constitutional court has largely deferred to executive power, the country’s **federal system, social heterogeneity, and a highly fragmented subnational party system** have made it difficult for the Hindu nationalist BJP to dominate local and provincial governments the way it has come to dominate national governing institutions. At the same time, this regional party and ethnic/linguistic diversity, along with the decimation of the alternative national party – the Congress Party – has prevented a coherent opposition challenge to the BJP at the national level.

In Poland, after losing its attempt to change the constitution, the PiS packed the constitutional court and reduced the independence of the judiciary, weakening an important constraint on executive power. However, with its bicameral legislature, PR electoral system, directly elected president independent of the prime minister, and complex requirements for changing the constitution, Poland has **stronger and more diverse institutional veto points** that make it harder for incumbents to engage in backsliding. In contrast to Indonesia, then, in Poland it is institutional fragmentation, rather than political fragmentation and competition among elite actors, that has been the primary constraint on executive-led backsliding. Nevertheless, the PiS government has used its slim legislative majority to push through several of its constitutional proposals as simple laws. Polish **civil society has also actively resisted backsliding through social protest activity, raising the costs of backsliding to the incumbent, while not completely impeding or reversing it.**

2. Severe Backsliding. Our cases of severe backsliding—Hungary, Turkey, Serbia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Tunisia, and Benin—are notable for the relative weakness and ineffectiveness – or the erosion over time – of these varied forms of institutional and societal resistance to backsliding. In several of these cases, this weakness reflected highly permissive antecedent conditions that allowed aspiring autocrats to claim executive and legislative powers with large electoral majorities or supermajorities, while severely weakening rival democratic parties. These antecedent conditions included severe economic crises, corruption scandals, majoritarian institutional features or performance failures that undermined mainstream parties and opened the door to populist outsiders (Venezuela, Hungary, Tunisia), acute political polarization around questions of religious and national identity (Turkey, Serbia). In other cases, however, antecedent crises played little role; instead, patterns of elite collusion with aspiring autocrats enabled the latter to access and accumulate powers against weakened and divided opposition forces (Nicaragua, Benin).

In these countries, **legislative checks were dismantled** by dismissing Congress (Tunisia), bypassing it (Venezuela and Turkey), or capturing a majority of seats for the autocratic party or coalition (Turkey and Hungary). **Constitutional courts were notably reluctant** to defy popular presidents in polarized contexts, or their efforts backfired by eroding the court’s image and by mobilizing and

consolidating the incumbent's support base (Turkey), so they either began to defer to executive power or were simply neutralized and then **packed through the appointment powers of legislative and executive branches working in tandem. Control of these branches of governments then made it possible to neutralize or capture other state institutions and oversight mechanisms, such as electoral commissions, public media and media regulatory bodies, and taxation and anti-corruption accountability institutions, and to regulate, divide and/or repress civil society as well.** In several cases, military and police deference to executive power enabled the violent repression of protest activity.

Although no opposition strategy has proven to be very effective in reverting such severe processes of backsliding, the cases suggest that **extra-institutional strategies of resistance such as military coups and election boycotts often prove to be counter-productive**, as they may rally support to the autocrat, allow autocrats to close or fully monopolize particular democratic sites, or incentivize them to resort to violence against opponents. By contrast, **opposition strategies of contesting elections and other sites that remain open may allow the opposition to maintain a foothold in regime institutions, at least at local levels —one that may allow it to exercise oversight functions, public communication, and connections with voters** while potentially driving a wedge among incumbent supporters. The Turkish and Hungarian cases indicate that even broad, multi-party electoral coalitions may find it difficult to defeat incumbent autocrats who have tilted the democratic playing field by muzzling the media, deploying state economic resources to co-opt both elite and mass support, harassing opposition forces, and repressing independent civil society actors. Nevertheless, **such broad coalitions at least help to keep democratic spaces open for future contestation**, when a variety of factors may weaken the iron grip of the autocrats.

COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK

Our analytical framework is developed through a comparative perspective that seeks to identify similarities and differences among our 15 cases. The framework for comparison has five central dimensions.

1. ***Antecedent Conditions for Backsliding.*** These refer to preexisting conditions or preceding critical events and developments that open the door for potential autocrats to access power or begin a backsliding process. These may include severe economic crises, ethnic-regional or religious-cultural conflicts and inequities, socioeconomic inequities, unreconciled material or ideological shocks of previous democratic transitions, corruption scandals, miscalculated or crises or deficits of representation or party systems. They may also include patterns of deepening social and/or political polarization.
2. ***Factors Facilitating Backsliding.*** These are factors that strengthen the hand of backsliding leaders or make it harder for their opponents to block backsliding measures. Examples include disproportional electoral systems that amplify ruling party legislative majorities; judicial composition rules that give executive and/or legislative branch officials control over judicial appointments; executive control of military and police forces; weak and fragmented opposition parties; patterns of elite collusion; patronage or spoils systems that make civil servants, business leaders, and media outlets dependent on state largesse, or vulnerable to state retaliation or buyouts by private government allies; ruling party linkages to and control over civil society actors; ideologically divided civil societies; monocultural economies; and

the deference that courts, legislatures, and other institutions often show to incumbents with broad electoral appeal.

3. **Factors Restraining Backsliding.** These are factors that make it harder for incumbents to concentrate power or strengthen the capacity of opponents to block backsliding measures. Examples can include highly proportional electoral systems; multiple veto points that distribute power across different institutions; federalism and independent state or local governments; rules that reinforce the independence of courts; vibrant opposition parties; independent media and civil society actors; and a legacy and social-political repertoire of past reversals of backsliding or authoritarian rule.
4. **Common Strategies and Patterns of Backsliding.** Incumbents pursuing backsliding strategies can follow several different patterns, which are not mutually exclusive.
 - a. The most common pattern is incremental institutional capture, whereby executive authorities use their existing recruitment and appointment authorities and gain control over legislative majorities which allow them to neutralize or capture the courts and undermine the independence of electoral agencies, the media, civil society, etc. Backsliding leaders may employ a wide range of targeted strategies to advance these forms of capture, such as omnibus bills that make it hard for legislators to oppose specific measures, changing electoral rules, and media buyouts or financial pressure.
 - b. Plebiscitary overrides, or the use of popular referendums to circumvent opposition-controlled institutions and create alternative institutions, and to pass constitutional amendments that crack the door open for executive overreach may initially be used to move toward the pattern of institutional capture.
 - c. Backsliding partnerships/alliances with pro-incumbent business and civil society, which work through existing legal and political-economic frameworks, or exploit their deficits and loopholes, to capture independent and critical media and civil society and to create pro-incumbent ones, is an important strategy in the first two patterns.
 - d. Executive self-coups to close or neutralize other institutions comprise a third pattern.
 - e. Careening between popularly-mandated executive excess, and executive restraint exercised by means of opposition institutional excess is a fourth path of reducing the quality of democracy.
 - f. A fifth pattern is elite collusion to maintain an elitist and somewhat exclusionary democracy.
5. **Resistance Strategies.** Opposition political parties and civil society actors can choose from a range of different resistance strategies. Key choices include the adoption of institutional vs. extra-institutional strategies of resistance, whether to compete individually or form broad, multi-party opposition coalitions, and whether to politicize or downplay the “regime cleavage” between autocratic and democratic forces. The specific narratives, emotions and polarizing or depolarizing strategies they employ are also critical. The stakes of opposition

choices are high, as some strategies may backfire by dividing or delegitimizing opposition forces or providing the government with an excuse to tighten up authoritarian controls. Courts, bureaucracies, and international actors can also play key roles in resistance strategies.

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

1. **The Uncertainty of Backsliding:** A key lesson from our case studies—a silver lining, so to speak—is that **aspiring autocrats cannot easily fully dismantle democracy**, even if they are impaired and contested. The “permissive conditions’ that allow them to do so are not readily found in many national settings, and institutional and/or societal resistance to backsliding often makes democracy resilient even when it is under attack from incumbents. Consequently, many would-be autocrats either fail to concentrate powers in a durable manner, or they are at least partially constrained at an intermediate stage of the backsliding process that leaves democratic institutions largely intact, although potentially diminished or disputed. Our case studies provide insight on the conditions that make possible long-term democratic backsliding (Venezuela, Turkey, Hungary), as well as the conditions under which backsliding can be reversed after several years (South Korea) or constrained indefinitely at a partial or intermediate stage (Poland).
2. **Dynamic Processes:** Since many of our cases evolve over time, our categories are not fixed. The second, intermediate category of **partial backsliding appears to be an especially unstable equilibrium**, as cases may undergo a recovery pattern, or experience a deepening of the backsliding process that relocates them to the third category of severe backsliding. Indeed, over the course of this study, two countries—Benin and Tunisia—were reassigned from the category of partial backsliding to the category of severe backsliding. India may well be approaching a similar reassignment.
3. **Antecedent Conditions:** our cases suggest that **backsliding episodes and their outcomes are not predetermined by antecedent conditions**, whether these be deeply-rooted structural conditions and socio-political cleavages or short-term catalysts like economic crises or corruption scandals. Severe crises or conflicts may open the door for autocrats to access power or engage in backsliding activities, as in Venezuela, but they are not a *necessary* condition for backsliding (Nicaragua, Hungary), and they do not make backsliding inevitable. In many countries antecedent conditions are mixed, with some being conducive to backsliding, and others helping to impede it.
4. **Importance of Political Agency:** If backsliding is not predetermined by prior conditions or crises, it follows that political agency and **political choices are** vitally important in shaping backsliding dynamics and democratic openings. The values and ideological intentions, and the strategic behavior and choices, of both government and opposition actors are decisive for understanding how and why backsliding occurs, and whether or not it is likely to be effectively resisted. Domestic and international actors can also use agency to selectively invest in the crucial capacities that empower resistance against backsliding. Political agency clearly involves the strategic choices of elite actors in both the government and the opposition, but it also includes a wide range of political behavior by media and communication outlets, business actors,

civil society organizations, and grass-roots activist networks in support or opposition to democratic goals.

5. **Opportunities for Autocrats:** Severe conflicts or crises may not be preconditions for backsliding, but autocrats routinely seek to exploit them.
 - a. **Backsliding often follows crises of political representation.** In most of our cases, either general rejection of the political establishment opened the door to autocratizing, often populist, leaders (Venezuela, Ecuador), or specific corruption scandals generated opportunities for autocratizing opponents to gain power (Serbia).
 - b. Political polarization does not always precede backsliding, but almost always is a strategy and/or consequence of backsliding. Backsliding leaders often activate and politicize an existing cleavage or formative rift, such as religious-secular (Turkey, India), nationalist-globalist (Hungary), modernization-traditionalism or other identities around elections and continue using polarizing strategies to create Us vs. Them blocks. As backsliding continues to politicize institutions and divide the populace, excluding some sectors and restricting rights and democratic space, then political polarization can become severe, often over democracy itself.
 - c. **Backsliders use some common strategies** to create an unlevel political playing field, capture institutions, and limit choices available to citizens. In addition to the familiar strategies of changing electoral rules and packing courts or dismissing judges, common strategies include turning public media into platforms of government propaganda, disinformation, media buyouts, and omnibus bills and referendums that make it difficult for citizens or legislators to know what they are choosing.
6. **Conditions that facilitate backsliding.** These are sources of democratic vulnerability.
 - a. **Electoral systems** that promote disproportional representation (majoritarianism), as in Hungary.
 - b. **Practices of elite collusion** represent one pattern that can lead to restricted, lower-quality democracy, or can open the door to executive aggrandizement with the support of a wide range of social and political actors (Benin, Indonesia, Nicaragua).
 - c. **Unresolved deficits of representation and socioeconomic or cultural inequities** by existing political actors and institutions. Rather than specific types of party systems, the problem is party systems that produce chronic deficits of representation and governance. For example, elitist democracies with cartelized political parties may seem to prevent severe backsliding in the short run, even as they lower the quality of democracy, but they may also create a potential for an outsider who comes to power with strong support from a disenchanted public and dismantles the system with authoritarian and backsliding policies (Venezuela).
 - d. **Hyper-presidentialism** with legislative and budgetary powers and with weak checks and balances from legislatures or courts. Expansive executive decree or emergency

powers can be especially problematic, whether these powers are enshrined in the constitution or granted to the president by a compliant legislature. The use of presidential authority to call for popular referendums, as in Ecuador and Venezuela, is also a mechanism used to rewrite constitutions and/or circumvent legislative and judicial checks and balances.

- e. **Control of media and information.** While media freedoms suffered severely in all our cases, the erosion remained moderate in our recovery cases compared to our stagnation and severe backsliding cases. This meant that a vibrant free media continued to exist and censorship did not develop to the extent of cutting political communication between oppositions and major segments of the population.
7. Existing or developed capacities that facilitate democratic resistance and recovery. These are sources of democratic resilience.
 - a. **Federalism** often promotes strong regionally-based ethnic parties that can resist capture by a backsliding national party, or that can provide opportunities for democratic oppositions to gain a foothold in subnational governments. However, subnational governments can also practice authoritarianism, and regionally-based parties may not be able to unite to defeat a national backsliding party/incumbent (India).
 - b. **Utilizing existing democratic spaces** such as subnational governments (Turkey); independent media sites and investigative reporting; bureaucracies discouraging and delaying backsliding policies by following procedures and documenting illegal acts; some judiciary levels remaining independent; watchdog NGOs; and protest movements (Malawi, Moldova) can serve as brakes or signals to backsliders testing the waters and provide a nucleus to organize and mobilize resistance.
 - c. **Internal divisions within autocratic coalitions and opposition efforts to identify and magnify them.** Incumbents engaged in backsliding are generally accompanied by other political actors with varying levels of commitment to the leader and/or his autocratic aspirations. Internal divisions are sometimes deepened during periods of economic crisis, corruption scandals, political succession, or civic unrest, creating opportunities for opposition forces to push for political openings (Ecuador).
 - d. **International attention,** signaling, legal responses, and support for civic education, political party development, institutional capacity-building (such as legislative and judicial), and awareness about counterproductive institutional and political responses to backsliding policies can help develop opposition capacity to resist backsliding. They can also incentivize some restraint to backsliding incumbents concerned about international legitimacy and empower citizens to defend democracy.
 8. **Prolonged backsliding and the resulting degree of democratic erosion constrain opportunities for recovery.** An inflection point appears to occur around one decade. None of our recovery cases experienced backsliding for more than a decade, with the partial exception of Ecuador, where the autocratic coalition split during a presidential succession after a decade in power.

- a. **Early in the process there are more opportunities to defend democracy**, but there may also be weaker incentives to take action against it, given the relatively low-level authoritarianism in early stages. The gradual nature of backsliding commonly makes oppositions and electorates slow to recognize the cumulative implications of incremental changes. Hence the importance of international efforts to raise awareness about the nature and dangers of backsliding. After 10 years, backsliding tends to consolidate autocratic authority. By that time, the incumbent is likely to have acquired a wide range of repressive and manipulative tools to tilt the playing field in its own advantage, and the opposition has to fight much harder and be much more innovative to dislodge an entrenched backslider.
- b. **Moderate backsliding cases are indeterminate and unstable** and may hold promise for democratic openings or deteriorate further; they remain highly contested and non-equilibrium cases where agency, strategy and pro-democracy mobilization are critical.
- c. **Severe cases have experienced prolonged and cumulative backsliding**, whereby initial steps to concentrate powers and erode checks and balances make it possible to tilt the democratic playing field in ways that create serious impediments to opposition success.

9. Resistance Strategies observed:

Greater Success:

- a. **Opposition electoral coalition strategies** allow for more vigorous and unified electoral challenges to autocrats (Brazil, Turkey, Moldova). They help keep democratic spaces open, even when they are not able to defeat incumbent autocrats (as in Turkey and Hungary).
- b. **Mass protests and social mobilization** often play an important role in restraining autocrats, strengthening electoral resistance, and blocking or even reversing backsliding (Moldova, Malawi, South Korea). Social protest, however, is not guaranteed to be successful, and may sometimes elicit a backlash from autocrats who control police and military forces that can be used to increase repression of civil society and opposition parties (Nicaragua).
- c. **Investigative media reporting** is critical for monitoring and publicizing incumbent abuses of power and keeping democratic spaces open.
- d. **Activist court decisions** have also played an important role in preventing autocrats from violating constitutional norms, extending their terms in office, or engaging in other forms of backsliding in several cases (Malawi, Moldova, South Korea).
- e. **Competing in local elections** has allowed opposition forces to win mayorships in capital cities and other major metropolitan areas, keep local democratic spaces open, and revive opposition parties and their societal linkages in several countries (Turkey,

Venezuela, Hungary, etc.). Local election victories are not necessarily a springboard to success at the national level, where incumbent autocrats have often tilted the playing field decisively to their advantage, but success at the local level can at least prevent autocrats from completely monopolizing governing institutions.

- f. **Timely defections of dissident democratic actors from incumbent regimes** can help to reveal divisions and vulnerabilities within the autocratic coalition. Such defections can broaden the social and political base of the opposition and indicate where the opposition might be able to win over voters who previously supported the incumbent.

Less Successful and Counter-productive:

- a. **Coups or coup attempts** tend to deepen political polarization, divide opposition forces into moderate and hardline tendencies, and weaken the democratic credentials of at least some sectors of the opposition (Venezuela, Turkey).
- b. **Election boycotts or other withdrawals from democratic arenas** often backfire. Rather than delegitimize incumbents, they may allow them to further monopolize key institutional sites and completely lock out opposition forces (Venezuela). Opposition strategies to contest these sites, even on an unlevel playing field, are generally a more effective way to keep democratic spaces open.
- c. **Punitive or retaliatory investigations, harassment, or judicial trials** can also exacerbate polarization and raise doubts about actors' commitments to fair and inclusive democratic competition.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

A. POLITICAL COMPETITION AND CONSENSUS-BUILDING

In advance of backsliding....

- Political party organizational reforms should take priority among policy implications and reform proposals, as opposition party organizations become key to overcoming incumbent informational advantages and combatting backsliding incumbents on an uneven playing field.

When backsliding is occurring....

- **Democratic oppositions need to be prepared for when unexpected opportunities arise.** They should keep participating in elections, strengthen their organizational structures and connections to voters, and develop policy proposals for recovery. Extra-institutional strategies like military coups, electoral boycotts, forming parallel governments and punitive judicial trials backfire. They should not engage in reciprocal polarization or tit-for-tat strategies of retaliation.
- **Splits within the autocratizing government/party can also provide unexpected opportunities.** These can often occur around succession questions (factional breaks prior to

elections or in the wake of internal successions). For example, in Ecuador, Rafael Correa designated his vice president Lenin Moreno to continue his legacy and run in subsequent terms. When Moreno won, however, he gained popular support to repeal the constitutional reforms and laws Correa had enacted and initiated corruption investigations of his former mentor.

- **Unified opposition coalitions have the best chance to defeat backsliders**, but it is imperative that these coalitions be constructed during the early stages of the backsliding process, before autocrats have consolidated their authority and thoroughly tilted the democratic playing field. In the democratic recovery cases, broad electoral coalitions pointing out the threat to democracy defeated autocratizers in Brazil and Moldova, and a bipartisan coalition impeached a South Korean backslider early in the process. In the intermediate cases, no opposition coalition has been formed. In the severe cases, unified oppositions were attempted only far into the backsliding episodes. In Venezuela, a united opposition came close in 2013 and actually won the legislature in 2015 as the popularity of the government was falling. In Hungary and Turkey, it was not until 2022 and 2023 that oppositions united behind single presidential or parliamentary candidates, and the playing fields were so skewed that, combined with internal weaknesses, they were not yet successful.
- **Opposition forces are most willing to unify when they recognize the existence of a threat to democracy.** It is crucial that opposition mobilize supporters around claims to defend and open democratic spaces, as well as present clear proposals to address material, security and cultural concerns of voters, and not simply criticize an incumbent's policy platform or general performance in office. The earlier opposition forces recognize the existence of a regime threat, the more likely they will be able to set aside their secondary differences and join forces to defend democratic spaces. Crucially, the more informational control the backsliding incumbent exerts as erosion deepens, the more difficult it is for even unified opposition forces to combat disinformation and use of state resources to persuade regime supporters that the incumbent is their defender and protector against shadowy threats.
- **Political party development is critical to challenging backsliders.** Many opposition political parties are severely weakened during backsliding episodes, either because of general popular alienation in response to their prior mistakes or unresponsiveness, or because they are restricted by the autocratizing policies. They need to rebuild party organization and policy capacity. Even more importantly, they need to rebuild connections with voters, which requires tremendous effort and new skills to understand changing voter attitudes and loyalties, particularly in the context of growing partisan and affective polarization, disinformation, and socio-cultural differences. Practices such as deep canvassing, listening tours, and focus groups to better understand the grievances, values and discourse of different populations, particularly the supporters of the incumbent, may help revive opposition parties. The development of stronger party organizations, however, does not diminish the need for coalition building among opposition parties, as no party is likely to defeat an autocratic incumbent on its own.

B. INDEPENDENT MEDIA AND FREE FLOW OF INFORMATION

In advance of backsliding . . .

- **Support for pluralistic media outlets that are independent**—both politically and financially—from state institutions and corporate interests can help create a media landscape that is more resistant to the efforts of aspiring autocrats to capture or muzzle the media.

When backsliding is occurring:

- **Media pluralism and independent, alternative sources of information are keys to constraining backsliding.** International and domestic actors should strive to support independent traditional and internet media to keep open informational space, and they should be attuned to the efforts of autocratic incumbents to manipulate the financial and/or legal vulnerability of independent media to capture them or neutralize their political influence.

C. CIVIL SOCIETY

In advance of backsliding:

- **Support for pluralistic and independent civil society networks** is also important for creating social spaces that are resilient to efforts at autocratic capture or regulation.

When backsliding is occurring:

- **Societies need to practice constant vigilance and respond to early warning signs of backsliding.** Complacency and assumptions that the backslider is following democratic principles in the early years allow erosion to occur to the point that it becomes much more difficult to constrain.

Therefore, it is important for civic, media and academic organizations to monitor and educate about the early warning signs of backsliding and its threats. Likewise, elites who activate polarization for electoral gain and then assume they may control it or depolarize when it suits them, may find that societies remain polarized for a long time and beyond their control.

D. INTERNATIONAL FACTORS

- **International blind eyes toward backsliding** due to geopolitical interests (India, Poland, Hungary, Turkey), anti-terrorism and anti-refugee partnerships (Tunisia and Turkey), or lack of strategic interest (Benin) may facilitate backsliding and, in the case of Poland and Hungary, have actually subsidized backsliding. On the other hand, international over-reaction, such as the U.S. maximum pressure policy against Venezuela's Maduro government, can solidify a regime's allies and impede a democratic opposition from developing. The extremes of inattention vs. hyper-attention are best avoided when international actors consistently prioritize democratic commitments rather than more narrowly defined economic or security interests, and instead treat these as interconnected.

- **International democracy assistance**, on the other hand, can provide needed support for civic education, political party development and institutional capacity-building (such as legislative and judicial autonomy). This can incentivize some restraint to backsliding incumbents concerned about international legitimacy, and empower citizens to defend democracy, and claim governance outcomes.
- **Promoting Awareness** is critical due to the new tactics that executives are deploying to control democratic institutions, and the urgency of rapid responses by diffuse and previously uncoordinated (and potentially ideologically opposed) pro-democracy constituencies. Democracy promoting institutions such as USAID and democratic actors should focus on increasing international awareness about and developing legal-institutional reforms to discourage commonly used backsliding tactics, and strategies of resilience.

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