



SCENARIO: BALANCE of POWER

STATUS:

In a balance of power scenario, political parties may alternate turns in power, each time using the tools available to them to try to tilt the playing field in their favor.

Depending on the effectiveness of closing space tactics, these changes in power can occur rarely (with one party dominating over several electoral cycles), or frequently (with power shifting from one electoral cycle to another). A balance of power scenario differs from a "snowball" scenario, in that the system moves back and forth between periods of greater concentrations of power and periods of more competition.

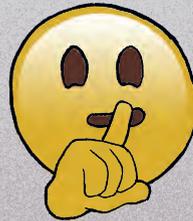
As new incumbents move to consolidate power, tactics to close democratic space often focus on manipulating the levers of state power, including:

When Power Shifts

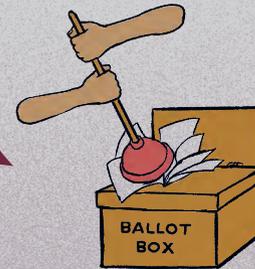
Shifting power can lead to retaliation; new incumbents may have incentives to use the same tactics against their opponents. Highly personalized (or "patron-client") politics can exacerbate this dynamic by making it easier to co-opt or coerce supporters of the former government. Building policy and program commitments can help build consistency and mitigate cycles of transition and retaliation.



Using patronage, or the "spoils of office," to reward supporters with jobs and pack courts and agencies with loyalists



New regulatory bodies restricting speech and association, and reliance on supporters in the courts to protect these initiatives from legal challenges



Manipulating elections, including fraud



Arbitrary regulation and enforcement of political activity, including greater administrative burdens for opposition parties, or raising barriers to voting (e.g., increasing voter registration requirements or arbitrarily disqualifying registrations or ballots)

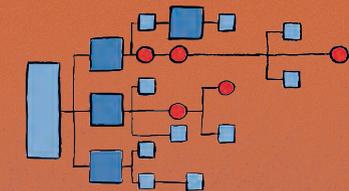


Changing the constitution to empower the executive at the expense of the legislature

Resilience Strategies



Building coalitions between opposition parties. Try to co-opt sympathetic or vulnerable members of the incumbent coalition



Build internal party infrastructure, local branches, youth and women's wings, party-related clubs, etc. They can boost party identification and allow them to build and maintain constituencies at the local level, even if they lack access to national-level administrative resources

SCENARIO: DOMINANT INCUMBENT, FRACTIONALIZED OPPOSITION

Disclaimer: This publication was made possible through the support provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID.



Closing space in a dominant incumbent scenario occurs gradually as the party in power uses state resources to create an environment in which repressive tactics are increasingly difficult to resist.

This process may begin with subtle efforts to repress freedom of expression for academics, media, and civil society – spreading disinformation or calling critics or opponents enemies of the state.

These efforts to control information and repress criticism are often followed by more overt closing tactics, including intimidation and harassment of critics and opponents, or attempts to change electoral rules to favor the incumbent.*

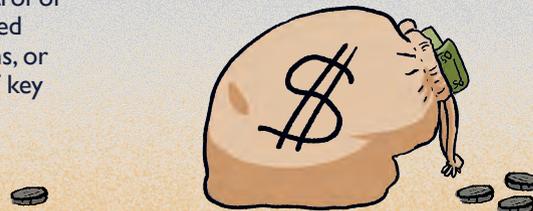


Specific tactics employed by a dominant incumbent can include, but are not limited, to:

Rhetorical attacks that paint opposition parties, civil society organizations (CSOs) or independent media as corrupt, enemies of the state, foreign agents, or terrorists



Taking editorial control of media via state-funded advertising campaigns, or co-opting owners of key outlets



Politically motivated enforcement of regulations for CSOs, media outlets, and political opposition by, for instance, audits or freezing bank accounts

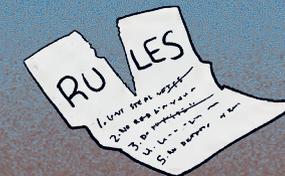


In this scenario, there may be several options available to opposition parties. If incumbents are particularly effective in closing the political space, opposition parties may feel their only option is to boycott the system or appeal to the international community.

These approaches can draw wider attention to closing space tactics. However, they risk enabling overwhelming incumbent victories.

If the opposition cannot unite to present a viable electoral alternative, it can leave room for the incumbent to claim a mandate to introduce more severe tactics, including:

Changing election rules to tilt the playing field in favor of the incumbent



Intimidation, violence, and harassment of political opposition, CSOs, and the free media



Recommendations

Where opposition parties are small, fractionalized, or otherwise stand little chance of competing with a powerful incumbent, one option is to develop broad networks or coalitions that oppose the closing of political space. These might include other political parties, CSOs, or protests and social movements.

Such alliances might not emerge naturally, as potential allies may have different goals, priorities, or ideological commitments.

Programs to help partners develop networks and coalitions should pay careful attention to group rules, norms, and structures in order to help members reach consensus on goals and strategy. This is vital to maintaining unity, especially when members are likely to face inducements or coercion.

Note that these approaches have downsides, particularly if unpopular political parties attempt to co-opt popular protests or social movements, which risks delegitimizing both.

*Nazifa Alizada, Rowan Cole, Lisa Gastaldi, Sandra Grahn, Sebastian Hellmeier, Palina Kolvani, Jean Lachapelle, Anna Lührmann, Seraphine F. Maerz, Shreeya Pillai, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2021. Autocratization Turns Viral. Democracy Report 2021. University of Gothenburg:V-Dem Institute.

SCENARIO: The SNOWBALL DILEMMA

Disclaimer: This publication was made possible through the support provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID.



Strengthening Democracy Through Partnership

A. Closing space in this scenario occurs gradually, often over years, as competing parties alternate in raising the stakes and in the intensity of their tactics.

B. The primary perpetrator during periods of closing is likely to be the party in power – the incumbent – if only because access to state resources provides more options for closing tactics.

C. The tactics of closing are not new and rely on historical repertoires of repression and response. Closing space reflects an escalation of intensity of tactics – not necessarily a difference in the tactics themselves.

D. Specific tactics used by the incumbent party early in the process may include, but are not limited to:



- Use of state resources to restrict political competition – installing party loyalists in electoral commissions and courts (including supreme courts)
- Administrative restrictions to crack down on political activity, like high barriers for rally permits, or arbitrarily refusing to fund physical offices and infrastructure
- Dubious disqualifications of political candidates from running for office

- F.**
- Election boycotts
 - Cultivating relationships with foreign governments, regional/international organizations (R/IOs), and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs)
 - Building domestic coalitions of opposition parties and NGOs.

Maintaining or increasing engagement with constituents, even while out of power, can help maintain a voter base and provide ongoing information on their interests.



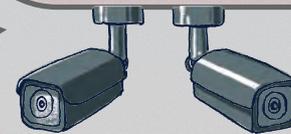
E. If these tactics are especially effective, opposition parties may escalate responses. Initiatives to draw domestic or international attention to closing space may include things like:

G. But if these tactics are unsuccessful, particularly in elections, opposition parties may resort to more extreme tactics, including voter intimidation and violence.



H. This escalation can lead to retaliation by the incumbent party, who may justify their own actions as righting some historical wrongs. Tactics may include:

- state sanctioned violence and voter intimidation
- forced disappearances of opposition figures and critical organizations
- torture
- extrajudicial killings



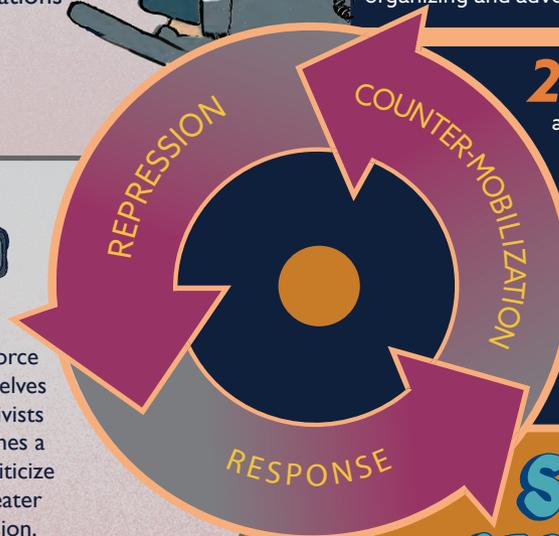
I. For security reasons, this cycle of escalation and politicization might force opposition parties to represent themselves as businesspeople, civic leaders, or activists in public gatherings. This tactic diminishes a party's public profile and serves to politicize these spaces, which can then spark greater government surveillance and oppression.

In these cases, vicious cycles of repression, counter-mobilization, and response can leave everyone worse off than they were previously.

1. Programs to support opposition parties and other targets of closing space should not stand alone. They should be linked with initiatives to help competitive parties de-escalate vicious cycles of closing. These might include cross-party dialogues, working groups, legislative caucuses, mutual pacts, or support for nonviolent organizing and advocacy.

2. The impact of these approaches may be difficult to notice, particularly if they simply slow the rate at which the problem gets worse.

3. But early intervention may help mitigate the long term (5-10 year) consequences of escalation.



SOLUTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS



SCENARIO :

Parties operate and persist in an environment of severe and consistent repression, often over decades.

SURVIVAL & BREAKTHROUGH

In this scenario, restrictions on political competition may be broad and severe. Fraudulent elections, political manipulation to benefit incumbents and their allies, pervasive corruption, and violations of basic human rights are common.

Human rights violations can include the use of violence against regime critics, as well as broader restrictions on freedom of speech and association.

In these contexts, the task of opposition parties may simply be to survive – to maintain a policy identity, a brand, and an organizational infrastructure – until a democratic opportunity emerges. Fraudulent elections, autocratic leadership succession crises, and protest movements are all examples of potential focal points for collective action against the regime.

Survival strategies that opposition parties have used in highly repressive, closed spaces can include:

#1 Diaspora organizing and international support

Sometimes, organizing outside the country may be the only viable option. Diaspora groups can bring foreign attention and pressure to bear on repressive incumbents. More open organizing environments can allow groups to raise resources for pro-democracy activists in the country. And diasporas can provide a locus for building coalitions among opposition political parties and other critics of the regime.



#2 Coalition building

Incumbents may manipulate electoral rules and apply repression selectively to split potential opposition groups. Coalition building can be difficult, and is even more challenging when incumbents play opposition parties against each other.

Support for building coalitions between parties, as well as for networking between parties, civic groups, and activists, helps opposition groups reconcile competing goals, find common strategies, field unified candidates, and distribute the costs and benefits of coalition action across members.



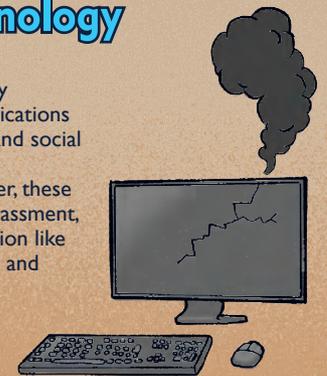
#3 Adapting organizational forms

In the most repressive contexts, opposition forces may not even be allowed to register as political parties, due to unreasonable administrative burdens or high risk. In these cases, those who hope to contest political power might choose to organize as CSOs or other “apolitical” groups. This can create some space to build organizational infrastructure and resources, but risks alienating or delegitimizing potential allies – especially if the incumbent can brand civic actors as political.



#4 Adopting digital technology

Where freedom of speech and association are severely restricted, digital technologies like encrypted communications apps, virtual private networks (VPNs), online forums, and social media can help develop or maintain an organizational infrastructure (and links with external actors). However, these technologies expose groups to online surveillance, harassment, hacking, and doxxing (the release of personal information like physical addresses). Outreach should include resources and training in security and digital hygiene.



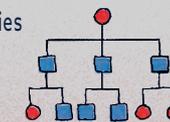
PROBLEMS TO CONSIDER:

Post-transition governments can be unstable, particularly when they are coalition-based. New leaders may have an incentive to use the resources now available to them to establish and consolidate control. To mitigate these risks, consider the following:

Progress could be slow. Diaspora groups and international supporters should expect to apply patient and steady pressure to support democratic gains, not just a transition.



In addition to organizational infrastructure, policy platforms are key building blocks for political parties in repressive contexts. Commitments to policies over prominent personalities may reduce the likelihood of concentrating power around a new incumbent following a transition.



Supporters of coalition building must pay attention to the details of pre- and post-election agreements to make sure any benefits of office are distributed fairly.

