DEMOCRATIC EROSION AND AUTHORITARIAN CONSOLIDATION

Prepared by

[Logos of USAID and CEPPS]
Democratic Erosion and Authoritarian Consolidation


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Introduction: An Overview of Trends in Electoral Democracy

Over the past few years, the number of liberal democracies has declined, reinforcing an ongoing trend of democratic erosion over the past decade (Alizada et al., 2022). Most recently, the number of liberal democracies dropped from 42 nations in 2020 to 34 in 2021 (Alizada et al., 2022). In 2021 alone, 33 countries became more autocratic while less than half – 15 – became more democratic (Keck, 2022). As illustrated by Figure 1, this democratic erosion is a global phenomenon and not isolated to any specific region.

Figure 1: Electoral Democracy Index, Regional Trends (2010-2021)

Worryingly, the current era of democratic erosion is unlike analogous backsliding in the past; rather than the loss of democratic nations through military coups, today’s trend of illiberalism is driven by elected leaders who often won their positions through free and fair elections. Only once in power do these leaders begin undermining their country’s commitment to electoral democracy by attacking democratic institutions. Specifically, leaders with authoritarian tendencies have gone after their nations’ respective judicial
systems, civil society, independent media, and electoral bodies — claiming that these democratic organs are corrupt and in need of reform (Laebens and Luhrmann, 2021). In Hungary, for instance, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has used his position to nearly double the size of the constitutional court, altered the process of judicial selection to make judicial appointments more partisan, and declared that constitutional court rulings prior to 2012 no longer held for judicial precedent (Keck, 2020).

In Figure 2, which we have adapted from V-Dem’s 2022 Annual Report, we identify the top twenty democratic indicators that saw a substantial decline worldwide over the past decade (Alizada et al., 2022). Of note, 44 countries experienced an uptick in the repression of civil society organizations between 2011-2021, 42 nations saw an increase in government censorship of the media, and 41 countries experienced the erosion of inclusive, participatory democracy as evidenced by a marked decline in the willingness of political elites in these nations to consider counterarguments when formulating government policy.

**Figure 2: Top 20 Declining Indicators (2011-2021)**

![Diagram showing top 20 declining indicators](chart.png)

*This chart was adapted from Figure 7 in V-Dem’s 2022 Democracy Report. It plots the total number of countries that saw significant and substantial declines—at least a 0.5-point decrease—in each democratic indicator between 2011 and 2021.*
This report explores these trends within the context of the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS)'s democracy, rights and governance (DRG) programming under two USAID-supported Leader with Associates (LWA) Awards, made possible by the generous support of the American people. In partnership with USAID, the Democratic Elections and Political Processes' (DEPP) LWA, launched in late 2021, enables CEPPS to support the establishment and consolidation of inclusive and accountable democracies to advance freedom, dignity and development. Likewise, the previous Global Elections and Political Transitions (GEPT) LWA, launched in 2015, supported DRG programming during a period of tremendous social change, marked by the challenges of increased connectivity, the youth bulge, urbanization, migration, and globalization. As the launch of the DEPP LWA was still relatively recent during the development of this report, the majority of the CEPPS data analyzed in this report was collected through GEPT-supported programs. To better understand how these global trends manifest and may influence DEPP LWA programming objectives over the coming years, we have plotted the regional average of three GEPT performance monitoring indicators—PO1-1, PO1-2, and PO4-1—in this report’s Appendix.

Of note, we see that several V-Dem indicators capturing the strength of civil society between 2010 and 2021 have steadily eroded at the same time that organizations like CEPPS, as highlighted by PO1-1 and PO1-2, have stepped up their support for civil society. On the other hand, CEPPS has also invested in training election observers (PO4-1) over this same time period, and almost no indicators of free and fair elections are showing authoritarian trends. Of course, we cannot interpret these correlations as evidence of a causal relationship, especially cross-nationally. Rather, our goal in this report is to contextualize global trends in democratic erosion which may undermine or cut against government investment in support of nascent or backsliding democracies.

Thus, we aim to understand the root causes of this recent worldwide democratic erosion. Through an extensive literature review, the quantitative analysis of V-Dem and GEPT data, and the development of in-depth qualitative case studies, we identify six common factors – or “precursors” (Bairey et al., 2020) – associated with recent democratic erosion worldwide. In this paper, our analysis of democratic erosion also aligns with the Democratic Erosion Consortium’s (DEC) precursor–symptoms–resistance model of democratic backsliding. Through case study analysis, we also outline symptoms of backsliding, in DEC parlance, by identifying specific events where erosion has been institutionalized in countries of interest (Paloumpis et al., 2018).

The first factor identified in this report is increasing information control, especially aggressive attacks on freedom of expression by governments and the increased
dissemination of false information by nefarious state and non-state actors. The second factor is rising populism sentiment, which contributes to democratic erosion directly by enabling the delegitimization of political opponents. Populism also leads to democratic erosion indirectly by furthering societal polarization, which is the third factor we identified. Increasing ideological and affective polarization can weaken democratic norms and contribute to the increased likelihood of political violence and state-sponsored repression—the fourth factor we identified. Over the past decade, there has been an unfortunate uptick in state-sponsored violence in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Highlighting the interlinked nature of many of the factors facilitating democratic erosion, researchers have linked growing horizontal inequality and societal cleavages—the fifth factor we identified—as both a symptom and contributor to contemporary polarization and the degradation of democratic norms. Similarly, the increased capture of state resources in many developing countries has worsened corruption, the sixth factor we identified, which is often a signal of ongoing democratic backsliding. Finally, many of the trends identified in this report were further worsened by COVID-19, the seventh factor we identified, as unscrupulous actors took advantage of the pandemic to close civic spaces and sow disinformation.

To arrive at the seven factors we identified, we performed a comprehensive review of the quantitative and qualitative academic literature since 2016, especially research published from 2018 onwards coinciding with the implementation of GEPT program. The factors we identified have also been cross-validated with other recent reviews of democratic trends, like V-Dem’s 2022 Democracy Report (Alizada et al., 2022). Additionally, the Democratic Erosion Event Dataset and Autocratic Consolidation Event Dataset codify democratic erosion precursors, symptoms, and resistance events; the most recent version of this dataset (v4) includes events from 2000 through the beginning of 2022. The six most common precursor events identified by the DEC—state-conducted violence or abuse, vertical corruption, extremist/populist parties, non-state violence, horizontal corruption, and polarization, in order—neatly overlap with the underlying trends put forth in this report.

In the following sections, we analyze each of these factors, reinforcing our quantitative analysis with case studies from six countries—Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Ecuador, Tunisia, Sri Lanka, and Malawi—that were selected in consultation with CEPPS partners. In the Appendix, we detail our methodology for arriving at these six countries. Below, in Figure 3, we provide brief context of where these six countries sit alongside the continuum of electoral democracies in 2021 using V-Dem’s indicators for liberal and electoral
democracy. The methodology for all V-Dem indicators used in this report is specified in the Appendix.

Figure 3: Selected Case Studies – Electoral Democracy & Liberal Democracy (2021)

Case Study: Ethiopia as a Microcosm of Democratic Erosion

After receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for his prominent role in Ethiopia’s democratic transition, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has helped stoke one of the world’s deadliest conflicts which has displaced millions of people, caused mass starvation, and resulted in dramatic democratic erosion (Mackintosh, 2021). At its root, the current crisis stems from Abiy’s frosty relations with the Tigray ethnic group, the previous rulers of the country, who felt incensed after the Prime Minister attempted to prevent the group from holding regional elections in September 2020 under COVID-19 safety measures. When the Tigrayans went ahead with the election, Prime Minister Abiy declared the vote illegal and cut off funding to the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) (Mackintosh, 2021). Since then, tensions between the Tigray population and the Ethiopian government have escalated into a violent conflict as the TPLF has been labeled a terrorist group by Ethiopian lawmakers and Addis Ababa has prevented the international community from accessing the Tigray region as part of a de-facto
humanitarian blockade, resulting in 700,000 people facing famine-like conditions (Woldeselassie, 2021; The Guardian, 2022).

The current situation is worsened by the Ethiopian government’s stronghold over the flow of information in the country. During the beginning of the current conflict, for instance, Abiy’s government imposed a mass media blackout which prevented independent media organizations from accessing the Tigray region (Pabón and Shifa, 2022). Moreover, grievances between the Tigray minority and other ethnic groups that compose the current Ethiopian government can be traced to the country’s economic inequality. Though Ethiopia as a whole has seen massive rates of economic growth, most of these gains have been captured by elites from the previous autocratic regime, such as the Tigray, who have historically enjoyed far more political and economic power than other ethnic populations (Kuznar, 2019). These existing inequities have created a high degree of societal polarization in the country that has been further exacerbated by social media and the government’s strict regulation of journalists (Pabón and Shifa, 2022). Finally, Mr. Abiy has used his position to denounce his opponents as a “cancer” that he’s vowed to bury in “a deep pit”—which he has done by arresting journalists as well as detaining his critics (Walsh and Dahir, 2022). In fact, Prime Minister Ahmed has been uncharacteristically condemned by the Nobel Committee itself, which argued that he had a “special responsibility to end the conflict and contribute to peace.” As ruler, he has done anything but.

**Increasing Information Control**

Between 2010 and 2021, there was a noticeable global decline in government respect for the free press and everyday citizens’ ability to freely exercise their opinions in the public sphere. With the exception of a brief uptick in media freedom and freedom of expression in the MENA region at the onset of the Arab Spring, every region of the world saw a dramatic decline in V-Dem’s Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information index over the past decade, which is documented in Figure 4, Panel A. At the same time that government censorship of the media became more rampant, there was also a growing trend of governments around the world using social media to disseminate misleading viewpoints to influence their own populations, as seen in Figure B, Panel B. These two information control approaches are complementary tools in the authoritarian playbook today (Alizada et al., 2022; Pickard, 2020).
With the exception of Western Europe and North America, this downward trend along both indices has accelerated even further since 2020 with the start of the global pandemic, which has made implementing democracy assistance programming even more difficult in countries of need. In the Appendix, we graph GEPT Indicators PO2-1 and PO2-2, which, respectively, measure the number of media and technology initiatives implemented by CEPPS’ partners to promote citizen understanding of the political process and the number of training days provided to journalists with U.S. government assistance. Concurrent with the drawdown of CEPPS programming at the end of 2019,
the onset of COVID-19 may be related to the global downturn in both indices highlighted in Figure 4. This downturn demonstrates how authoritarian nations and malicious non-state actors alike took advantage of the pandemic to spread disinformation and close online and physical democratic spaces. As will be expanded upon in future reports, the academic literature argues that if disinformation is a poison for democracy, journalist training like CEPPS’ programming is the antidote (McDevitt, 2023).

Figure 5: Top 20 Declining Indicators in Autocratizing Countries (2011-2021)

This chart was adapted from Figure 13 in V-Dem’s 2022 Democracy Report. It plots the number of autocratizing countries that saw significant and substantial declines—at least a 0.5-point decrease—in each democratic indicator between 2011 and 2021.

The global crackdown on freedom of expression has been especially pronounced in autocratizing countries. In Figure 5, also adapted from V-Dem’s 2022 report, we see that 45% of the top twenty declining indicators among autocratizing countries are related to undermining freedom of expression. Specifically, 21 countries that are experiencing
democratic erosion have seen an increase in government censorship of the media as well as the harassment of journalists over the past decade. Similarly, freedom of discussion for women has dramatically declined in 19 autocratizing countries between 2011-2021 while freedom of discussion for men declined in 16 autocratizing countries over the same time period.

At present, there are an estimated 3.2 billion people who are active on social media, which poses an ever-growing risk as populaces become ill-equipped to sort through misinformation (Eisen et al., 2019). In many nations that experience democratic backsliding as a result of a marginalized press, unconstrained populist leaders, and weakened legal constraints, social media has become the go-to platform for spreading disinformation (Hook and Verdeja, 2022).

In addition to direct government censoring of media sources and government-sponsored social media disinformation campaigns, there has also been a documented increase in the social media manipulation efforts of private corporations and other non-state actors (Hook and Verdeja, 2022). In countries subject to intense socio-political cleavages, researches have found the coarsening of democratic norms and interrelated polarization has manifested itself in the use of dehumanizing discourse online and the direct targeting and harassment of political dissidents by civil society (Hook and Verdeja, 2022). However, in the most illiberal nations, it is most often the government itself that has directed social media campaigns at their own populations (Eisen et al., 2019).

This ongoing spread of misinformation both by state and non-state actors in autocratizing nations can contribute to increased distrust among these countries’ residents of their governing institutions and their fellow citizens (Hook and Verdeja, 2022). Ultimately, increased attacks on freedom of expression by pernicious actors can be seen as both a cause and effect of global democratic erosion, which we will argue in more detail in the following sections.
Case Study: Cracking Down on Media Freedom in Zimbabwe

On paper, the Zimbabwean constitution protects the freedom of the press, and President Mnangagwa has committed to greater media freedom by signing into law the Freedom of Information Act in June 2019. In practice, however, media censorship still remains an enormous challenge in the country post-Mugabe, as shown in Figure 6. The Media Institute of Southern Africa reported nearly 50 government violations against journalists and other media workers in Zimbabwe in 2020 alone (Reporters Without Borders, 2021; Alfandika and Akpojivi, 2020; Stiftung, 2022). Specifically, the Zimbabwean government has continued to interfere in the relationship between nonpartisan members of the media and their sources, with ongoing state surveillance of journalists which has led to a number of recent arrests (Munoriyarwa and Chiambu, 2019; Stiftung, 2022).

Moreover, in 2020, journalists like Hopewell Chin’ono, a notable Zimbabwean journalist and public figure, were arrested during anti-government protests and had to spend more than a month in prison. This recent uptick in censorship has also been exacerbated by government’s attempt to control information about the spread of COVID-19 (Freedom House, 2021; Reporters Without Borders, 2021). That said, the level of violence against journalists during the Mnangagwa Administration has significantly declined in comparison with the government under Mugabe, whose regime systematically orchestrated the harassment of journalists in the workplace (Tshabangu and Salawu, 2022).
Rising Populism

While populist leaders often win elections legitimately, once in power, they seek to expand their influence and begin tightening their grip on democratic institutions (Beasley, 2021). To shore up their base, populist leaders try to convince their citizens and followers that they hail from the “pure” common folk, in contrast with “the corrupt elite,” who are trying to disadvantage the everyday person. By pursuing this political strategy, populists hope to garner enough political capital to eliminate institutional checks on their power (Mounk, 2018). In academic parlance, populism has been most succinctly described as “an attempt [by political leaders] to circumvent the institutional gatekeepers and increase their authority through the will of the people” (Hill et al., 2018) or to circumvent the “rules of the game,” as evidenced by the delegitimation of political opponents, the legitimation of violence and restrictions on civil liberties to achieve political ends (Gerschewski, 2021).

However, the process of democratic erosion led by a populist leader is usually quite gradual. These leaders begin by using the lack of confidence in democratic institutions among their supporters to leverage taking over these pillars of societal governance. Only once they are in power do they violate freedoms of the press and speech, and undermine the legitimacy of elections. In a comprehensive analysis of V-Dem data, Musgrave (2021) found that populist leaders and would-be autocrats usually make the media their first target once in power. In Hungary, for example, Orbán used his political power to disband media outlets critical of the president such as Népszabadság, the largest independent political daily newspaper in the country, in 2017 (Tubbs, 2018). When media organizations aren’t outright suspended, populist leaders can also force their failure through sustained public attacks which result in their financial failure due to a loss of advertising revenue amid dwindling readership (Tubbs, 2018).

Populist leaders also threaten to take legal action against any group with opposing views such as the media, opposition parties, or civil society (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). The Global State of Democracy (GSoD) indices indicate that populist regimes worsen the quality of democracy compared to non-populist governments by appointing loyalists into key positions of authority within the judiciary and throughout government bureaucracy (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance-IDEA, 2020; Dean, 2020). Finally, populists often attack judges who oppose their views or question the validity of other courts allied with the populist leader. For example, in Poland, the Polish government has made numerous attempts to silence court judges. In 2019, legislation was passed to punish judges who questioned the validity of other courts in the country (Beasley, 2021).
To better understand the growing trend of global populism, in Figure 6, we look at the decline in the world average of V-Dem’s Deliberative Components Index since 2010, which has been especially weighed down by declines in the Middle East and North Africa as well as in Latin America and the Caribbean. Specifically, this index measures the degree to which government decisions are made in consultation with both the public and the political elite.

To combat rising populism, some scholars have suggested that a greater effort should be made to connect political elites with their constituents to ensure their needs are being met. If not, everyday people may turn to a strongman leader who promises a “return to greatness” in exchange for a few democratic concessions (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Given this claim, we have graphed GEPT outcomes PO5-1 and PO5-2, which measure, respectively, the number of public forums funded by USG assistance where national legislators and members of the public interact and the number of elected leaders trained...
to respond to constituent needs. These figures (see Appendix) seem to indicate that the populist spike in MENA has occurred despite large numbers of USG-sponsored public forums in the region (PO5-1), and the populist spike in Latin America and the Caribbean has occurred despite even more recent USG-sponsored training of elected officials. However, more robust, country-specific analysis is necessary to rigorously validate either of these claims. Thus, examining this relationship may be fertile ground for future research.

Case Study: The Lasting Effects of Populist President Rafael Correa in Ecuador

As President of Ecuador from 2013-2017, Rafael Correa’s tenure was characterized by media oppression (Santamaria et al., 2021). Using his popular approval as a shield, Correa crafted laws to regulate what content could be published by the media and criminalized journalistic criticism of him and his administration. Even when journalists tried to use Ecuador’s legal system to fight media silencing, the courts dismissed their cases and ruled in favor of Correa’s administration (De la Torre and Lenos, 2016). Additionally, under President Correa, the country’s constitution was amended to eliminate the term limits on the office of the Presidency (Freedom House, 2022). Fortunately, Correa’s reign did not last for long as he was subsequently defeated by Lenín Moreno in the next presidential election. This shift in Ecuador is captured in Figure 8 below.

Nonetheless, the chilling effect his administration had on the Ecuadorian media still remains. For instance, in 2020, there were 960 documented attacks against Ecuadorian media outlets, journalists, activists, and citizens. This agenda against the media, stocked by President Correa, continues to persist even after President Moreno eliminated the Superintendency of Information and Communication, a regulatory body that harassed and imposed administrative sanctions on independent media outlets, that was first set up by Correa (Human Rights Watch, 2021).
Expanding Polarization, Societal Cleavages, & Consequent Violence

At a systemic level, social science research has shown that humans “inherently desire to group themselves [using an] ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality” (Hill et al., 2018). This mentality has been linked with what has been widely defined as polarization: when two conflicting groups...are divided by political ideology, social class, or other characteristics. Because these two groups hold different values, principles, and interests, supporters of each perceive the other as an existential threat and believe that the two cannot co-exist — hence the threat of violence. Additionally, these societal cleavages make it more difficult to achieve the political and social consensus needed for democratic governance (Garcia-Guadilla and Mallen, 2019).

In recent history, political, societal, and ideological polarization has actively contributed to democratic erosion in many regions of the world. For example, the emergence and consolidation of political polarization in Venezuela during the Bolivarian Revolution led by Hugo Chávez and his successor Nicolas Maduro from 1999 to 2018 was a contributing factor to the democratic erosion Venezuela has undergone since the turn of the millennium (Garcia-Guadilla and Mallen, 2019).

In recent years, the concept of polarization has been parsed by other social scientists, who have delineated “ideological polarization” and “affective polarization.” The former refers to the extreme division between members of opposing parties over matters of public policy. The latter reflects the degree to which this opposition spills over into other
sectors of public life, breeding mistrust and contempt (Orhan, 2022). This affective polarization has been exacerbated in recent years by the rise of populist leaders who have stoked us vs. them dichotomies between their supporters and other outgroups (Kingzette et al., 2021).

| Table 1: Correlation Between Deliberative Democracy, Polarization, & Violence |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Deliberative Component Index | Polarization of Society | Use of social media to organize offline violence |
| Deliberative Component Index | 1                          | 0.0836                      |
| Polarization of Society | 0.1929                     | 0.5115                      |
| Use of social media to organize offline violence | 0.0836 | 1 |

Worsening societal cleavages induced by polarization can not only appear alongside ideological lines, but also spill over to other cross-cutting dividing lines including geophysical location, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Orhan, 2022). To briefly examine the link between violence, polarization, and the breakdown of deliberative democracy in backsliding nations, we conduct a simple correlation analysis of V-Dem’s Deliberative Component Index, as well as the V-Dem indicators for affective polarization and the use of social media by state and non-state actors to organize violence. In Table 1 and as visualized in Figure 9, we see that affective polarization is moderately correlated with the use of social media to organize violence while societal deliberation is only weakly correlated with affective polarization.
Thus, there is some evidence that increasing affective polarization can pose a threat not only to the vibrancy of democracies but also to societal security as citizens come to see their opponents as less than human (Orhan, 2022). The dramatic rise of affective polarization over the past decade, which can be attributed to a number of sources including elite polarization, economic crisis, and negative campaigns — just to name a few — can be seen in Panel A of Figure 10 (Orhan, 2022).

In many countries marred by political and social polarization, state-sponsored violence often becomes more permissible among the general public as supporters of those in power become willing to tolerate the repression of political out-groups. This lagged relationship between polarization and violence suggested by the affective polarization literature can potentially be seen in Figure 10. Panel A shows the dramatic increase in societal polarization in all regions of the world, which has been followed by increased state-sponsored violence, particularly over the last few years in the Middle East and North Africa, the Asia-Pacific, Latin America, and the Caribbean as evidenced by Panel B. However, Figure 10 merely posits a link between the two based on our analysis of the academic literature—much more work is necessary to test the robustness of this claim.
Moreover, as indicated by Panel A above, political polarization is especially rampant in South America. Throughout Latin America, authoritarian-minded leaders have leveraged their popular support to modify their nations’ constitutions and weaken democratic institutions. For example, in Ecuador and Venezuela, Presidents Rafael Correa and Hugo Chávez changed their countries’ constitutions after taking office to weaken opposition groups with the endorsement of their core ideological supporters (Landua, 2017).

Similarly, President Álvaro Uribe of Colombia sought new constitutional amendments while in office that would increase the number of presidential terms he could legally serve. After permitting Uribe to serve a second term in office after his first constitutional amendment passed, Colombia’s Constitutional Court eventually rejected Uribe’s request.
to allow presidents to serve a third term as they believed it would represent a threat to Colombian democracy (Ginsburg, 2018). These constitutional changes were facilitated by extreme societal polarization, which is especially pernicious in majoritarian democracies because it can result in disproportionate representation in political office for political parties that have only a plurality of public support, in turn resulting in engineered constitutional and legal changes to “enhance their electoral advantage” (McCoy and Somer, 2019, p. 261).

Thus, in politically polarized nations, supporters of the dominant political group are more willing to grant their leaders with additional authority over democratic institutions to thwart their competitors. This may include ensuring opposition candidates are left off the ballot during elections often by claiming that opposition leaders are a threat to national security and must be formally excluded from politics on legal grounds (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

To combat this rise in intolerance and the threat of political violence both by the state and non-state actors, development agencies may consider increasing their commitment to conflict mediation resources within especially polarized nations. To provide more insight into this policy recommendation, we graph GEPT outcomes PO3-1 and PO3-2, which measure, respectively, the number of groups trained in conflict resolution skills as well as the number of consensus-building forums held among members of the civil and security sector that are funded by U.S. government assistance. These figures in the Appendix show that there has been more consistent investment in consensus-building (PO3-2) than in conflict resolution (PO3-1).

**Case Study: Tunisia Reneging on the Promise of the Arab Spring**

Despite Tunisia transitioning from autocracy to democracy after the Arab Spring, the revolution created extremely high expectations which have yet to be met (Macdonald and Waggoner, 2018). This has resulted in frequent public protests, which the Tunisian government has responded to in turn by adopting strong internal security policies and empowering state security forces and (Boukhars, 2017). As, a result, in 2021, state security forces continued to use extreme violence to stop such protests (Human Rights Watch, 2022). For instance, last year Tunisian forces used teargas to stop protests, attacked journalists, and arrested a 25-year-old student for opposing police repression in a Facebook post. While Tunisia scores relatively well along V-Dem’s Physical Violence Index in comparison with our other case study nations in Figure 11, this still represents a sharp downturn uptick in the average level of violence that Tunisia had experienced since the end of the Arab Spring, as documented in Appendix Figure 4.
Additionally, like other MENA governments over the past two years, Tunisia’s government used the pandemic as a pretext to increase violent measures against civilian demonstrations (Bank et al., 2022). The response to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions by the Tunisian President, Kais Saied, exacerbated public frustration with his reign and contributed to mass demonstrations, some which turned violent. In response, Tunisian troops were sent in to attack protestors and in one case, military forces were deployed in a clash among rival groups in parliament (BBC, 2021; Bank et al., 2022).

Figure 11: Selected Case Studies – Electoral Democracy & Physical Violence (2021)

Soaring Inequality

In a similar vein to the factors we have already identified, increasing horizontal inequality, which itself is linked to rising populism, affective polarization, and rising information control, is another factor that has contributed to global democratic backsliding. Horizontal inequalities are defined as inequalities between culturally defined groups along economic, political, or social dimensions (Hillesund et al., 2018). In contrast with vertical inequalities, which refer to individual or household-level inequality in the context of aggregate societal wealth, horizontal inequality focuses on how rising inequality concentrated in particular sub-groups can lead to political fractionalization and conflict.
In the academic literature, the study of horizontal inequality has sometimes been referred to as ethno-income cross-cuttingness (Gubler and Selway, 2012). In societies marred by cross-cutting fractionalization, rising horizontal inequalities have been shown to increase intergroup animosity and make equitable governance much more difficult (Gubler and Selway, 2012). Thus, the second-order effects of rising economic inequality are worth investigating from a democratic erosion angle as well.

In the United States, for instance, economic inequality has helped drive both populism and social polarization and thus furthered the country’s democratic erosion (Tubbs, 2018). Research shows that during times of stark economic shocks such as the global financial crisis in 2008 or the COVID-19 recession — as argued in our final section — citizens are more willing to give power to autocratic leaders who promise that they can improve economic conditions for everyday people (Bermeo, 2016).

Similarly, economic inequality is associated with an increase in populist movements that exploit social discontent to gain political power and authority. In several nations, authoritarian leaders have used rising inequality to expand their power, arguing that they need greater political authority to fight for “the people” (Mudde, 2008). Specifically, Timoneda (2021) found that losing economic elites often turn to political outsiders, whose campaigns they actively support through financial means and unscrupulous political machinations, to engage in state capture and implement favorable policies (Timoneda, 2021).
The effects of growing socioeconomic inequality on democratic outcomes are especially evident in countries that already have a high association between socioeconomic status and political power, as seen throughout much of the Middle East and North Africa in Figure 12. With the exception of Western Europe and North America, most regions of the world have high degrees of inequality and a large concentration of power among the socioeconomic elite.

Nonetheless, more can be done to break down horizontal inequality and remove barriers to democratic inclusion. As such, in the Appendix, we graph GEPT indicator PO6-2, which measures the number of political parties assisted by the U.S. government in each country that are implementing initiatives to increase the number of candidates and/or members who are from marginalized groups. While this indicator does not capture socioeconomic inclusion and societal divisions specifically, it is nonetheless a relevant output for understanding the U.S. government’s efforts to combat democratic erosion through economic inequality worldwide.
Even before the collapse of the Sri Lankan government earlier this year, the nation’s stark economic inequality and ethnic polarization had sown deep divisions in the country that came to dominate national politics (Kadirgamar, 2020). In contrast with Colombo, the urban center of economic activity for the country, the rural areas of Sri Lanka were left behind by the country’s integration into the global economy. This economic and social polarization has made Sri Lankan political alliances especially brittle and prone to fracture (Kadirgamar, 2020). In Figure 13, Sri Lanka’s concentration of power by socioeconomic status appears middling in the global context; however, in Appendix Figure 5, we see that this concentration has steadily worsened since 2010.

Thus, when Sri Lanka entered a rapid debt crisis in April, 2022 that led to mass public demonstrations that bridged ethnicity and ideology, several analysts rushed to declare that Sri Lanka had entered its own version of the “Arab Spring.” In the assessment of Asanga Abeyagoonasekera, a Senior Fellow at the Millennium Project, Sri Lanka’s protest movement was “a perfect match with the pattern of an Arab Spring: a people’s uprising to end authoritarian rule, economic mismanagement and family rule, and install democracy” (as quoted in Buddhavarapu, 2022). One reason cited for the breakdown of
the Sri Lankan economy: the ruling Rajapaksas clan prioritized providing government contracts to their close political associates and other wealthy elites which led to increased corruption and the weakening of government institutions (Kenny, 2022). However, it remains to be seen if Sri Lanka can emerge from this crisis in a strong economic position without resorting to severe democratic erosion.

**Corruption & Its Consequences**

Though the precise definition of corruption is oft debated in the academic literature, all of its forms — corporate corruption, the elite capture of state resources, and the redirecting of government funds to friendly third parties — contribute to and often are a result of democratic backsliding (Eisen, 2019). Additionally, both vertical and horizontal corruption have been identified by the Democratic Erosion Consortium as the second and fifth most prevalent precursors of democratic backsliding, respectively (DEC, 2022). While the exact causality and directionality of this relationship can be difficult to establish in fragile nations, corruption has been linked elsewhere to rising horizontal inequality, populism, and growing mistrust in government institutions.

Within the field of economics, corruption is often narrowly defined as “bribes to government officials and thefts of government resources by public officials” (Olken and Pande, 2012). This notably excludes absenteeism by government workers as well as illegal payments to third parties indirectly connected to public officials. The Varieties of Democracy Dataset, however, is much more expansive in its approach to corruption. Specifically, V-Dem’s Political Corruption Index, graphed in Panel A of Figure 14, provides an equally weighted estimation of executive corruption, public sector corruption, judicial corruption, and legislative corruption. Interestingly, V-Dem’s measure of corruption has seen a slight downturn in corruption in almost all regions of the globe, with the exception of the Middle East and North Africa. Unfortunately, that is also where we see much of the past decade’s democratic backsliding concentrated.

On the other hand, the Worldwide Governance Indicators project maintains its own measure of corruption which captures “perceptions of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, including both petty and grand forms of corruption, as well as "capture" of the state by elites and private interests.” This perception-based measure, shown in Panel B of Figure 14, actually shows a decline in the control of corruption in the MENA region and an increase in perceived corruption in the Asia-Pacific as well as Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The discrepancy between these two measures at the
regional level is well worth investigating in future empirical work and country-specific analysis.

**Figure 14: Political Corruption & Societal Perceptions of Corruption, Regional Trends (2010-2021)**

![Figure 14](image)

**Pandemic-Related Erosion**

The outbreak of coronavirus led political analysts to express concern about the impact of COVID-19 on worldwide democracy. In many ways, COVID-19 is a cross-cutting factor reinforcing the other factors discussed above. During the pandemic, governments centralized power and enacted emergency legislation as a way to control the spread of the virus (Maiorano, 2022). In addition, researchers have linked rising populism and polarization with growing economic inequality, which was further worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic (Landry and Lieres, 2022).
According to Freedom House (2020), since the pandemic began, 91 of 192 countries experienced restrictions on their news media as part of the response to the coronavirus outbreak. For example, in Cambodia, one journalist was arrested for quoting comments about COVID-19 made by Prime Minister Hun Sen verbatim (Patel, 2020). Similarly, some governments engaged in mass disinformation campaigns by denying the outbreak of COVID-19 within their countries or inaccurately reporting COVID-19 cases. For instance, in Nicaragua, Tanzania, and Burundi, governments informed their citizens and the international community that there was little to no spread of the virus despite mass evidence to the contrary (Lurhrman et al., 2020).

Additionally, some authoritarian-minded leaders saw this as an opportunity to settle scores with their political opponents by invoking public health measures as an excuse for limiting opposition leaders' freedom of assembly. Consequently, the number of people facing unfair jail sentences skyrocketed as part of a trend of human rights violations during the pandemic (Repucci, and Slipowitz, 2021). This was the case in both Cambodia and Venezuela, where each country’s respective leaders exploited the pandemic to suppress opposition and consolidate their power. Furthermore, COVID-19 led to disruptions in the electoral process of some African countries such as Togo, Guinea, Uganda, and Egypt. Nonetheless, protest movements opposing these voting irregularities were repressed and opposition candidates were intimidated. In contrast, in other African nations like Burkina Faso, Guinea, Ghana, and Mali, elections were postponed out of an abundance of caution (Eko-Akingbesote, 2021).

Finally, the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) states that emergency measures should not “discriminate solely on the ground of race, color, sex, language, religion or social origin.” However, while enforcing COVID-19 measures, cases of stigmatization and discrimination were widely reported in autocratizing nations. For example, Ugandan security forces specifically targeted the LGBTQI+ community in their enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions (Edgell et al., 2021). Relatedly, in March 2020, a Cambodian Ministry of Health report identified Khmer Islam and other groups as having contracted COVID-19, leading to additional discrimination against the frequently targeted Muslim minor community (Patel, 2020).

**Case Study: The Political Economy of Malawi’s Response to COVID-19**

In response to the first COVID-19 case in the nation, the government of Malawi closed national borders and airports, reduced the number of people allowed on public transportation, and restricted public and social gatherings. However, demonstrations broke out, mostly among small business owners and marketeers, complaining that the
lockdown would result in economic hardships for many Malawians leading to starvation in the country (Ferree et al., 2020). This backlash towards the Malawi government by everyday citizens has been underscored by recent research by Ferree et al. (2021), which found that Malawians were more willing to test for COVID-19 when international health organizations such WHO administered the test instead of local public health clinics. This can be attributed to the lack of trust among the Malawi people in public institutions.

This lack of trust in Malawi institutions can also be linked to what many people saw as fraudulent elections at the height of the pandemic (Ferree et al., 2021). Specifically, despite facing several challenges including an alarming number of positive COVID-19 cases and associated deaths by the end of 2019, Malawi’s electoral commission decided to hold new presidential elections without postponement (Freedom House, 2021). Nonetheless, the pandemic had little effect on voter turnout in the June 2020 elections in which Lazarus Chakwera of the opposition party won with 59% of the vote (Dulani et al., 2021). This can be seen in Figure 15, where Malawi scores the highest for freedom of movement among all of our case studies – reflecting the relative strength of Malawian democracy.

**Figure 15: Selected Case Studies – Electoral Democracy & Freedom of Movement (2021)**

![Figure 15: Selected Case Studies – Electoral Democracy & Freedom of Movement (2021)](image)

**Conclusion and Next Steps**

In this report, we have highlighted six actors that have been often linked to recent democratic erosion in the academic literature: increasing information control; rising populism; increased affective polarization; growing societal cleavages and related
violence; soaring horizontal inequality; political corruption; and pandemic-related erosion. These seven factors could provide focal points for future DEPP programming.

For future research, there is room for compiling evidence regarding programming for mitigation democratic erosion and reversing authoritarian consolidation, particularly focusing on addressing the six factors identified in this report. Additionally, there is need to analyze country case studies, utilizing CEPPS' programming reports for each, to try and identify a series of “sentinel indicators” that could serve as early warning signs of incoming democratic backsliding (USAID, 2016).

References


Appendix

Precursor Analysis/Identification Strategy

While conducting our analysis of the academic literature studying the precursors of democratic backsliding over the past decade, we encountered a number of recurring trends in the research that helped us arrive at our seven unique factors in this report. All told, increasing informational control, populism, affective polarization, horizontal inequality, political violence, corruption, and pandemic-related erosion represent macro-level factors that facilitate democratic erosion.

In this report, we did not have the opportunity to focus on proximate shocks, such as natural disasters and inter-state conflict, which immediately precede rising authoritarianism. Thus, the factors we have laid out in this paper could be considered necessary but not sufficient for backsliding. Consequently, future research could help tease out which of these seven factors is most heavily linked to the democratic backsliding we see today.

Moreover, one important caveat of our analysis is that V-Dem’s annual indicators and the academic literature often lag behind what practitioners are seeing on the ground. One factor underlining democratic backsliding that did not come up in our survey of latest academic research, but was often mentioned amongst implementing partners, is the rising threat of climate change. However, we did not pursue this avenue in depth as it can be challenging to clearly isolate climate change’s direct and measurable effects on each of our seven common factors.

Ultimately, there were a multitude of factors that came up in our research, but it can be difficult to tease out which ones, specifically, are contributing to the trends identified in this report. Nonetheless, the seven factors we have chosen are those that came up again and again in the literature on democratic erosion.
## Case Study Selection

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<td>Sri Lanka or Tunisia</td>
<td>Peru</td>
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<td>Nepal</td>
<td>Peru or Ecuador</td>
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<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>Sri Lanka or Tunisia</td>
<td>Peru</td>
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<tr>
<td>shadow</td>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Wealth</strong></td>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>Sri Lanka or El Salvador</td>
<td>Bulgaria or Peru</td>
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<td>shadow</td>
<td>DRC or Pakistan</td>
<td>Nepal</td>
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<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
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<td>shadow</td>
<td>Ethiopia or Zimbabwe</td>
<td>Tunisia or Nepal</td>
<td>Ecuador or Bulgaria</td>
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Using the above as reference, we thus ultimately arrived at the following set of country cases:

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<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
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<td><strong>Shadow</strong></td>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
</tr>
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</table>

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1. We would like to extend a special thanks to Linda Stern for her input throughout this process, and for sharing case selection materials from National Democratic Institute.
Figure A: Electoral Democracy vs. Women's Civil Liberties

Generated from 2021 VDem Values

Figure B: Electoral Democracy vs. Power Distribution by Wealth

Generated from 2021 VDem Values
Figure C: Electoral Democracy vs. Power Distribution by Urbanicity

Figure D: Electoral Democracy vs. Political Violence by Non-State Actors
Case Study Trends

Appendix Figure 1: Trends in Electoral Democracy
Selected Case Studies (2010-2021)

Appendix Figure 2, Panel A: Trends in Freedom of Expression
Selected Case Studies (2010-2021)

Appendix Figure 2, Panel B: Trends in Government Dissemination of False Info
Selected Case Studies (2010-2021)
Appendix Figure 3: Trends in the Deliberative Component Index
Selected Case Studies (2010-2021)

Appendix Figure 4, Panel A: Polarization of Society
Selected Case Studies (2010-2021)

Appendix Figure 4, Panel B: Level of Physical Violence
Selected Case Studies (2010-2021)
Ecuador Case Study (Extended)

Case Study: Ecuador (2016-2022)

Overview

Ecuador transitioned from military dictatorship to a democratic system in 1979. Ecuador’s constitution has undergone various reforms, leading to achievements in guaranteeing the basic freedoms of individuals, citizens being aware of their rights, and an establishment of state functions (Piza et al., 2021). Elections are held regularly, with the recent elections being held in April 2021 which saw Guillermo Lasso win with 52 percent in the second-round contest defeating Andrés Arauz with 48 percent of the vote. Lasso took over from former president Lenín Moreno who was the successor of Rafael Correa (Freedom House, 2022). Despite the progress made in Ecuadorian democracy, corruption, prison violence and media oppression remain a challenge in Ecuador (Freedom House, 2022).

Democratic Trends

Electoral Integrity in Ecuador

Ecuador’s 2008 constitution allows for a president to be directly elected. Additionally, the constitution gives the president power to dissolve the legislature (Freedom House, 2022). In December 2015, under president Correa, the constitution was amended to eliminate the term limit. The amendment would become effective with the 2021 elections. (Lansford, 2017). However, in 2018, under president Correa’s successor president Moreno, voters approved a referendum to restore term limits (Freedom House, 2022).

Moreno won presidential elections in 2017 with 51 percent, defeating Lasso who received 49 percent of the vote. Lasso rejected the results and refused to concede, claiming that the 2017 elections were fraudulent, but he could not provide any concrete evidence to support his claims. Despite his failure to provide evidence, the National Electoral Council (CNE) did a partial recount and did not find any “significant discrepancy from the previous count” (Freedom House, 2021). Since Moreno’s term, CNE has been more independent compared to when Correa was in power (Freedom House, 2020).
According to the World Bank (2021), “Ecuador was entirely at the mercy of COVID-19, by late 2020, the country had recorded over 200,000 cases and 14,000 deaths.” Amid COVID-19 and an economic crisis exacerbated by the pandemic (Zapata et al., 2021), Ecuador was preparing for the 2021 elections. Parties were permitted to campaign, Cisneros et al., (2021) find that due to COVID-19 related restrictions, political parties used social media platforms such as twitter to campaign. The authors also find that “even though COVID-19 related messages were present as one of the four most cited topics of the campaign, candidates and parties did not focus on it” (Cisneros et al., 2021).

Ecuador’s elections were held in February 2021. For two weeks, right wing candidate Guillermo Lasso and environmental activist Andrés Arauz were nearly tied for second place (Zapata et al., 2021). Eventually, Lasso was declared the winner with 52 of the votes and Arauz received 48 percent (Freedom House, 2022). Lasso narrowly defeated Yaku Pérez for the second position in the first round, which was held in February (Freedom House, 2022). Pérez claimed the results in that round were fraudulent and made a formal request to electoral authorities to recount the votes, but he failed to provide any evidence to support his claims. The National Electoral Council (CNE) denied the petitions. Other parties such as the democratic left claimed lack of transparency and criticized CNE (Zapata et al., 2021).

Media Freedom in Ecuador

Ecuador’s constitution provides for the freedom of expression, including media freedom (Stiftung, 2022). However, Correa’s term (2013-2017) was characterized by media oppression (Castellanos Santamaria et al., 2021). He created laws to regulate what content could be published, and if journalists published anything against him or his administration, they were charged. Journalists tried to use Ecuador’s legal system to fight media oppression however, the courts always dismissed their cases and ruled in favor of Correa’s administration (de la Torre and Lenos, 2016).

Moreno tried to ease pressure on the media (Wolff, 2018), for example legislators eliminated the Superintendency of information and communication (Supercom)- a regulatory body that harassed and imposed administrative sanctions on independent media outlets (Human Rights Watch, 2021). However, attacks on media outlets continued. According to Stiftung (2022), “in 2020, there were a total of 960 attacks against media outlets, journalists, activists, and citizens, which represents 91% of the alarms registered by Fundamedios that year. Additionally, there were 37 attacks on media outlets and six cases of attacks on graphic reporters. According to IDEA’s Global
State of Democracy, Ecuador scored 0.59 for media integrity (out of a maximum of 1), ranking as a mid-tier country in this section”. With the current president, tension between the government and privately-owned media has eased (Reporters Without Borders, 2022).

Corruption in Ecuador

Corruption remains one of Ecuador’s major challenges. Former president Moreno supported anti-corruption efforts. For example, in 2017, his own Jorge Glas was suspended from his duties and later detained and eventually sentenced to six years imprisonment for taking $13.5 million in bribes (Wolff, 2018). In 2020, former President Correa was sentenced to eight years in prison for his involvement in corruption with 20 other government members (Stiftung, 2022).

In 2020, some assembly members were involved in corruption scandals that saw two of them resign: Daniel Mendoza and Eliseo Azuero were involved in a network of corruption when constructing hospitals. Furthermore, Viviana Bonilla also lost her legislative seat due to aggravated passive bribery during Correa’s presidential term and was sentenced to eight years in prison. (Castellanos Santamaria et al., 2021).

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Freedom in the World — Ecuador Country Report, 2020

Freedom in the World — Ecuador Country Report, 2021


Malawi Case Study (Extended)

Case Study: Malawi (2026-2022)

Overview

Malawi has had a relatively stable government since its independence in 1964. The defeat of Dr. Banda in a referendum in 1993 ushered Malawi into multiparty democracy from the autocratic one-party regime. Since then, multiparty tripartite elections have been held every five years, with the presidency being limited a two-five-year term. Malawi has also had a democratic constitution since 1995, which has served as the bedrock of the country’s political process. The constitution guarantees equal and universal suffrage to citizens of any eligible voting age.

While freedoms of association, political rights, civic liberties are often guaranteed and respected, the state has in the past violated these liberties. For example, declaring political opposition rallies illegal without justification for it. The previous government had also tried to use COVID-19 to unconstitutionally delay the electoral process, violating its citizens civic liberties. Freedom House 2022) states that, corruption, discrimination against women and minority and people with albinism remain problems in Malawi.

Democratic Trends in Malawi

Electoral Integrity in Malawi

Malawi held its elections in May 2019, which saw the incumbent president Peter Mutharika win by the plurality vote. The two main opposition parties, Malawi Congress Party and newly formed United Transformation Movement (UTM) had 35.4% and 20.24% of votes, respectively. The results of the elections were highly rejected by several stakeholders including the leaders of the two biggest opposition parties, Lazarus Chakwera of MCP and Saulos Chilima of UTM. Stakeholders alleged that elections were characterized by widespread irregularities, alleging that judges included errors in filling out electoral forms (USAID, 2021). Additionally, correction fluid was used to change to number of votes. Malawians, CSOs, and other organizations protested the presidential election results, some Malawian artists used music for protests, for example, songs such
as “voti yanga yathera madando” were used to complain about Malawi’s 2019 election process (Lipenga, 2021). In February 2020, the constitutional court nullified the May 2019 elections and ordered fresh elections in June 2020.

Despite the country facing several challenges including alarming numbers of COVID-19 positive cases and deaths by the end of 2019, the electoral commission was able to successfully hold new presidential elections without having to cancel or postpone (Freedom House, 2021). According to Dulani et al., (2021) citing IFES (2020), health experts called for a postponement of the repeat elections due to “logistical challenges, added costs of providing protective equipment to electoral staff, reduced international election observation due to travel restrictions, and high exposure to risk voters during the campaign rallies”. Additionally, the government attempted to impose a COVID-19 21-day lockdown, however, Malawian citizens demonstrated widely. Some demonstrations were organized by the Malawi Human Rights Defender Coalition (HRDC) (Freedom House, 2020). Additionally, civil society organizations obtained a court order declaring the proposed lockdown as unconstitutional (Dulani et al., 2021).

Dulani et al., (2021) find that the pandemic had little effect on voter turnout in the June 2020 elections in which Lazarus Chakwera of the opposition party won by 59%. Chakwera led a political coalition of nine opposition parties called “Tonse” coalition.

**The Rule of Law in Malawi**

The state of the rule of law in Malawi is relatively stable and has a reputation of independence. The judiciary in Malawi is led by the Chief Justice who is also the Supreme Court judge. The judiciary system is divided into threefolds; the Magistrate Court, the High Court and Supreme Court. There are also special courts like the industrial and on specific occasion a constitutional court (The Government of the Republic of Malawi).

Provisions in the constitution guarantee independence, with the judiciary being able to review executive decisions for compliance with the constitution and other laws. Stiftung et al., (2022) states that, “in appropriate instances, the judiciary has been able to overturn government actions for contravening the constitution or other applicable laws”. For example, the decision by the constitution court to nullify the 2019 presidential elections in which the incumbent Peter Mutharika of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was declared the winner with 38.57% majority vote. In 2020, the court interpreted the term plurality vote to mean 50% plus one, this interpretation changed the electoral process (Stiftung et al., 2022).
However, the judiciary has struggled to maintain its independence due to a lack of financial autonomy (Stiftung et al., 2022). In trying to improve the financial autonomy of the judiciary, which is underfunded, in October 2020 Chakwera allocated funds to the judiciary. (Freedom House, 2021). Additionally, judges face political pressure and are offered bribes to influence decisions. In Malawi, the appointment of judges lacks transparency (Freedom House, 2021). While the government of Malawi has established a legal anti-corruption framework, corruption remains a problem in Malawi, this includes corruption in campaigns and government pronouncements (Chunga and Nedi, 2022). According to the most recent Afrobarometer survey, “a majority Malawians say that corruption is increasing, and the government is performing poorly in dealing with the vice. Most want strong sanctions against cabinet ministers and businesses associated with corruption.”

**Inclusion in Malawi’s Electoral Process**

While multiparty democracy in Malawi has promoted inclusion in politics, some populations are still excluded from political power. For example, the LGBTQI+ population, political parties do not advocate for their rights, and they still face legal and societal discrimination (Freedom House, 2021). Maxwell, Mechkova and Seim (2019), find that from 2016 to 2019, the LGBTQI+ population became more excluded from political power than in the past.

Furthermore, women political empowerment has been slower to improve in Malawi. According to Maxwell, Mechkova and Seim (2019), there was a decrease in political power equality between 2014 and 2019. Women in Malawi continue to be underrepresented in politics, in the 2020 elections, none of the presidential candidates were women. Additionally, out of the 31 cabinet ministers appointed by the new president Chakwera, only 11 were women, with only 4 being full ministers and rest deputy ministers (Freedom House, 2021). Clayton et al., (2019) find that women are disadvantaged in two “less obvious” ways in the electoral process. Firstly, societal barriers that make it extremely difficult for married women with children to participate in politics. Secondly, a hostile campaign environment, for example, women faced verbal abuse and gender-based defamation, making it extremely difficult to campaign fairly.

**COVID in Malawi**

In response to the first COVID-19 case, the government of Malawi responded by closing national borders and airports, reduction in the number of people on public
transportation, as well as restricting public and social gatherings. However, demonstrations broke out mostly by small business owners and marketeers, complaining that the lockdown would result in economic hardships for many Malawians leading to starvation in the country (Ferree et al., 2020).

On stigma, trust and integrity, Ferree et al. (2021) find that Malawians were more willing to test for COVID-19 when international health organizations such WHO conducted the test compared to public health clinics. This can be attribute to the lack of trust in public institutions. Additionally, the upcoming elections after nullifying the previous fraudulent elections possibly led to the reduced trust in government and this could have been extended to public clinics. Furthermore, Malawians were worried about their confidentiality and accuracy of tests in public clinics but that was not the case for WHO (Ferree et al., 2021).

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Case Study: Tunisia

Overview

Since the 2011 “Jasmine Revolution”, Tunisia has taken steps to consolidate its democracy (Arieff, 2018). Longtime President, Zine El Abidine Ben was ousted from power in January 2011 during various demonstrations due to corruption, high levels of unemployment, and other economic and social related challenges. The Arab Spring in Tunisia diffused to other countries in the MENA region (Freedom House, 2021; Bartal, 2020). However, Alizada et al., (2022) note that according to the 2021 World Democracy Report, Tunisia has now become an electoral autocracy. This is despite transitioning to democracy after the Arab Spring. Obstacles such as gender equality, corruption, security threats, economic challenges are hindering Tunisia from consolidating its democracy (Freedom House, 2021).

In 2021, protests broke out in Tunisia following the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the economy and health sectors. Emergency measures imposed by President Saied included lockdowns partially enforced by the army, indefinite suspension of parliament in violation of constitutional provisions, dismissal of Prime Minister Mechichi, repeal of lawmakers’ immunity, and ban of public demonstrations. Furthermore, the president announced a referendum on a revised constitution, the referendum will be held next month (July 2022). This is despite the oppositions’ request to not go ahead with it. (Alizada et al., 2022; Freedom House, 2021; Freedom House, 2022).
Democratic Trends

Electoral Integrity in Tunisia

The Independent High Authority for the Elections (ISIE), the new Electoral Management Body (EMB) was created in 2011 after the removal of authoritarian Zine El Abidine Ben. The ISIE was mandated with voter education campaigns in collaboration with Civil Society Educations with the aim of improving citizens’ knowledge on the electoral system and their voting rights (Zaghi, 2019). According to the Economist (2019), “ISIE has worked hard to sign up new voters. Almost everyone eligible is registered”. Freedom House states that since the creation of ISIE, international observers have regarded the elections generally well. The first local elections after the revolution were held in in 2018. There was inclusivity in the participation in these elections, electoral quotas included women, youth, and people living with disabilities. These under presented groups received 47%, 37% and 25% of seats respectively (Belschner, 2022).

Following the death of President Beji Caid Essebsi, Tunisia’s first democratically elected president from 2014 to 2019, presidential elections were held in October 2019. Saied run against opponent Nabil Karoui who was in prison during campaigns on money laundering and tax evasion charges, Saied was declared the winner of the elections with 73 per cent of the vote. According to international observers, the elections were credible (Freedom House, 2022). The election results were widely accepted in Tunisia including political parties and their candidates (MENA report, 2022). However, the 2019 elections were characterized by voter apathy with voter turnout of only 45 percent (Coeffey, 2019). Mansouri (2022), finds that voter apathy in the 2019 elections was a result of lack of political accountability particularly by young people which translated into a decrease in trust in political processes and its institutions, among other factors. Youth political participation has alarmingly declined since the revolution in 2011 (Macdonald and Waggoner, 2018).

Female Political Participation in Tunisia

According to Stateler (2018), Tunisia has successfully increased female political participation after the Arab Spring. Female representation in elections has increased and legislation protecting women’s’ rights has been passed (Freedom House, 2021). The government in Tunisia has made significant progress in pursuing gender equality reforms, in 2017, a law was enacted to counter gender-based violence (Arieff, 2018). Additionally, a law was passed in 2018 that aimed at improving election equity between men and women in Tunisia. for instance, women occupy 47 per cent of positions at local
council level following the 2018 local elections (Gabsi, 2022). The United Nations (2018) attributes the increase of female political participation at local level to a 2016 electoral law that “includes the principles of parity and alternation between men and women on candidate lists for all elections”. In addition to a high female representation at the local council, following the 2019 elections, fifty-four women held parliamentary seats and a woman requested to contest in the presidential elections (Freedom House, 2021).

However, women in Tunisia still face challenges in the political space. For example, a female opposition MP was physically abused by two MPs during a parliamentary plenary session. This was heavily condemned by civil society organizations such the National Associative Coalition for the Elimination of Violence, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, and the Tunisian Human Rights League (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Furthermore, lack of political awareness is a constraint to female political participation in Tunisia. Shalaby (2016) finds that women in Tunisia do not have the required levels of university-level education, income, and access to political information that would empower them with the knowledge and skills needed for “an equitable voice in politics”.

Political Violence in Tunisia

Despite Tunisia transitioning from autocracy to democracy after the Arab Spring, the revolution created extremely high expectations which were not met by the government (Macdonald and Waggoner, 2018). This has resulted into various socio-economic protests, in response to the continued protests, the government has developed strong security policies which empowers state security forces and contributes to political violence in Tunisia (Boukhars, 2017). According to the Human Rights Watch (2022), in 2021, state security forces continued to use extreme violence to stop such protests. For instance, in 2021, police officers used teargas to stop protests, attacked journalists, and arresting a 25-year-old student for opposing police repression in a Facebook post (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Tunisia’s legislative framework does not have laws that directly address political violence in social media (All Africa, 2021).

Additionally, Tunisia’s government like other governments used the pandemic as a pretext to increase violent measures against civilian demonstrations (Bank et al., 2022). The response to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions by the president exacerbated public frustration including political opponents which contributed to mass demonstrations, and in some cases turned out violent. Furthermore, troops were used
to curb violence, for example, troops were used in a clash among rival groups in parliament outside the legislature after the president announced some COVID-19 restrictions. The troops also stopped workers from having access to government buildings (BBC, 2021; Bank et al., 2022).

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Zimbabwe Case Study (Extended)

Case Study: Zimbabwe (2016-2022)

Overview

Zimbabwe gained its independence in 1980 and over the years turned into a one-party state under the rule of former president Robert Mugabe, who was in power from 1980 to 2017 after he resigned due to pressure from the military, citizens, and his own party the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) (Stiftung, 2022). President Emmerson Mnangagwa of ZANU-PF took over from Mugabe, making ZANU-PF dominate Zimbabwean elections since 1980 (Freedom House, 2022). There has been incremental improvements in Zimbabwe’s democracy since the election of Mnangagwa, however, elections do not meet international standards for democratic elections (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Additionally, corruption, weak rule of law, and media repression remain among Zimbabwe’s challenges (Freedom House, 2022).

Zimbabwe is one of the countries that used the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to expand power and repress the media and political opposition leaders. For example, in March 2017, in response to COVID-19, Mnangagwa declared a state of disaster which was prolonged. This declaration by the president contravened the law. During this period, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and association were violated. Resultantly, opposition leaders were charged for breaking lockdown regulations (Stiftung, 2022).

Democratic Trends

Electoral Integrity in Zimbabwe

Since 1980, Zimbabwe has held eleven general elections which have been contested by various parties, however, the ruling party ZANU-PF has had electoral domination since then (Muzondidya, 2022). Since the emergence of competitive elections in 2000, elections have been disputed by different stakeholders (Dziva et al., 2020). Gumbo (2020) argues that Zimbabwe’s past elections have been characterized by violence and fraud, which has created fear in voters to freely vote for preferred candidates without any intimidation from the ruling party. Gumbo further argues that voter education has
restricted and poorly funded, which undermines the credibility of elections as lack of voter education makes strategies such as electoral malpractices, intimidation and voter buying effective. Similarly, the ruling party has used other strategies such as voters’ roll manipulation, the voters’ roll was not updated until the 2018 elections. Prior to that, the electoral commission used an outdated voters’ roll that even included deceased people and people that left the country several years ago. Furthermore, to restrict campaign activities of political opponents, laws such as Law-and-Order Maintenance Act (LOMA), Political Order and Security Act (POSA) and Access to Information Protection and Privacy Act (AIPPA) have been used (Muzondidya, 2022)

Zimbabwe held its most recent general elections in July 2018, these were the first elections without Mugabe on the ballot who by then ruled for 37 years (Gumbo, 2020). Mugabe was ousted from power and his party ZANU-PF in November and resigned the presidency in 2017. Mnangagwa replaced Mugabe, therefore, Mnangagwa was the presidential candidate for ZANU-PF in the 2018 elections, 22 other parties participated with the main opposition leader Nelson Chamisa of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Mnangagwa received 50.8 percent of the vote, while Chamisa came in second with 44.3 percent (Magaisa, 2019). However, opposition leaders and international observers noted some electoral challenges such as difficult access to voter rolls, bias state media coverage (state-owned newspapers and broadcaster), Zimbabwe’s lack of effective and consistent communication strategy, denial of diaspora vote, intimidation of voters, and violence among other irregularities (Freedom House, 2019; Sithole, 2018). The opposition challenged the election results formally in court, but the case was dismissed by Zimbabwe’s Constitutional Court (Magaisa, 2019)

More recently, government has used COVID-19 to decrease the representation and influence of opposition leaders in parliament. The Electoral Management Body (EMB) unconstitutionally suspended by-elections due to COVID-19 measures such as lockdown (Stiftung, 2022)

Corruption in Zimbabwe

Endemic corruption remains a critical challenge in Zimbabwe (Freedom House, 2022). The constitution of Zimbabwe in 2000 was amended to provide for Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) which is responsible for combating corruption, theft, abuse of power and other malpractices related the public and private sector. However, the ACC has been faced with political interference, including threats from ministers and other high-profile individuals (Chilunjika, 2021). Nhlovu (2021) attributes the widespread of corruption
in Zimbabwe to weak institutions, lack of political will, lack of independent law enforcement and judicial institutions.

Until December 2017, corruption cases in Zimbabwe rarely receive media coverage, this is because these cases have involved political elites. For example, the case of a former minister of Local Government, Public Works and Urban Development who was accused of abuse of office by illegally awarding a tender to his own companies was not covered by any media. However, political corruption cases post Mugabe have been covered by the media. For instance, the arrest and conviction of the former minister of Energy and Power Development for abuse of office after awarding a tender to a company without going through the tender process (Ndlovu, 2021).

More recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were cases of the inflated contracts for COVID-19 relief supplies such as test kits and protective gear by government officials (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). Investigative journalists like Hopewell Chin’ono have reported and exposed government corruption around the procurement of COVID-19 supplies by government officials, which resulted in the arrest of the Minister of Health who was later released on bail (Stiftung, 2022).

Media Freedom in Zimbabwe

The constitution of Zimbabwe provides for freedoms of media. In June 2019 Mnangagwa signed into law the Freedom of Information Act to repeal the restrictive Access to Information of Privacy Act. However, the government continues to restrict media freedoms in many instances (U.S. Department of State, 2020). During the Mnangagwa administration violence against journalists has significantly declined compared to when Mugabe was in power who orchestrated the harassment of journalists and violation of their work premises (Tshabangu and Salawu, 2022). However, Media has remained undemocratic post Mugabe. Tshabangu and Salawu find that journalists were still concerned about the media space, as it is still repressive due to media violation and unconstitutional laws.

Additionally, The Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) reported that there were almost 50 violations against journalists and media workers in Zimbabwe in 2020. Self-censorship remains a challenge (Reporters Without Borders, 2021; Alfandika and Akpojivi, 2020; Stiftung, 2022). For example, in 2020, during anti-government protests, journalists like Hopewell Chin’ono were arrested and spent more than a month in prison. Additionally, self-censorship has been exacerbated by government’s attempt to control
information about COVID-19 (Freedom House, 2021; Reporters Without Borders, 2021). Furthermore, government has interfered in the relationship between journalists and their sources, as journalists are under state surveillance (Munoriyarwa and Chiambu, 2019). Increased state surveillance has resulted in arrests of journalists (Stiftung, 2022).

References


Freedom in the World — Zimbabwe Country Report, 2019

Freedom in the World — Zimbabwe Country Report, 2022


GEPT Regional Graphs

In the following section, we visualize the average change in GEPT indicators by region, organized by what the D-Arch team classified as the most relevant V-Dem indicators. This section of the report highlights the gap between the comparatively low-level GEPT indicators, and the much higher-level V-Dem indicators, demonstrating the need for collecting more mid-level indicators as CEPPS begins evaluating the impact of DEPP programming.

Electoral Democracy
Freedom of Expression
Charting GEPT Efforts Amid Populism: GEPT_P05_1

Average Regional Trends (2016-2021)

#public forums sponsored by USG-assistance where legislators and public interact


World Average  Eastern Europe and Central Asia
Latin America and the Caribbean  MENA
Sub-Saharan Africa  Western Europe and North America
Asia-Pacific
Charting GEPT Efforts Amid Polarization & Violence: GEPT_P03_1
Average Regional Trends (2016-2021)

#groups trained in conflict mediation or consensus-building skills with USG-assistance

- World Average
- Latin America and the Caribbean
- Sub-Saharan Africa
- Asia-Pacific
- Eastern Europe and Central Asia
- MENA
- Western Europe and North America
Charting GEPT Efforts Amid Polarization & Violence: GEPT_P03_2
Average Regional Trends (2016-2021)

#consensus building forums held with USG assistance

- World Average
- Latin America and the Caribbean
- Sub-Saharan Africa
- Asia-Pacific
- Eastern Europe and Central Asia
- MENA
- Western Europe and North America

Economic Inequality