

# Democratic Decline and Authoritarianization: New Wave of Authoritarianism

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**ABSTRACT:** In the first quarter of the 21st century, it is observed that democratic institutions were weakened in many countries and authoritarian tendencies gained strength. This study analyzes the dynamics of the “Wave of Authoritarianism” by addressing the phenomenon of democratic decline in a theoretical and empirical framework. In the article, unlike classical authoritarianism, current concepts such as competitive authoritarianism, elective authoritarianism and populist authoritarianism are given. In addition, authoritarianization practices such as restricting media freedom, damage to judicial independence, and suppression of civil society are elaborated. The analysis, supported by global democracy indices and case examples from different geographies, examines the threats and resistance mechanisms faced by democratic regimes. As a result, democratic decline weakens not only political institutions, but also democratic culture and social solidarity; This reveals the necessity of new strategies in the name of democracy.

**KEYWORDS:** Democratic decline, authoritarianization, competitive authoritarianism, populism, democracy indices, political institutions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

After the end of the Cold War, a strong belief in the “final victory of liberal democracy” became dominant in political theory and international relations (Fukuyama, 1992). However, the first quarter of the 21st century was the scene of developments that rapidly overshadowed this optimistic picture. Multidimensional crises such as increasing political polarization, economic inequality, spread of digital surveillance technologies, global migration movements and COVID-19 pandemic revealed the fragility of democratic regimes and strengthened authoritarian tendencies (Diamond, 2019; Runciman, 2018). According to Freedom House (2024) data, democratization worldwide has declined in the last decade; Political rights and civilian freedoms have experienced significant decreases in both authoritarian and so-called democratic regimes. The remarkable aspect of this process is the erosion of its contents despite the formal protection of democratic institutions. In the 21st century, threats to democracy are no longer through classical coups or the suspension of constitutions, but by means of instrumentalization of elections, neutralizing the independent judiciary, and the pressure of the media (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Bermeo, 2016). In this context, a new form of authority emerges: in these regimes, which are defined as “competitive authoritarianism” or “election authoritarianism”, it seems to continue the elections, but it systematically excludes the opposition by monopolizing the political field (Levitsky & Way, 2010). In this tendency combined with authoritarian populism, the charismatic leading figure undertakes the will of the people as the sole representative, instrumentalizes institutions and frames the opposition as “enemy of national will” (Mounk, 2018). This study conceptualizes the transformation as a “new wave of authoritarianism” and aims to analyze the effects of this tendency on political systems. The basic questions of the article are as follows:

What are the main driving forces of democratic decline?

How do new forms of authoritarianism differ from classical authoritarianism?

What kind of resistance capacity can democratic institutions develop against this wave?

In this context, the article structured, in the light of both theoretical and empirical data, deals with the threats faced by democratic regimes and aim to discuss the possibilities of democratic renewal.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, the concepts of democratic decline and authoritarianization are explained and how these processes are classified in the theoretical framework are discussed. Concepts are discussed in the context of both theoretical literature and current political developments. The democratic decline is the process of systematic weakening of democratic institutions and practices of a country over time (Bermeo, 2016). This process involves the erosion of existing democratic norms, not an explicit regime change.

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Democratic decline is characterized by the significant damage to the rule of law, freedom of expression and judicial independence even in elective regimes. Nancy Bermeo (2016) argues that democratic decline is no longer in classical forms (eg coups), but by more gradual and apparently legal means. For this reason, contemporary democracies face processes such as "creeping authoritarianism. The concept of competitive authoritarianism is a regime typology developed by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way. In these regimes, elections are made, there are opposition parties and media activities continue to a certain extent; However, the government has made systematic interventions in these areas and eliminates political competition to a great extent (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Competitive authoritarianism is not a transition phase in the direction of democratization, but a regime form that can be permanent on its own. In such regimes, power gains legitimacy by maintaining democratic institutions at a symbolic level, but de facto eliminates the function of these institutions. Populist authoritarianism is a regime form that emerges by weakening the corporate balance mechanisms by claiming that the leader directly represents the people. According to Yascha Mounk (2018), such leaders reject pluralism and frame the opposition as enemy elements that oppose the "national will .. This discourse paves an ideological basis for the functionalization of constitutional institutions. In populist authoritarian regimes, the political sphere is often shaped through charismatic leadership, media control and social polarization. Democracy maintains its formally, but has suffered a significant discharge in content (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). In order to determine the process of democratic decline, changes on political institutions should be taken into consideration. In the literature, this process is defined by the following indicators (Diamond, 2019; Freedom House, 2024):

Weakening of judicial independence

Restriction of Media Freedom

Narrowing of the field of activity of civil society

Degradation of equality and fairness in election systems

Replacement of constitutional and legal regulations in favor of execution

These indicators can be seen not only in authoritarian regimes, but also in liberal democratic systems; This shows that the process has become globally widespread.

### 3. THE DYNAMICS OF AUTHORITARIANIZATION: POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FLOOR

The new wave of authoritarianization should be considered not only an ideological or cultural transformation, but also as a corporate restructuring process. In this process, authoritarian leaders transform or neutralize institutions that form the basic poles of the democratic system according to their own interests. Below is the most prominent institutional manifestations of authoritarianization. The principle of the state of law is one of the most basic building blocks of democratic regimes. However, in the administrations with authoritarian tendencies, the principles of the state of law are seriously damaged and the balance between the legislative and executive powers is deteriorated. Authoritarian regimes strengthen the execution through constitutional amendments or extraordinary powers and remove the legislative and judicial bodies from the audit function (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This usually takes the form of the "the instrumentalization of law "(Rule By Law). In other words, law is used to legitimize the arbitrary practices of power; The principle of superiority of justice is replaced by political loyalty (Diamond, 2019). Thus, the executive puts pressure on legislative processes and at the same time neutralizes the balance-based mechanisms like the Constitutional Courts. Independent and critical media is vital to the fact that the democratic system fulfills the function of the public control. Authoritarian regimes tend to direct the public field by controlling the media field, suppress opposing sounds and block alternative information channels (Freedom House, 2024). Methods such as directing directly on the media, applying advertising and funding pressure, and intimidating journalists with criminal sanctions are frequently used. However, social media platforms have also become an important tool for power's digital propaganda strategies. The society is manipulated with disinformation campaigns, boots calculations and polarizing content; The perception of reality is systematically impaired (Tufekci, 2018). In this context, the media loses its function of public control and becomes a "routing tool". Thus, the development of a critical attitude of the public in the face of power is prevented and social consent is produced under pressure. The continuity of democratic regimes depends on the existence of independent and impartial judiciary. However, in the authoritarianization processes, the judiciary is under the influence of the executive; This leads to the fact that legal decisions are made according to political loyalty (Bermeo, 2016). In the process of appointment of judges, political proximity is taken as a basis instead of merit, thus the independence of the judiciary is actually eliminated. Although the election process is apparently protected, it is eroded as content. The deterioration of the competitive environment, the blocking of opposition candidates, the loss of the neutrality of the election boards and the unilateral publication in the media in favor of power causes basic doubts about the fairness of the elections (Levitsky & Way, 2010). The elections are reduced to "formality up and turned into a legitimacy tool. This is not only the election of democracy; The superiority of law reveals the fact that fair race and corporate audit mechanisms are at least as important as elections.

### **4. NEW WAVE OF AUTHORITARIANISM: GLOBAL AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS**

The democratic decline in the 21st century has ceased to be a phenomenon that can only be explained by the internal dynamics of individual states; It has become a systematic tendency that has become widespread on a global scale, showing regional variations. In this section, the global appearance of authoritarianization is handled at three levels: General trends through international democracy indices; Selected Regional Samples; And the increasingly legitimacy of authoritarian norms on a global scale. Various international reports published in recent years reveal that there have been serious decreases in democracy levels worldwide. For example, according to Freedom House's Freedom in the World 2024 report, global freedoms have been declining for 18 consecutive years. Only 20 %of the 195 countries examined in the report are in the "Full Free" category; Many countries are shifting to the category "partially free" or "not free" (Freedom House, 2024). Similarly, the 2024 report of V-Dem Varieties of Democracy (Varieties of Democracy) shows that the decline in the "Liberal Democracy Index" has gained momentum after 2010 and the number of authoritarian regimes in the world has passed democracy (V-Dem, 2024). In addition, it is stated in the 2023 Democracy Index of The Economist Intelligence Unit only 8 %of the world's population is governed by "full democracy ((EIU, 2023). These data reveal that the new wave of authoritarianism is not an individual deviation, but a systematic and structural transformation. Although the new wave of authoritarianism emerges with similar practices in different geographies, it also exhibits original appearances shaped by local dynamics. In Latin America, in countries such as Brazil and al Salvador, populist leadership styles, intervention of judicial independence and media control tendencies are exhibited (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Nayib Bukele's administration in El Salvador has gained elections with high public support, although it systematically weakened constitutional control. In Eastern Europe, especially Hungary and Poland examples are remarkable. Hungary, led by Viktor Orbán, put intensive pressure on the media, judiciary and academy with the discourse of "illiberal democracy"; This put the country into the "elective authoritarian regime" category in V-DEM's measurements (V-DEM, 2024). In Southeast Asia, the Filipins, Thailand and Myanmar are observed either open authoritarianization or hybrid regime forms. Rodrigo Duterte's harsh security policies, media censorship and judicial interventions in the Philippines offer a typical example of populist authoritarianization (TUSALEM, 2021). The Middle East, on the other hand, has long been dominated by authoritarian regimes, adding a different meaning to the new wave of authoritarianism. After the "Arab Spring", attempts to democratization except Tunisia failed, and in countries such as Egypt, military-civil authoritarianism gained strength again (Brownlee et al., 2015). Another dimension of the new wave of authoritarianism is not only the spread of such regimes, but also the legitimacy of the normative level. Now, leaders with authoritarian tendencies are not only in domestic politics, but also in the international arena, cooperates and constitute a "authoritarian solidarity ((Kendall-Taylor & Fondz, 2021). The efforts of large actors such as Russia and China to produce alternative norms in the international system limits the effect of Western -centered liberal democracy discourse. In addition, the use of social media for disinformation has turned into a vehicle that sabotages democratic processes from inside (Tufekci, 2018). Thus, democracy is suppressed not only from the inside, but also through external norms and global actors; Authoritarian practices are legitimized by discourses such as "national sovereignty", "stability" and "cultural originality".

### **5. POPULISM AND AUTHORITARIANIZATION: CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE**

It is possible to understand a significant portion of the authoritarianization processes in the 21st century through the phenomenon of populism. Populism; It can be effective in both democratic and authoritarian regimes as a set of political discourse that puts the will of the people at the center, progressing against the elite and often progressing to institutions through insecurity. In this section, the relationship between populism and democracy, the effect of charismatic leadership on democratic institutions and media-social media dynamics are discussed. Populism defends the principles such as folk domination and direct representation due to its nature. Although it seems to be a democratic demand in this respect, in practice, hostility towards pluralism, insecurity to institutions and violations of legal boundaries, threatens democracy (Mounk, 2018). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) define populism with the radical interpretation of democratic values ". Populist leaders abuse the will of the majority and frame constitutional restrictions as "elite conspiracy .. This may result in a violation of the rule of law and minority rights. Populism thus turns into a strategy that uses the legitimacy of democracy. Charismatic leadership assumes the function of the carrier of populism. These leaders discredit institutional structures by claiming that they are the only real representatives of the people. Weber's definition of charismatic authority is still valid in terms of explaining how this leadership conflicts with rational-yield authority (Weber, 1978). This form of leadership puts the concept of "national will önüne in front of constitutional institutions and pluralistic representation. Supervisory elements such as parliament, judiciary and media are shown as "guardianship institutions opposing national will" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Thus, a new political system is built in the constitutional order, which is legitimized but authoritarian as content. One of the most important tools of the new authoritarianism is digital technologies. Especially for social media, for populist leaders, it serves to directly access the voters and bypassing traditional media (Tufekci, 2018). Algorithms, echo rooms and polarizing content weaken the common knowledge of the society; Disinformation campaigns lead to disintegration of reality. In addition, social media turns into a propaganda tool that serves the criminalization of the opposition, the manipulation of social fears and the reconstruction of political legitimacy (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). The permeability between the commercial interests of state -supported digital

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trolls, bots and social media platforms and political manipulations makes the impact of these channels on the democratic system even more problematic.

### **6. RESISTANCE AND DURABILITY: DEFENSE OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS**

In the contemporary political environment in which authoritarianization tendencies increase, democratic values have not completely disappeared; On the contrary, resistance continues in certain institutional and social areas. In this context, the “resistance” dimension of democratic regimes as well as “decline” is important. Resistance is not only a protest actions; The struggle of institutions and civilian actors from the system is one of the basic elements that determine the future of democracy. Civil society is one of the most dynamic and pluralist resistance to authoritarianization. Associations, foundations, citizen initiatives, trade unions and protest movements both make rights violations visible and produce alternative public spaces against the monopolizing discourses of power (Diamond, 1999). In order for civil society to be effective, it is important to act in cooperation with independent media and digital networks. Especially youth movements, women's organizations and environmental -oriented structures have been able to organize mass reactions to authoritarianization in many countries in recent years (Tufekci, 2018). However, many authoritarian regimes are trying to limit this effect by marginalizing civil society with discourses such as “foreign agent” and “enemy of the state”. Corporate resistance has critical importance especially in fields such as judiciary, universities and media. If these institutions can show the will of the regime within the constitutional boundaries despite the pressures of the regime, the ground of legitimacy of authoritarianization can be weakened (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). In particular, the Constitutional Courts and the high judicial bodies may constitute a balancing force against the interventions of the government when they take responsibility for protecting the rule of law. Similarly, the Academy contributes to the maintenance of public mind by maintaining critical information production. The media contributes to the supervision of authoritarian tendencies by defending the right to inform the public. However, these institutions are tried to be neutralized by political pressure, resource deduction, staff liquidations and criminalization; Therefore, the sustainability of institutional resistance is often limited. International institutions such as the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) are trying to develop monitoring and sanction mechanisms against democratic decline. In particular, the EU encourages democratic principles such as the rule of law, media freedom and judicial independence through its membership criteria and fund mechanisms (Sedelmeier, 2014). However, the impact of these institutions is limited for various reasons:

The decision -making processes of international institutions are often open to slow and political bargaining.

The binding of sanctions is weak; Authoritarian regimes often suggest the discourse of “sovereignty” against these pressures.

With the change of global power balances, authoritarian actors such as China and Russia produce alternative norms and offer support to the regimes under pressure (Kendall-Taylor & Fondz, 2021).

Therefore, the impact of international institutions on the protection of democratic values depends largely on the existence and durability of local resistance elements.

### **7. ECONOMIC INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL BASE OF AUTHORITARIANISM**

Although the rise of authoritarian regimes is often explained by the weakening of political institutions, the decisive role of economic dynamics in the finding of these tendencies cannot be ignored. Income inequality, insecurity, social exclusion and economic crises pave the way for the public to turn to authoritarian alternatives by eroding the confidence of the current democratic structure. In this context, it is seen that authoritarianism is not only formed as a result of the reactions from the base, not only a power engineering down the hill. Neoliberal policies, which have become widespread worldwide since the 1980s, resulted in the withdrawal of the state from the economic sphere, the privatization of public services and the weakening of job security. This process created great injustices in the income distribution and strengthened anti -system feelings between the lower and middle class (Piketty, 2014). Social discontent caused by neoliberal economic crises has often responded not with the demands of left-based social justice, but by strong leadership and nationalist-populist discourses. Authoritarian leaders have succeeded in establishing this crisis into a story of "domestic and national" economic resurrection and establishing both economic and ideological hegemony (Rodrik, 2018). Although the middle class is seen as the carrier of historically democratization, it is observed that this class is directed to populist and authoritarian leaders in environments where economic insecurity becomes widespread. A wide populist voter mass is formed when it is combined with economic concerns such as anti -globalization reactions, immigrant hostility and cultural protectionism (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). These voters prefer charismatic leaders who offer rapid and accurate solutions to problems instead of complex institutional processes; Thus, it supports implicitly supporting democratic processes. This facilitates the transformation of authoritarian leadership into a "demanded" regime form, not only "imposed". Many authoritarian regimes keep economic fragility under control with social assistance programs. These aids serve not only to alleviate poverty, but also to establish loyalty relationships (Lust, 2011). The selective distribution of state aid has become one of the most effective means of producing political commitment. In this context, authoritarian regimes distort the concept of modern welfare state; It institutionalize not the struggle

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against poverty, but to obedience to the dependence relations. This situation increases the social legitimacy of authoritarianism while damaging the principle of equal citizenship, one of the basic principles of democracy.

### **8. ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN THE FACE OF AUTHORITARIANIZATION**

In many countries where authoritarianization trends are increased at the national level, local governments have settled at the center of democratic resistance. Despite the repressive practices of the central power, municipalities and local government bodies play an important role in the protection of democratic memory by developing alternative management practices on the basis of participating democracy, transparency, social justice and human rights. Authoritarian regimes often strengthen central structures and draw decision-making processes from local to center. This restricts the field of movement of local governments and weakens political and financial autonomy. However, local governments of democratic principles carry out legal struggles against these restrictions and strive to protect participatory mechanisms (Goldsmith & Page, 2010). The preservation of local autonomy is critical for the multi-level functioning of democratic control mechanisms. The municipalities that come to work by election are more advantageous in preserving their legitimacy because they directly contact the daily lives of citizens. In many cities, despite the pressures of local governments, it has developed rights-based service models. Applications, which are exemplary in areas such as transparent and equal distribution of social assistance, support policies for women and immigrants, environmental sustainability and gender equality, show that democracy can be produced from local (Pierre, 2011). These efforts include not only service delivery, but also the practices that promote the active participation of citizens: neighborhood councils, public meetings, participatory budgeting and digital transparency platforms are important in this context. Participatory democracy is not limited to election; It aims to build a continuous and pluralistic political culture in which citizens directly participate in decision-making processes. One of the most important strategies developed by local governments against authoritarianization is to increase the capacity of social resistance with such participatory tools (Fung & Wright, 2003). Cities such as Barcelona, Porto Alegre, Warsaw, Seoul, Istanbul and Budapest around the world; In spite of authoritarian political climates, it presents examples of libertarian and pluralist local government. These examples reveal that democratization can be built not only from the "above", but "from top to top".

### **9. CONCLUSION**

The new wave of authoritarianization observed in the 21st century shows that democracy is not only structural but also in a normative crisis. However, this crisis does not mean that democracy is completely eliminated. Historical experiences reveal that democratic systems are from time to time, but can be rebuilt by resisting resistance. In this context, democratic renewal is both possible and encouraged by systematic strategies. From the history of democracy, democratization is not a linear progress; On the contrary, it is seen that there is a loop that is progressing through crises and reforms (Huntington, 1991). The transition from the authoritarian regimes (fascism, military dictatorships) in the 20th century to democratization has shown that even in moments of crisis, societies can re-adopt democratic orientation. Today's authoritarian wave can be read as a "withdrawal" phase following the third wave of the post-Cold War period. However, whether this wave will be permanent depends on how not only leaders but societies and institutions will react (Bermeo, 2016). Democracy is kept not only with institutional structures, but with political culture that legitimizes and internalizes these structures. The struggle against authoritarianization is possible as well as the consciousness of citizenship, pluralism and the education of democratic values as well as the constitutional, legal and election systems (Norris, 2011). It should be supported by priority reforms in areas such as the re-construction of political culture within the framework of democratic norms, especially educational policies, media literacy and youth participation. The inclusion of different segments of society in politics strengthens not only participation but also representation justice. Policies to be developed against the new wave of authoritarianism require a holistic approach both local and global. Some of the prominent suggestions in this framework below can be listed:

**Corporate Reforms:** Constitutional arrangements should be made that guarantees judicial independence, media pluralism and election justice.

**Strengthening of Civil Society:** Structures such as associations, trade unions and citizen initiatives should be supported financially and legally.

**Digital Democracy:** Freedom of expression should be preserved while combating disinformation on social media and digital media literacy should be spread.

**International Solidarity:** Institutions such as EU, UN, OSCE, consistent sanctions against regimes that harm democracy should be applied; It should also make actors that support democratic resistance more visible.

Although it is early to make an optimistic prediction of the future, the resistance capacity of societies, the institutional memory of institutions and the creativity of civilian actors constitute the most powerful defense lines against authoritarianism. Democracy is one of the rare regime types that can solve the crisis from within. Therefore, the solution should be sought again in democracy itself.

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