Inclusive Peace
setting change in motion

Opposition Political Parties in Authoritarian Contexts

Briefing note 1. Series Introduction

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Introduction

National elections are scheduled in over 60 countries this year, directly affecting nearly half of the global population. To a reader in the 1980s, this might have sounded like an almost utopian vision of a democratic future. Many of these elections, however, will feature little in the way of genuine political competition. The present "third" wave of autocracy has already reversed the democratic progress of the last thirty years (if assessed on a per capita basis). The emblematic regime of this third wave of autocracies is "electoral" or "competitive". These systems present the form of multiparty elections without the function (insofar as meaningful electoral accountability is fatally undermined by manipulation of the media, electoral process, judiciary, etc.).[1] Electoral autocracies are, today, the most common type of political regime, home to some 44% of the world's population in 2021, and are the fastest-growing regime type.[2] Several important democracies have moved into this category in recent years as electorally successful, but autocratically inclined. The politicians have closed the political space around themselves.[3] The compromised liberal institutions that characterise competitive autocracies help them to survive by releasing some of the pressure created by thwarted democratic aspirations.[4] However, these same liberal institutions also offer forms of real power not available in completely closed autocracies. It is, therefore, vital to understand how this power is pursued, attained, and resisted.

This series of policy briefs draws on Inclusive Peace's work with democratic opposition political actors and presents some of this analysis to a general audience.

Changes in the third wave of autocracy

The third wave of autocracies is one in which repression ebbs and flows. Two interrelated characteristics differentiate this current wave from previous eras of autocratic government. **First, democratic reversal is more likely to happen gradually**. Whereas, in previous eras, democratic reversals were typically sudden and drastic (e.g. a military coup followed by a repressive closed autocracy), democratic reversals in the third wave of autocracy were more likely to take place incrementally. This is captured in the gradualist language of "backsliding", which has become increasingly central to the way scholars think about democracy and its alternatives. In 2024, only three countries having elections are in the process of democratisation – the rest are stable or declining.[5] **Second, the "face" of repressive government is increasingly disguised behind a host of laws, tactics, and structural features of political competition (e.g. media ownership) that limit political competition in practice**, even as de jure competition is permitted.

1   Diamond, 2002; Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2002, 2013

2   V-DEM state of the world regimes 2022 article

3   Electoral autocracies can also emerge when closed autocracies liberalise. Most of the increase in this category of regime, however, has come from backsliding democracies.

4   Bruno de Mesquita book on coalitions

5   V-DEM Democracy Report 2024

Inclusive Peace and democratic opposition actors

Inclusive Peace works with democratic opposition political actors to respond to the challenges of political action in closed and closing autocracies. Political actors include parties (voluntary organisations, unified by shared political goals, that aspire to govern through the institutions of the state) and movements (collective efforts to achieve political goals through non-violent means). Democratic opposition actors are non-violent and committed to liberalising the political system, alongside other goals. Repressive political systems often feature these types of "big tent" pro-democracy coalitions, where diverse parties and movements put aside some of their differences to coalesce around a minimal goal of pushing for a democratic system.

Our approach is to "think with" our partners in confronting these challenges – recognizing that resisting and contesting state power from a position of weakness is a profoundly difficult task, and one for which there are not likely to be any easy answers. In contrast, other democracy assistance actors generally consider "strategies" to be discrete project-type interventions like:

- Promoting parties' ideological development, encouraging issue-based platforms.

- Facilitating codes of conduct for different stakeholders (e.g., to refrain from political violence, to avoid misinformation, to accept election outcomes).

- Developing and advocating for fairer and more inclusive legal frameworks.

In our experience, these technical or incrementalist strategies correspond less to how opposition political parties think about political change, and more to the types of activities donors are able and willing to fund (this is not to say they are irrelevant or ineffectual, just that there is clearly an appetite to engage in broader strategic thinking.) Part of our work involves preparing comparative and thematic analyses on the specific issues our partners confront: those of survival, growth, consolidation and confrontation in repressive political environments. In particular, our recent work has focused on issues of opposition movement building (internal coherence and unity), strategies in anticipation of upcoming elections (including boycotts), negotiated/brokered transitions, and strategies of autocratic survival.

Assessing closed political environments

The instruments of the state are powerful weapons when turned to partisan ends. Political elites in liberal democracies (in theory) abide by a mutual agreement to refrain from using the advantages of incumbency to try to permanently exclude their rivals from power. This truce is often uneasy and is occasionally broken even in fairly robust democracies (e.g., the high-stakes partisanship over the composition

of the United States Supreme Court – a supposedly neutral institution). A successful authoritarian project very likely involves most or all of these measures. It is, however, important not to assume that evidence of one form of partisan co-optation of the state constitutes evidence of pervasive co-optation or total political closure. Even in highly restrictive political environments, there are usually pockets of independence in some of the above sectors (or others not mentioned).

Box 1. Methods available to state-holders* for closing political space

- Freedom of association and expression

- Restricting freedom of association and expression can be achieved by enacting heavy regulations and laws that impose certain registration requirements. States often effectively use new surveillance means to identify, intimidate, and control political opponents. Some repressive measures are gradually imposed to drive people out of public space or discourage them from continuing to work.

- Electoral process

- An impartial, effectively-managed, electoral process is perhaps the fundamental ingredient of liberal democracy. Compromising electoral processes can involve staffing election management bodies with loyalists, limiting eligibility for opponents or banning political parties, manipulating voter registration, vote-buying and intimidating voters before and during election day, selective law enforcement to target opposition members, etc.

- Judiciary

- Judicial institutions can be turned into partisan instruments to expand executive power and selectively enforce laws against political opposition. State-holders might pack courts to influence their decision to review the executive actions and hold authorities accountable (elected populist governments also use their political support to capture judiciary to undermine fair electoral processes, as in the cases of Venezuela, Thailand, Turkey).

- The media

- State-holders can compromise the media environment by allocating broadcast licenses to favourable publishers, prosecuting whistle-blowers and the journalists who support them, exchanging political favours for positive coverage (for instance, this is the substance of Benjamin Netanyahu's corruption trials #2000 and #4000).

- Public services

- State-holders can compromise the independence of the bureaucracy by conditioning hiring and promotion on political favour (e.g., through membership in a regime party).

- Security forces

- Security forces can exert partisan influence when they are compromised in the same manner as other parts of the public service (e.g. staffed or supervised by regime loyalists), when they enforce laws that restrict acts or protest or association, or when they selectively tolerate extrajudicial political violence.

* The terminology of "state holders" allows us to avoid the trap of claiming these are the types of dirty tricks only used by undemocratic regimes. As the examples show, they are common enough in democracies as well.

Boycotts

The obvious injustice of competing in a compromised election often leads opposition political parties to consider boycotting these processes. Boycotts aim to deprive authoritarian elections of legitimacy, to protect opposition candidates and supporters from the dangers of openly contesting state power, and to avoid wasting scarce resources on unwinnable campaigns. On the other hand, boycotts entail significant risks. Boycotts increase internal fragmentation or factionalism in parties. The decision to boycott is generally controversial, and introduces new tensions into a political party or coalition. This can be exacerbated by another effect of boycotts, which dramatically restrict constituency building for most political parties (discussed below). It is common for election boycotts to cover only some party representatives, with others choosing to run despite the boycott, including as independents. For the opposition as a whole, this can easily produce a worst-case scenario, where too many candidates participate to plausibly delegitimise the election process, but too few voters show up to meaningfully endorse these candidates.

Movement building

One major political change of the last few decades has been declining rates of political participation, including voter turnout at elections and the share of the population belonging to a political party. Accompanying this shift has been the transformation or replacement of mass political parties into (or by) so-called "professional parties", which swap the broad based membership of "mass parties"

for greater numbers of salaried staff and consultants, often alongside a more hierarchical approach to decision-making, and a greater emphasis on media and communications.

While this phenomenon is usually discussed in the context of consolidated democracies, it may also help to explain the shrinking of civil resistance movements in electoral autocracies (and those autocracies that allow political parties). Inclusive Peace's partners among opposition political parties in authoritarian systems are generally organised in forms resembling modern professional parties. They feature strong communications teams, relatively hierarchical leadership and decision-making, few or no members, limited relationships with other social institutions (churches, labour unions, professional associations, universities, etc.), and an emphasis on mass (media) communication over mobilisation through communities or by volunteers or members. These types of party-form have distinct advantages, but they also typically struggle to sustain mobilisation over the long term. In reaction to this, some of our partners in democratic opposition movements have responded to the weaknesses of professional parties by investing in building political movements.