

# When authoritarian leaders start feeling insecure, nobody wins

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*Some authoritarian regimes like Belarus and Zimbabwe enjoy a semblance of democracy, holding regular elections, but skew political life in favour of the incumbent. Occasionally these countries become more democratic. In other cases, writes **Jennifer Raymond Dresden**, they succumb to authoritarian backsliding – when the incumbent consolidates power. Between 1993 and 2004, this happened around six times a year. She looks at how, when and why these leaders take further steps to crush the opposition and media criticism.*



The late Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez and the president of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko meet at the Miraflores Palace in Caracas. Photo: [Hugo Chavez](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

The mood among democracy promoters in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere has been less than chipper lately. Even before hand-wringing over the current state of American electoral politics became a daily (or hourly) pursuit, academics and policy makers alike lamented the recent retreat of democracy around the globe. Observers have pointed to [the failure of the Arab Spring](#) to deliver on its hopes, the [restriction of political rights in sub-Saharan Africa](#), and even recent [events in Eastern Europe](#) to declare the world to be in a state of democratic reversal.

Much of the concern seems to be driven by developments in countries that have never been fully democratic to begin with. These “electoral authoritarian” regimes in countries such as Zimbabwe and Belarus have regular multiparty elections and other formal trappings of democracy. They also include features that tilt the playing field in favour of the incumbent, ensuring that he or she retains office by means that would be considered unacceptable in more established democracies. Political life in these countries is fundamentally ambiguous: journalists may be able to critique the government and opposition parties do win seats in the legislature, but the risk of a newspaper being shuttered or an opposition politician being jailed is omnipresent.

Sometimes, these regimes liberalise and become more democratic. Often, however, they take the opposite path and the space for political competition shrinks even further. In [research recently published](#) in *Democratization*, Marc Morjé Howard and I label this authoritarian backsliding. While concern over it has escalated in recent years, backsliding itself has been occurring since at least the early 1990s. Between 1993 and 2004 (the height of global democratic optimism and well before the current lamentations began), backsliding took place in an average of six

countries each year.

Authoritarian backsliding is a class of strategies for the concentration of incumbent political power that reduce electoral competition. Incumbents can engage in backsliding in a number of ways:

- Increased electoral manipulation. Incumbents might bar major opposition leaders from running, harass their supporters, or even falsify results.
- Restrictions on civil liberties. Incumbents may use tactics such as repressing critical media outlets or limiting rights of assembly.
- Increasing the unevenness of the electoral playing field. Incumbents may limit the opposition's access to the "fundamentals" of electoral politics such as state institutions, the media, or party finances.
- Reducing constraints on the executive. Incumbents might do away with term limits or carve out privileged protections from judicial review, for example.

An incumbent could undertake backsliding in all four areas simultaneously, but this is rare. Repression is both costly and precarious. It takes resources to quash opposition domestically and overt action runs a high risk of drawing international scrutiny and even sanction.

**Prior studies** have shown that many authoritarian leaders are pretty good at choosing the type of institutions that best fit their political needs to maintain stability. Similarly, we can think of most incumbents as generally engaging in just enough foul play to remain in office, but not more than they need.

So why do authoritarian leaders sometimes decide that they are willing to pay the costs of increased manipulation and engage in authoritarian backsliding? These leaders already enjoy a dominant position in their countries' politics, so from this perspective backsliding seems like an unnecessary expense. Is backsliding the result of incumbents who get too ambitious?

The short answer is probably "no." Looking at all electoral authoritarian regimes between 1990 and 2004, it appears that incumbents engage in authoritarian backsliding out of fear, not ambition. These leaders use backsliding as an attempted means to re-secure their political dominance when their prior methods of maintaining office are threatened. Backsliding occurs from a position of relative weakness.

Resource-dependent countries are a case in point. Authoritarian backsliding is less likely during periods of economic strength, when we might think that incumbents are best equipped to use the wealth derived from abundant natural resources to consolidate their hold on power. Instead, backsliding is much more likely to occur in resource-dependent countries that are experiencing economic crises. For countries that rely on natural resources for more than 25% of their GDP, the probability of authoritarian backsliding roughly triples when economic growth is negative, compared to when it is positive. This suggests that incumbents who have previously been able to rely on natural resource wealth will seek out other methods of power preservation when that revenue stream dries up. Knowing that they cannot simply buy the next election, they might crack down on political opponents or take steps to neutralise civil society.

Authoritarian leaders also engage in backsliding when faced with other challenges. Opposition parties that strengthen over time may also provoke a strong response from the incumbent if elections get too competitive. Faced with the prospect of losing office via defeat in future elections, incumbents sometimes take steps to tilt the political playing field even further. The likelihood of backsliding sees a 58% increase after elections in which the opposition improves its performance, compared to prior elections. In such cases, incumbents may try to regain their political advantage by rewriting electoral rules (as in Burkina Faso after 2002) or even engaging in outright coercion (as in Zimbabwe after 2000).

Opposition parties thus face a high-risk, high-reward scenario at election time under electoral authoritarianism. If

they perform well, as in Croatia and Serbia in 2000, they might actually succeed in defeating the incumbent, despite the uneven playing field. Yet if they fall just short of that goal, as in Mozambique in 1999, they face the very real prospect that the incumbent will take steps to tilt the playing field even further, ensuring that the next electoral battle is even more difficult. This raises the stakes and increases the risk of conflict and violence.

Despite all this, our research suggests that the latest wave of authoritarian backsliding has not been a total reversal: the institutions of democracy do still play an important role. Democracy as a system is intended to offer a way to challenge the incumbent leader and threaten him with legal, legitimate replacement. Leaders in electoral authoritarian systems have not been able to entirely eliminate this effect of formally democratic institutions. Even with their considerable advantages, they have had to face the very real possibility of losing office via the rules of their own game, whether because of economic problems or the emergence of an increasingly strong and organised opposition that proposes alternative ideas and plans for the country. This is the good news.

The bad news is that it is often not enough. Most of these challenges to the legitimacy of authoritarian leaders have failed to trigger the kinds of accountability mechanisms that would foster deeper democratisation. Instead of improving their performance or being more responsive to citizens to seek a renewed mandate, many incumbents have determined that they can better retain office by introducing new forms of manipulation. Unfortunately, this is a very difficult calculus to change and effective, broadly-applicable methods of preventing authoritarian backsliding have yet to emerge.

Democracy promoters may not be cheering up any time soon.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.*

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