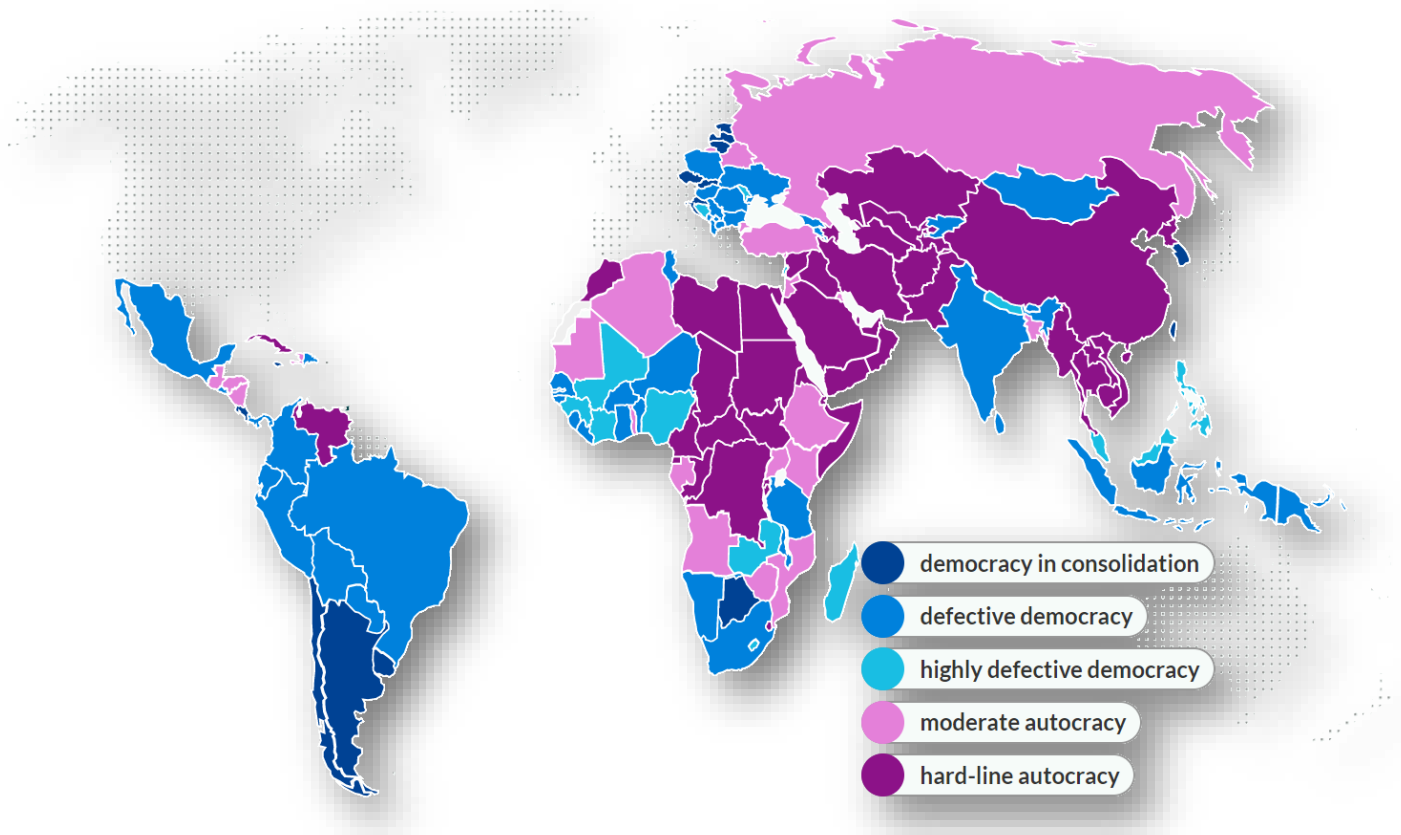


BTI 2020 | Resistance to democratic regression and authoritarian rule is growing

Global Findings Democracy

By Sabine Donner*

Overview of the status of political transformation in 137 countries



This global report analyzes the political transformation findings of the Transformation Index BTI 2020 in the review period from 1 February 2017 to 31 January 2019. For more information visit www.bti-project.org.

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Introduction

The state of political transformation as measured by the BTI has fallen to a new low, although the rate of decline has slowed somewhat in comparison with previous years. In order to secure their power and sustain systems of patronage and self-enrichment, a number of democratically elected governments are purposively undermining the oversight bodies designed to hold them accountable and oblige them to govern responsibly. Autocratic regimes are trying to tighten the thumbscrews further on opposition forces and the free media. Yet many governments are facing increasingly determined citizens and resilient institutions that are no longer willing to tolerate social inequality, mismanagement and corruption, and which are finding new strategies to keep up the pressure.

At first glance, BTI findings on political transformation trends for the review period from February 1, 2017, to January 31, 2019, give little cause for optimism. In nearly one out of five of the countries surveyed (24 of 129 countries), the overall political transformation score has declined by at least 0.25 points, while only one in ten governments has been able to achieve positive changes of the same magnitude. A total of 13 of the 18 indicators have seen their global average scores deteriorate over the last two years, with 11 reaching their lowest measured level since the BTI 2006. Since 2017, press freedom and the freedom of expression have been more severely curtailed in 36 countries, association and assembly rights limited further in 32, the separation of powers further undermined in 30, and civil rights subject to greater disregard in 19. Since 2010, the BTI has attested to an erosion in the substance of democracy precisely in those areas that make a democratic system meaningful by providing citizens the opportunity for fair participation in political life while also affording some measure of oversight over political power.

This finding is undoubtedly sobering, particularly when compared with the post-Cold War euphoria associated with the rapid increase in the number of democracies at the time. On the face of it, nothing fundamental has changed since this historic high point. In fact, the number of democracies (66) and autocracies (53) among all the countries that have been continuously assessed since the BTI 2006 has remained unchanged. Even the changes in regime type occurring between the beginning of 2017 and the beginning of 2019 nearly balance each other out, with three countries (Armenia, Lebanon and Malaysia) newly classified as democracies, and four countries (Guatemala, Honduras, Kenya and Turkey) crossing the threshold to autocracy. Yet a closer look reveals a series of accelerating trends that are halting the progress of democracy and threatening to bolster regressive tendencies. Indications of a democratic erosion first emerged in the BTI 2010 data. The review period for that edition (2008 – 2009) also marks the moment at which the first effects of the global economic and financial crisis were felt in several countries. The quality of democracy has continued to gradually decline in every subsequent edition of the BTI.

Growing threat from within

Three main characteristics can be used to sketch the last decade's trends in the area of political transformation. First, democracies face growing challenges from within. The purposeful undermining of democratic oversight bodies and the curtailment of political-participation rights by democratically elected governments ("democratic backsliding") can be seen in a growing number of countries. Second, autocracies have evolved in recent years and adapted their survival strategies. And third, international developments, especially the growing assertiveness of influential countries such as China and Russia, have created conditions conducive to the spread of autocracy.

This expansion has not (yet) been reflected in a dramatically increased number of regime changes. In total, those have occurred over the last decade in only 28 of the 128 countries that have been continuously surveyed in the BTI. Of the remaining 100 countries, 55 have been continuously categorized as democracies since the BTI 2010, and 45 as autocracies. A comparative look at the developments in these 100 countries between the BTI 2010 and the BTI 2020 should help illustrate the characteristics identified above.

The erosion of democratic rules and norms by democratically elected officeholders in the 55 democracies has taken place increasingly gradually and has followed clear patterns. Up through the turn of the millennium, democratic experiments were often brought to an abrupt end by military-backed or other coups. However, over the course of the last decade, regime change has increasingly been instigated through a creeping autocratization. These processes have proceeded at different paces, and are not linear; thus, such trends need not lead to the collapse of a democratic regime. However, actions that undermine the rule of law and curtail political-participation rights are increasingly serving as early warning signs of an impending comprehensive erosion of democracy, and must be heeded.

The group of countries classified since the BTI 2010 as democracies includes states from every BTI region with the exception of the Middle East and North Africa. However, the largest share are found in East-Central and Southeast Europe (all 17 countries) and Latin America and the Caribbean (15 of 24), the survey's most democratically advanced regions. A more detailed analysis of the development of democracy in these countries provides two main findings. First, governments in 22 countries have significantly curtailed the rule of law and political participation in particular over the course of the last decade. It is primarily due to this fact that the average level of political transformation within these 55 democracies is about 0.29 points lower in the BTI 2020 than it was the BTI 2010 (BTI 2010: 7.72 – BTI 2020: 7.43). Second, the majority of democracies – that is, the remaining 33 countries – have to different degrees shown a certain resilience to this development. There are even examples of countries that have been able to reverse the trend after a phase of backsliding, at least for the moment.

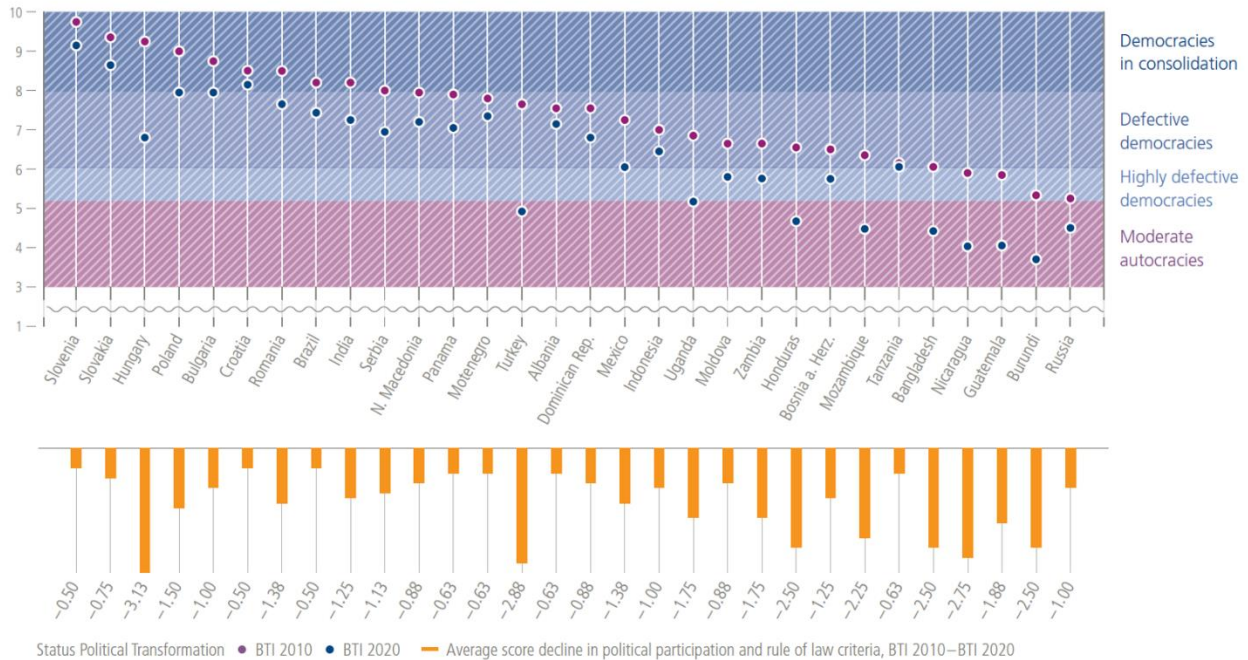
The approval of democracy, showing a deterioration of 0.79 points over the past ten years, has by far suffered the greatest decline of any indicator within the realm of political transformation. While this decline has served as a catalyst for the increasing disregard for democratic norms and processes evident in many states, the indicator itself has in turn been further negatively affected by these same developments. In 31 of the 55 countries, citizens are less convinced of the value of democracy than

was the case ten years previously. To be sure, the average score of 7.09 points on a 10-point scale does not indicate a fundamental rejection. However, the level of skepticism has never been this high. The nuanced analysis of the BTI country experts indicates that in the overwhelming bulk of countries, most people remain convinced that democracy is preferable to all other forms of government. The eroding support for democracy can instead be attributed primarily to a dissatisfaction with how democracy is functioning in each country. At the same time, trust in democratic institutions such as parliaments, governments and the media has fallen to a new low. In some Latin American countries, the degree to which autocratic alternatives are clearly rejected has diminished significantly. Strong declines in the scores assessing approval of democracy, though at different levels, can be seen in countries such as Brazil (-3), Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Panama (each -2). Significant declines are also evident in East-Central and Southeast Europe, particularly in Slovenia (-3), Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia (each -2).

As varied as the reasons for this declining trust may be in the individual countries, the primary criticisms leveled against established political elites are similar in nearly all of the world's regions. Elites are corrupt, these critics say, and are significantly more interested in securing power and status than in improving the general public's living standards or in addressing acute social injustices. Numerous cases of corruption at the highest political level – ranging from the Odebrecht scandal in Latin America to the misappropriation of EU funds and growing influence of oligarchs in East-Central and Southeast Europe – attest to the fact that this is more than simply perception. While the exposure of such cases is certainly also a consequence of greater transparency and improved anti-corruption efforts, consistent legal responses all too often remain lacking. Indeed, effective prosecution of office abuse takes place in just 10 of the 55 countries, according to the BTI. This dissatisfaction with governments' problem-solving abilities and responsiveness has in many countries strengthened parties and brought new governments to power that promote an anti-establishment agenda. Characterized in some cases by nationalist-populist slogans and a polarizing style of governance, they purport to be committed to the fight against the "corrupt elites." With their majoritarian logic, they regard institutionally embedded oversight mechanisms as interferences, and curtail participation rights, believing that all who are not for them must be against them. With a markedly different logic, but a similar effect, governments elsewhere are seeking to cling to power, seeing their populations' growing discontent as a threat to their long-standing corrupt regimes.

Looking at instances in which criterion scores for the rule of law and political participation deteriorated by at least 0.50 points between the BTI 2010 and the BTI 2020, a number of countries can be identified whose governments have actively engaged in dismantling democracy. This group includes 22 countries drawn from every region of the world. However, there are considerable differences with regard to the beginning, the end point and the extent of this democratic backsliding. Since this phenomenon is marked not by an abrupt collapse, but rather a deliberate but gradual erosion of democratic norms and processes, the frequent delay in reactions is understandable. Nevertheless, the patterns and tactics used in the efforts to dismantle democracy have proved increasingly similar across time periods and regions of the world. The preferences shown by the governments responsible for the erosion in democratic quality are also similar: They favor strong and forceful leadership, scorn established institutions, and distrust supposed experts and elites. Instead of featuring sudden, fundamental breaks, the dismantling of democracy takes place subtly and almost organically.

Figure 1: Backsliding democracies, BTI 2010 - BTI 2020



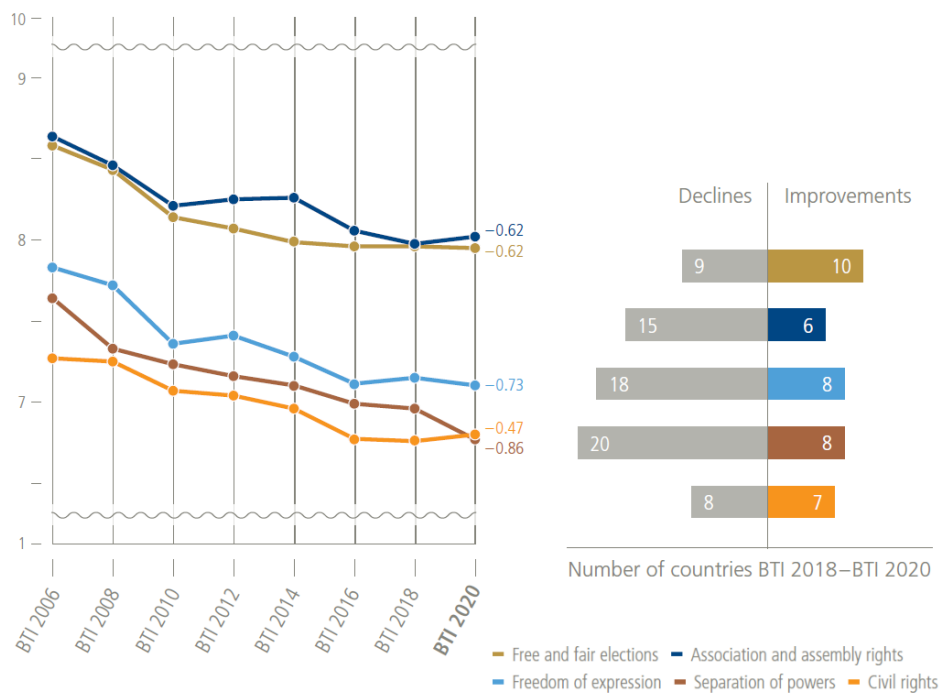
Patterns of democratic backsliding

Although individual steps may vary in terms of intensity and order, there is nevertheless a typical sequence to the populist-authoritarian deconstruction of democratic institutions. Especially in consolidated democracies, governments tend to focus their attentions swiftly on the purposeful undermining of oversight institutions intended to hold the government accountable. Over the course of the past decade, the average score for the separation of powers indicator has declined by 0.59 points within the democracies. This reflects a deterioration in the extent and quality of the checks and balances between the three branches of government in a total of 25 countries, most notably in Hungary (-5), followed by Poland, Romania, Serbia, Tanzania and Zambia (-3). In relatively advanced democracies, these institutionally already quite differentiated mechanisms are the first targets in large part because they hold the most potential power to arrest the authoritarian advance. If the parliament has a noteworthy organized opposition, it is paralyzed as swiftly as possible. For example, the Serbian government under former prime minister and current president Aleksandar Vučić crippled the legislative process with a flood of disciplinary measures, late changes to the agenda and the introduction of “urgent legislative measures.” These limited the time available for parliamentary debate and meant that the legislative initiatives introduced by the opposition were not even taken up. In addition, the governing party effectively blocked any discussion of bills submitted for vote by offering countless amendments to its own draft texts. The Polish government has followed a similar strategy. Numerous laws have been adopted in hectic and spontaneously called parliamentary debates, in some cases without the presence of opposition representatives. With regard to the politicization and limitation of the judiciary’s oversight role, the Hungarian government under Viktor Orbán served

as an initial model for Poland’s PiS government in terms of disempowering the Constitutional Court, appointing judges loyal to the party line, introducing mandatory retirement ages for serving judges, and thus the overall curtailment of judicial independence.

In most cases, governments have attacked media freedom while, at the same time, placing loyalists in oversight institutions and curtailing parliamentary effectiveness. Traditional media organizations are vilified and presented as “mouthpieces of the elite” that must be eliminated. Verbal attacks and threats against journalists have become commonplace (Philippines, Serbia). Governments on the one hand seek to gain control of their public messaging, and on the other to establish a monopoly on communicative power while minimizing criticism. Thus, media are muzzled with the help of restrictive laws (Poland, Tanzania), publications critical of the government are bought out by government-allied companies or simply shut down (Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia), and social media and online platforms are subjected to cyberattacks and periodically banned (Philippines). State-ordered shutdowns of social media or websites also become increasingly frequent.

Figure 2: Political rights and rule of law increasingly restricted in democracies



In a next step, the scope of activity allowed to civil society and for the exercise of civil rights is limited. This may take place through the imposition of excessive registration requirements or fees, the prohibition or harsh criticism of foreign support for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as in Hungary and India, or the creation of NGOs allied with the government and the politicization of regulatory authorities. In Poland, for example, the agency responsible for allocating public resources to civil society institutions, which was once independent of the government, has now been placed

under government oversight and staffed with government loyalists. Because most governments attach importance to ensuring that their actions meet at least formal legal requirements, Tanzanian President John Magufuli's decision after taking office in June 2016 to ban all political gatherings and public demonstrations until the next election can be characterized as relatively extreme. As a fourth step, once the government has de facto freed itself of accountability, and control has been established over the public sphere, the electoral system is often manipulated in favor of the incumbent. The means of doing so range from redrawing electoral districts and changing electoral and campaign-financing laws to restructuring election-oversight agencies and weakening the opposition's ability to act by reducing its access to the media. Finally, as a fifth step, an attempt is made to hinder any future resurgence of the opposition through the passage of new constitutional provisions.

Populist governments often seek to enshrine the so-called will of the people into the constitution itself – whether through the elevation of particular political goals to the constitutional level, the abolition of term limits or the fundamental restructuring of the political system with the aim of disempowering the “old elites.” Their strategies for concentrating and securing power are often given a normative justification. Such measures are ostensibly directed primarily against “enemies of the people,” so that the exertion of control over the media or the bans on demonstrations are said to be democratically legitimated at a higher level – that is, in fulfillment of the “true will of the people.” The concentration of power without any checks and balances or oversight is in turn supposed to enable the government to do its job as effectively and with as little interference as possible. Ultimately, such governments argue that they are not accumulating power in their own interest; rather, the effort serves as the comprehensive fulfillment of their electoral mandate, because the fight against the old system's corruption and mismanagement is not yet complete. This quasi-democratic legitimation of the erosion of democratic institutions has another effect: It also destroys the population's trust in democracy and its institutions, and further fuels the society's already significant political polarization. This in turn leads supporters of the government to accept the rollback of democratic rights and freedoms and the restriction on the efficacy of the separation of powers, because such measures reflect the deep divisions within society.

Despite the populist rhetoric, however, it can generally be observed – and in fact measured – that neither an increased concentration of power nor an anti-elite orientation contributes to fighting corruption more effectively, for example. The justifications expressed by Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán or the Polish government for their actions, namely that they are leading an ostensibly defensive struggle against the return of corrupt politicians who are still pulling strings of influence in the background, not only promotes the polarization of society, which then perpetuates the incumbents' power. In the course of this process, opposition forces and critics are branded as potential enemies of the state. Moreover, due to the erosion of oversight bodies' efficacy, the process also makes it more difficult to prosecute office abuse, or to secure transparency and accountability. A particularly striking example of how little rhetoric and reality have to do with each other was the attempt by the

Romanian government, virtually as its first action in office, to deprive the well-respected anti-corruption authority of its power, and to grant corrupt officeholders legal impunity or amnesty.

Resistance and resilience

However, the Romanian example also serves to illustrate that in many locations, the brazen undermining of democracy has not been tolerated without resistance. Between 2017 and 2019, the government's move led to the largest demonstrations in Romania since the overthrow of Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1989. Working in conjunction with President Klaus Iohannis, the demonstrators succeeded (following the end of the review period) in stopping the controversial judicial reform in a 2019 referendum called by the president. For their part, two Latin American countries have shown that the path of backsliding is just as reversible as that of progressive democratization. Under President Rafael Correa, Ecuador came alarmingly close to the threshold below which the creeping erosion of democratic rights and norms would have become extensive enough to force the country from its classification as a democracy. By contrast, and contrary to expectations, Correa's hand-picked successor President Lenín Moreno broke with his predecessor's course; soon after taking office, he removed the restrictions on the media, and restored presidential term limits in a constitutional referendum. However, the fact that consolidating democracy is an incremental and arduous process is evident both in Moreno's low approval rating, and in the occasionally violent protests that swept across the country in 2019 after the president sought to introduce gasoline-price hikes in order to fulfill International Monetary Fund loan conditions. To be sure, it is an encouraging signal that Moreno relented after striking an initially hard-line stance, ultimately coming to a negotiated solution with the demonstrators. But the events underscore how much effort will be necessary to bring the deeply polarized country to a course of political rapprochement that is able to overcome the now-dominant "friend or enemy" schema.

Columbia also saw a phase of democratic backsliding come to an end, although its events took place farther in the past, in 2010. In this case, the Constitutional Court ruled against then-President Uribe's plans to seek re-election in a referendum, a process that would have violated the term limits enshrined in the constitution. The top court ruled that the referendum could not be held. However, following a democratization push by Uribe's successor, Juan Manuel Santos, the future of the peace agreement negotiated during Santos' term in office is today uncertain. This is in large part because under new President Iván Duque, democratic consensus-building has once again suffered setbacks. In Poland and elsewhere as well, attempts to gradually roll back democratic achievements have been met with resistance. The Polish government has repeatedly run against the limits of its power and, as a result of popular protest, has been forced to withdraw planned legislative proposals.

The BTI's latest results mask another bit of good news, although this one comes with a warning. The remaining 33 countries of this group – that is, the majority – still evince comparatively well-consolidated democratic structures despite the era's challenges. Over the past ten years, some of the persistently highly rated countries, such as Chile, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Mauritius and Taiwan, have been able to further consolidate their democratic systems at a high level.

However, the fact that a high level of consolidation, once reached, can offer no guarantee against future threats to democratic institutions from within, is shown most clearly by the overall decline in the number of BTI democracies undergoing consolidation. Seven countries that had been categorized in this group in the BTI 2010 have since fallen to the level of defective democracies (Brazil, Bulgaria, Ghana, Hungary, India, Poland and Romania). With a deterioration of 2.45 points in the overall dimension of political transformation, Hungary shows the greatest loss of democratic substance of any democracy. Democracies today face the challenge of passing the “stress test” of political polarization and ethno-nationalist mobilization. Countering the internally driven erosion of the separation of powers due to increasing concentration of power in the executive, along with the gradual restriction of political-participation rights, demands a particular vigilance. This is especially true given that the early stages of such processes are all too often cloaked in a formal democratic legitimacy, while governments’ power-consolidating intentions are rarely openly communicated.

Given the already comparatively weak character of the rule of law in many countries, independent judicial and legislative institutions have shown a remarkable degree of resilience against attempts to undermine democratic norms and processes. Beyond such entities, citizen engagement has been the main force able to provide some counterpoise to this trend toward erosion. In this regard, the BTI reveals two particularly notable contrasting trends. While the representation of societal interests through traditional party systems has continued to weaken over the last decade in the 55 countries categorized continuously as democracies since the BTI 2010 (with the average score in this indicator falling from 6.53 in the BTI 2010 to 6.20 in the BTI 2020), the significance of interest groups as intermediaries between society and the political system has risen in the same period (with this average indicator score rising from 6.60 to 6.91). The spectrum of social movements, community organizations, unions and professional associations, as well as the interactions between them, has improved in 22 democracies and deteriorated in only seven. The record also remains slightly positive when considering the entire country sample of the 129 countries surveyed since the BTI 2010. It is striking that the BTI country reports stress the growing importance of interest groups operating in conjunction with traditional non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and political oppositions precisely in those states where there has been either civil society resistance to democratic regression, or where democratic openings have taken place. However, while progress in Armenia, Tunisia, Ukraine, and most recently in Sudan has come in large part through new forms of civil engagement, a systematic examination of the changes in global civil society and citizen engagement has yet to be undertaken. For, as the strengthening of Islamist activism in Turkey or the right-wing conservative activism in Brazil shows, increases in other forms of civil society engagement are not necessarily conducive to democracy.

Creeping autocratization

Three of the four countries that have crossed the threshold into autocracy in the BTI 2020 illustrate the consequences of gradual democratic backsliding. Guatemala, Honduras and Turkey each have phases of democratic erosion of differing length behind them. Each followed the pattern described above, in which the losses of democratic substance with regard to political-participation rights and

the rule of law ultimately became great enough that a regime change to autocracy took place. The erosion in Turkey began with the suppression of the Gezi protests in 2013. At that time, the country had climbed to 20th place on the BTI 2012 Democracy Index and was viewed as the model of a moderate Islamic democracy. Following the script sketched above, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pursued the erosion of democracy with as much determination as he had previously seemed to advocate the democratic opening of his country. Following the failed coup attempt in July 2016, the Turkish president unleashed a wave of purges that cost thousands of military officers and bureaucrats their jobs, while sweeping additionally into universities and colleges. Constraints on press freedom and the freedom of expression also escalated sharply. In 2017, there were more than 20,000 investigations and 6,000 prosecutions launched against journalists and citizens for insulting the president, and the number of imprisoned journalists is today one of the world's highest. Since the failed coup attempt in 2016, more than 150 media outlets have been forced to close, and nine of the top ten largest media companies are now allied with the AKP governing party. The concentration of power in the presidential palace, enhanced yet again in the course of the 2017 constitutional reform, has grown to such an extent that any separation of powers has largely been eliminated. It is certainly no coincidence that these developments have taken place in parallel with a deep economic crisis, and while the president and members of his close ruling circle have faced intensifying allegations of corruption.

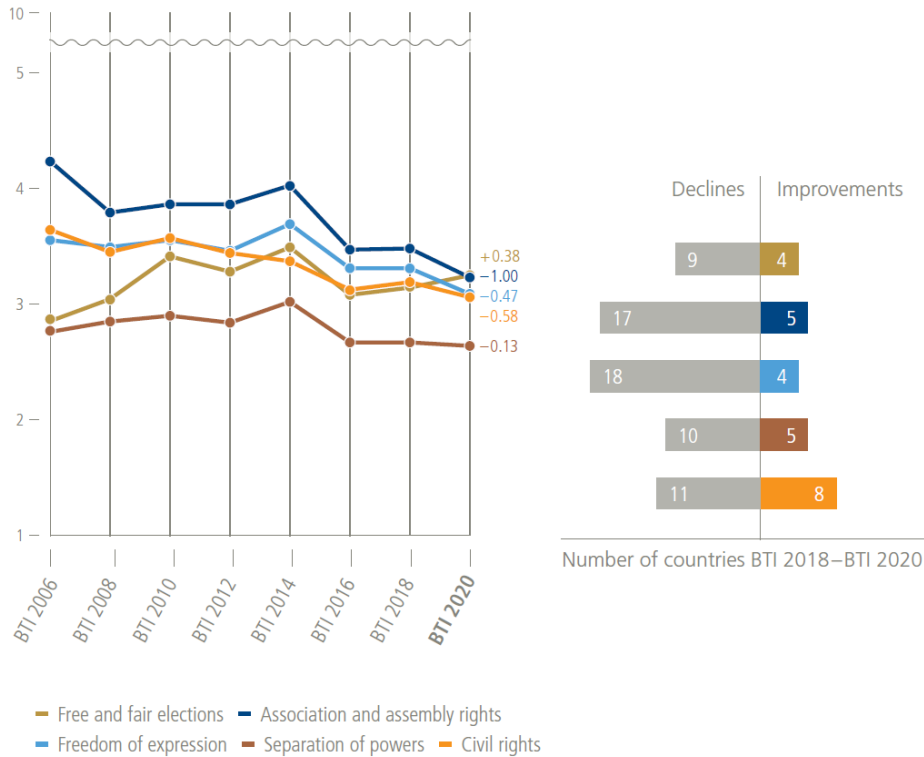
Honduras and Guatemala too have undergone periods of democratic regression that were already becoming evident in earlier BTI surveys. In the BTI 2020, Honduras crossed the threshold to autocracy due to the apparent manipulation of the 2017 presidential elections, as well as the near-total vitiation of the judicial system. This latter trend manifested recently in the complete disempowerment of the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity, an independent body that had been well-respected by the population. In Guatemala too, a nearly complete elimination of the separation of powers was triggered by what was in this case the UN-supported International Commission against Impunity, an independent body designed to support national institutions in investigating and prosecuting serious wrongdoing at the hands of illicit security forces and organized crime. While Kenya was also downgraded to the status of autocracy in the BTI 2020, it does not belong as clearly to the group of countries in which a creeping erosion of democracy was previously taking place. In the Kenyan case, the reclassification as autocracy was prompted solely by the controversial events surrounding the August 2017 presidential election. After the serious misconduct of the electoral commission and the shortcomings in the conduct of elections from which President Kenyatta allegedly emerged as the winner, the country's Supreme Court declared the polls invalid. The subsequent new elections were boycotted by the opposition candidate, because he did not regard the requested changes, which would have been necessary for a free and fair vote, as being adequately implemented. The ensuing clashes with security forces led to a long political crisis over the legitimacy of the president's electoral victory. These events do not make it possible to categorize Kenya as a democracy, a status, which requires a free and fair electoral regime. However, the Supreme Court's decision underscores what is actually a quite high level of functional independence and professionalism within the judiciary. Thus, hope persists that Kenya's slide will remain of short duration.

If the group of 55 democracies is expanded to include those countries that have undergone a regime change from democracy to autocracy since the BTI 2010 survey, and which have remained in this category since, we see five additional countries – Burundi and Russia (2014), and Bangladesh, Mozambique and Nicaragua (2018) – that have followed the pattern of a deliberate undermining of democratic institutions by incumbent governments.

The extent of autocratic hardening

Alongside the democracies showing a loss of institutional quality and the countries displaying prefatory democratic backsliding before being reclassified as autocracies in the period since the BTI 2010, there are 45 autocracies that have been classified in this category continuously. Many of these countries have also seen considerable changes over the course of the last decade. The survival strategies pursued by these governments have shifted significantly, especially in reaction to the color revolutions of the beginning of the 2000s in the states of the former Soviet Union, as well as to the Arab Spring and more recently to the Euromaidan events. Until about 2006 or 2007, there was a tendency to condone a certain amount of societal dissent and pluralism – from allowing opposition parties to tolerating moderate independent media and non-government organizations – thus, at least formally, giving something of the appearance of political liberalism. However, the sudden regime collapses in the post-Soviet and Arab world triggered a shock wave that brought on a rigid intensification of repression. As unsustainable as the transformation dynamics in many of the countries experiencing revolution may have been, the protest waves clearly signaled that rulers in apparently stable autocratic regimes could be driven from office overnight. Because protests against abuses of power and cronyism also swelled in their own societies, numerous regimes turned once again to significantly more repressive methods in order to inhibit open societal discourse. The focuses of this authoritarian hardening are reflected in the changes in score averages since the BTI 2010: The freedom of expression (-0.73), association and assembly rights (-0.69) and civil rights (-0.51) have all been increasingly restricted. Moreover, the already low average level of electoral quality (-0.42) has declined even further. The strongest setbacks have come in Yemen and Libya, both of which sank into civil war in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, as well as in the neighboring countries of Bahrain, Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia, where governments have been highly focused on stability and the maintenance of power. However, the Central Asian successor states to the Soviet Union have also experienced significant political setbacks, as has East Africa, which is currently burdened by ethnic conflict.

Figure 3: Growing repression in autocracies



The patterns are strikingly similar to the above-described strategies pursued by democratically elected populist-authoritarian regimes seeking to arm themselves against a loss of power. Arbitrary detentions of human-rights activists and journalists have increased in frequency, as have bans on demonstrations and laws restricting civic organizations. To legitimize these measures, such governments often point to the need to combat terrorism and the desire to prevent foreign interference. However, autocracies have also increasingly justified themselves by dissociating themselves from liberal (Western) norms, and through an explicit return to conservative values. Fully 78% of the 45 countries that have been persistently classified as autocracies since the BTI 2010 are now again deemed to be hard-line autocracies, with governments that are already suppressing their political oppositions and strongly restricting what freedoms remain. This autocratic hardening had already progressed far enough in the BTI 2016 that the scores have remained almost stable at the lowest level. One exception has been the further restrictions on the freedom of expression in numerous states (average of -0.16 points), which has been due to draconian restrictions on internet freedom and in some cases complete blocks on social-media activities. Thanks in no small part to the adoption of Chinese and Russian strategies, as well as technology transfers from these two countries, capacities and opportunities for digital repression are increasing in many autocratically governed nations.

Authoritarians' sham stability

The performance and legitimacy crises experienced by numerous democracies have played into the hands of populists and autocrats. With Western democracies preoccupied with their own issues, and the democratic heavyweight of the United States engaging in a gradual withdrawal from the arena of multilateral cooperation, other countries' fear that harsh crackdowns on their own populations might trigger international criticism has diminished. Thus, these governments' narratives seeking to legitimate their efforts to secure power no longer need to be as convincing; instead, they can successfully point to the failure of the Western model. However, many of the economic and societal challenges currently confronting democratically governed countries – from rising inequality and popular resentment over persistent corruption and misgovernment to the paucity of economic prospects – are also faced by autocracies.

In contrast to the incremental nature of the erosion of democratic quality, the window of opportunity for the removal of autocratic rule opens in a manner that to many observers seems unpredictable and sudden. Precisely because autocratic regimes have done a great deal in recent years to control the media and the public sphere and to prevent criticism, the supposedly spontaneous character of public protests lacking any obvious trigger is seen as surprising in systems perceived as closed. Given the debate over the “crisis of democracy,” itself fueled by autocratic regimes, it once appeared as though the argument regarding the most agile and most stable system had already been decided in favor of populist-authoritarian leaders.

However, even a first qualitative evaluation of the BTI reports for the years between 2010 and 2018 shows more than 60 mass protests in autocratically governed countries, more than half of which took place in hard-line autocracies. In Armenia, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Kyrgyzstan and Tunisia, these led to a regime change. In countries such as Zimbabwe and Ethiopia, the consequences included changes at the top of governments. This cursory glance is intended only to underline the fact that contrary to autocratic rhetoric, there are often signs of impending storm in non-democratically governed countries as well. Indeed, despite the often-repressive reactions by security forces and governments, mass protests are hardly a rarity. In addition, they more quickly take on a system-threatening character, because particularly in hard-line autocracies, there is generally a complete lack of opportunities and locations in which societal conflict can be transformed into a new consensus.

The supposed stability of autocratic regimes is also contradicted by the fact that in the last two years, the strongest positive changes have taken place in the most unlikely locations. This showed increasing momentum in 2019, after the end of this report's review period. Such shifts have occurred under regimes in which the balance of power seemed to be stable due to relentless repression, strict elite control and a population that was apparently indifferent to this situation – and in which it thus seemed unlikely that elites would be challenged.

Rays of light and counter-strategies

Two of the three countries that are newly categorized or reclassified as democracies in the BTI 2020 illustrate this trend. In Armenia, non-violent mass demonstrations forced the resignation of President Serzh Sargsyan, who had governed since 2008. He had tried to circumvent term limits using the Putin model, by moving from the presidency to the prime minister's office, and seeking there to keep the reins of power in hand. As in the case of Putin, who faced the biggest protests of his time in office following this gambit, the population resented this ruse. What was new about these protests, however, was a generation- and affiliation-spanning mobilization, with few obvious hierarchies. It was only after some time that a leading figure crystalized in the person of Nikol Pashinyan. Though he does not come from a traditional political background for Armenia, he was chosen as prime minister after Sargsyan's resignation and after new elections had resulted in a new parliamentary majority. The new government's swiftly implemented anti-corruption measures, along with the loosening of restrictions on the freedoms of expression and assembly, gave Armenia the largest gain (+1.98) in the overall political transformation dimension of the BTI 2020. However, the system's degree of encrustation cannot be underestimated. It thus remains to be seen whether the impetus for reform will persist after the early euphoria dissipates.

The review period's second regime change to democracy also came unexpectedly for all observers. In Malaysia, citizens voted out Prime Minister Najib Razak – who had been deeply disgraced by a corruption scandal – along with his political coalition, which had determined the country's fortunes without interruption for 40 years, since its independence. This took place under an electoral regime that was primarily aimed at keeping the incumbent in office. As in Armenia, however, this is only a first step. It remains to be seen whether the new government is serious about implementing far-reaching reforms, and whether it can overcome the enormous polarization between the political opponents.

New heads of government also came to power in Angola and Ethiopia; here, however, the transfer took place not through a regime change, but within the autocratic systems themselves. In the Angolan case, the president's unconstitutional extension of his term in office was prevented, while in Ethiopia, the monopolistic government party replaced the prime minister after three years of persistent protest. His successor quickly lifted the state of emergency, released thousands of political prisoners, made peace with previously hostile neighboring states, and granted the media greater scope for independent reporting.

In all these cases, it was elites in supposedly stable autocracies that were forced to accede to the demands of their populations by public, long-lasting protests. Other such unforeseeable moments also followed in 2019.

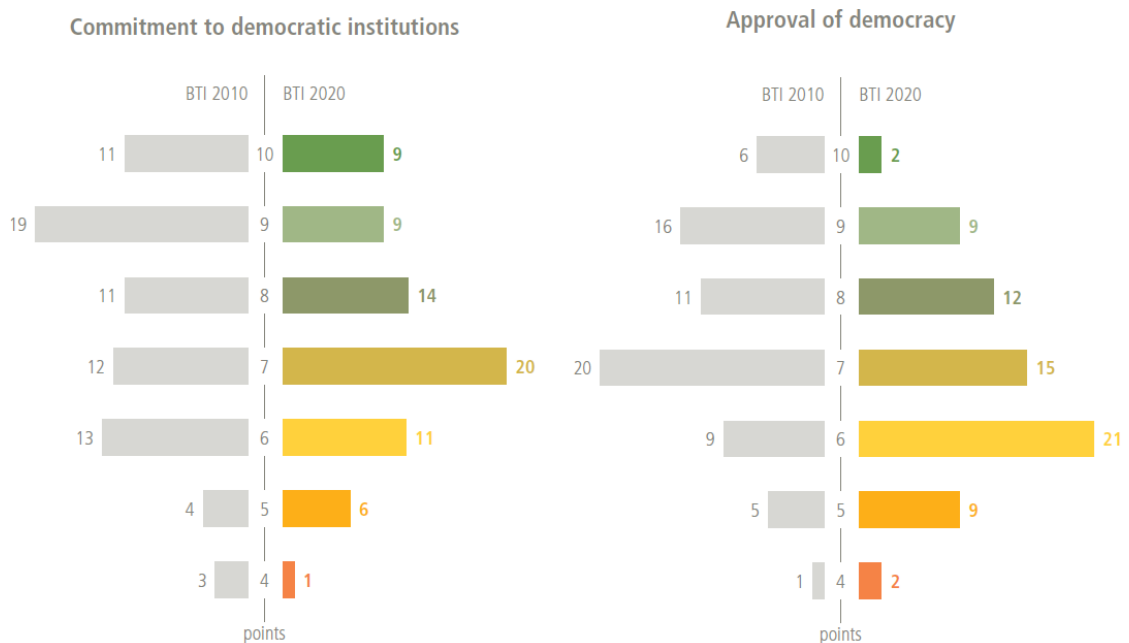
In Algeria, six months of mass protest forced President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to resign after announcing his intention to run for a fifth term in office. The protests continued even after the election of the military-backed President Abdelmadjid Tebboune. More than 60% of the country's population boycotted the vote, because they had more far-reaching demands.

In December 2018, mass protests sparked by economic difficulties erupted in Sudan, leading the following April to the ouster of President Omar al-Bashir after 30 years in power. There too, the violent demonstrations and deadly clashes persisted for several months more, until the military agreed in August to form a transitional government with the leaders of the protests.

The list could be continued with Hong Kong, Iran, Iraq or Russia. However, some caution remains necessary, since we have known at least since the Arab Spring how quickly and brutally a wave of protest of this kind can be repressed, and how conditions for the population can be left worse than before. The fact that many citizens have dared to take to the streets at all so soon after this experience shows considerable courage and underscores the depth of discontent with ruling elites even in supposedly stable autocracies. A new pattern is crystalizing that seems to be taking regimes by surprise, and which perhaps carries a lesson from the protests of the recent past: that the resignation of a president alone sends few people home from the streets.

At the same time, in many parts of the world that are democratically governed, the wave of anger against corruption and abuse of office has not abated. Brazil and the Czech Republic offer ample evidence of this fact. Nor have the demands for more economic and social justice become quieter, whether in Chile, Ecuador or Lebanon.

Figure 4: Two sides of one coin: Democratic institutions less accepted by those in power and less trusted by citizens



Number of democracies per scoring level in indicators “Commitment to democratic institutions” and “Approval of democracy”, BTI 2010 - BTI 2020.

It is notable that a whole series of protests are taking place against decisions made possible only by the weak oversight of democratic institutions, or which are seeking to hold governments accountable in the absence of other organs of accountability. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, they have been directed against corruption and cronyism, or against planned legislative changes that would further weaken the judiciary. In India, there have been massive protests against a citizenship reform driven by the governing Hindu-nationalist party, which would discriminate against the country's 200 million Muslims. In Indonesia, demonstrators have protested against the government's move to reduce the anti-corruption authority's power and implement a criminal-law reform that would impose draconian penalties for insulting the president.

We should be careful of engaging in excessive optimism; it is incremental change that brings about lasting transformations. At the same time, these events may also be an indication that the idea of democracy and fairness has not lost its appeal. No matter whether in autocracies or democracies, the growing sense among many citizens that an economic and political elite is increasingly committed to its own vested interests, and is increasingly less accountable to the people, will remain as long as the governments fail to react. Democracies at least make the claim to do so; they should try harder to live up to this claim.