

PRESS RELEASE

More Autocracies Worldwide – But Democratic Resistance Is Growing

Democracy continues to lose ground globally. This is the central finding of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index 2026. When the BTI was first published 20 years ago, democracies still outnumbered autocracies. Today, 56% of the 137 countries assessed are governed autocratically. Yet autocratic rule rarely translates into better governance. The BTI findings challenge the notion of authoritarian efficiency, showing that autocracies are more prone to corruption and less capable of effective, consensus-based policymaking than democracies. Cases such as Poland and Brazil demonstrate that societal resistance to authoritarian overreach, combined with reform-oriented political leadership, can reopen pathways toward democratic renewal.

Gütersloh, March 26, 2026. Autocracies are on the rise worldwide. A majority of the 137 countries assessed by the BTI – 77 in total – are now governed autocratically. Governments in these systems are increasingly repressive toward opposition forces, media and civil society. According to the BTI, 52 of the 77 autocracies qualify as hard-line regimes in which fundamental rights are comprehensively violated – the highest number recorded since the index was first launched in 2006. Autocratic tendencies are also gaining ground in several democracies. “Many elected governments have hollowed out core democratic institutions in order to secure their hold on power. This abuse of power paves the way toward autocracy,” says Sabine Donner, a democracy expert. The pressure of multiple crises, combined with the growing influence of autocratic actors, has accelerated this erosion. The decline is particularly visible in two areas: severe restrictions on political participation and the weakening of rule-of-law safeguards. The patterns identified by the BTI shape international debate far beyond the 137 countries it assesses – including in countries not covered by the study, such as the United States.

Core democratic institutions under pressure

The most pronounced setbacks concern freedom of the press, expression and assembly. The space for open public debate has rarely been narrower. Beyond defamation efforts and violence against demonstrators and journalists, governments increasingly rely on subtler instruments: restrictive anti-defamation or NGO laws carrying severe penalties, political interference in licensing decisions and preferential funding for pro-government media. Digital surveillance and internet shutdowns have likewise become standard tools for suppressing criticism and opposition.

Electoral integrity is also deteriorating. In 54% of the countries assessed, elections no longer meet minimum democratic standards. Military coups, such as those in Gabon and Niger, suspend elections altogether. Elsewhere – including Belarus, Russia and Rwanda – elections have become tightly controlled rituals of legitimation, with outcomes effectively

predetermined. In Georgia and Serbia, serious electoral manipulation led to their reclassification as autocracies in the BTI.

Yet a closer look at elections also shows that numerous free and fair contests resulted in peaceful transfers of power. In other cases, manipulated elections triggered mass protests, as in Madagascar, Tanzania and Venezuela. Although often violently suppressed, these protests frequently sustained political mobilization beyond the electoral moment. In Senegal, the Constitutional Council enforced the timely conduct of the presidential election against the incumbent's wishes. Brazil, Latvia and Taiwan strengthened electoral integrity through measures targeting disinformation and foreign interference. In Moldova, pro-European President and Reinhard Mohn Prize laureate Maia Sandu secured reelection despite extensive external influence efforts. In India and South Africa, long-dominant parties lost their absolute majorities.

At the same time, political power is becoming increasingly centralized. Independent oversight bodies are dismantled or staffed with loyalists, parliaments bypassed and judicial independence curtailed or subjected to political influence – including through the strategic appointment of aligned judges. In times of volatile crisis, public demand for stability and efficiency can increase receptiveness to rigid top-down governance.

Singapore is the exception, not the rule, among autocracies

Examples such as El Salvador, Serbia and Türkiye show that the promise of authoritarian efficiency is rarely fulfilled. In more than 100 of the countries assessed, corruption is inadequately addressed, and two-thirds of these are autocracies. Only eight of the 77 authoritarian regimes even reach the average level of resource efficiency achieved by democratic governments. “In authoritarian systems, loyalty must be rewarded and patronage secured,” notes BTI expert Hauke Hartmann. “The supposed efficiency of authoritarian regimes is a myth. Cases such as Singapore are the exception, not the rule.” Singapore is not representative of authoritarian performance; Nicaragua or Uganda are more typical examples. Autocracies also lag behind democracies in political steering capability, consensus-building and international cooperation.

Socioeconomic outcomes reflect similar divides. Poverty and inequality are severe in two-thirds of the autocracies surveyed by the BTI, compared with only one-quarter of democracies. Social exclusion is compounded by discrimination and the erosion of rights. In many autocratic systems, the fusion of political and economic power produces entrenched patronage networks. Free competition and secure property rights are in decline, and social inequality is becoming increasingly entrenched. Of the 52 countries classified as having unfree and unfair economic regimes, only three are democracies.

Democratic resistance remains robust

Persistent social grievances, weak public services and exploitative economic structures help explain why protest remains widespread even in autocratically governed states. Polling data ahead of elections in Hungary and mass demonstrations against the imprisonment of political opponents in Türkiye suggest that the once strong popularity of populists such as Viktor

Orbán and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is beginning to wane. In Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, protests opened space for democratic renewal. In Brazil and Poland, democratic reversals were halted, although their long-term success in polarized societies remains uncertain.

These cases point to growing democratic learning and the ability to protect institutions and seize reform opportunities. “The BTI once again highlights the pressure on democratic institutions worldwide – even as resistance to their erosion remains strikingly vibrant in many contexts,” says Daniela Schwarzer, Executive Board Member of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. “The mobilization capacity of active civil societies represents a central resource for democratic renewal.”

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Additional information:

Since 2006, the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Transformation Index (BTI) has analyzed and evaluated on a biennial basis the quality of democracy, economic performance and governance worldwide. The current sample includes 137 countries. Twenty-three OECD countries, including Germany and the United States, are currently not part of the assessment. The evaluation is based on more than 5,000 pages of detailed country reports prepared in cooperation with nearly 300 experts from leading universities and think tanks in over 120 countries. The current review period for this edition covers Feb. 1, 2023 to Jan. 31, 2025. The BTI is the only internationally comparative index that measures governance performance using its own primary data and provides a comprehensive analysis of political steering capacity in transformation processes.

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