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THE THIRD WAVE OF AUTOCRATISATION

Evidence from Türkiye, Tunisia, and Israel

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Abstract

This thesis examines the phenomenon of autocratisation, analysing its key drivers, mechanisms, and consequences across different political and institutional contexts. While the unprecedented number of elections in 2024 initially appeared to reaffirm democratic resilience, a closer examination reveals an ongoing third wave of autocratisation, characterized by democratic backsliding and the systematic erosion of institutional checks and balances. Challenging the assumptions of democratic inevitability, this study confirms that democracy is neither absolute nor irreversible; rather, it is increasingly fragile in the face of executive aggrandizement, weakened horizontal and vertical accountability, and the manipulation of electoral processes.

Through a comparative analysis of Türkiye, Tunisia, and Israel, this research highlights distinct yet interconnected patterns of autocratisation. In Türkiye, a gradual process has seen democracy hollowed out from within, as the ruling AKP entrenches its dominance through electoral manipulation, the suppression of opposition, and the voiding of the legislative and judicial branches. Tunisia, once celebrated as the lone democratic success of the Arab Spring, has undergone a rapid reversal, with President Saied dismantling democratic institutions through a self-coup and autocratic legalism. Israel, historically the MENA region's most stable democracy, exhibits signs of democratic erosion through executive overreach and attempts to weaken judicial independence. Despite differing historical and institutional contexts, these cases reveal common autocratic strategies, including the targeting of the judiciary, horizontal and vertical accountability, and electoral processes to consolidate power and use it without oversight, while maintaining a democratic façade.

This thesis contributes to the growing literature on democratic decline by offering a systematic framework for understanding modern autocratisation, which increasingly occurs through legal and procedural means rather than abrupt coups. It underscores the urgent need for institutional safeguards, strengthening democratic pillars of oversight and accountability, as well as civil society resilience. As democracy faces mounting internal and external pressures, this research calls for renewed scholarly and policy efforts to defend democratic integrity in an era of growing autocratic regression.

Introduction

The year 2024 has been a defining moment for global democracy, as more than 60 countries, representing nearly half of the world's population, headed to the polls, making it the largest election year in history. At first glance, this significant democratic event will profoundly impact billions of people and could be interpreted as the enduring strength of democratic norms and the consolidation of electoral processes worldwide. It might even lend support to the optimistic vision of the "third wave of democratisation" put forward by Samuel Huntington in 1991, which predicted a steady global expansion of democracy. It could also be acknowledged as the validation of Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis advanced in 1992, which saw western market-based liberal democracy as the ultimate ideological endpoint for human political evolution.

However, a closer examination of contemporary political trends paints a more complex and troubling picture, one that suggests that the democratic tide has not only stagnated but, in many instances, is now receding. Indeed, the spread of democratic regimes, democratisation processes, and the quality of democracies around the world have not proved to be absolute and irreversible. Indeed, over the past two decades, the democratic phenomenon has slowed, giving way to a "global crisis of democracy" (Diamond, 2019), leading to a resurgence of an ebb of autocratisation processes, in both democratic and autocratic regimes. Far from continuing the trajectory of democratisation that characterised the latter half of the 20th century, an increasing number of states, across a wide range of political, geographical, and economic contexts, have experienced democratic erosion. This process, commonly referred to as autocratisation, entails the gradual or abrupt erosion of democratic norms, institutions, and procedures. Unlike traditional military coups or abrupt regime collapses, modern autocratisation often occurs incrementally, through legal measures that progressively weaken checks and balances, suppress opposition, restrict civil liberties, and concentrate power in the executive. The incremental nature of this phenomenon makes it more difficult to detect and counteract, as autocratic tendencies often emerge under the guise of legal and democratic reforms, national security imperatives, or even the will of the majority.

Despite its significance, the study of autocratisation has historically received less academic attention than the processes of democratisation, regime transition, and democratic consolidation. Until recently, much of the scholarship in comparative politics focused on

understanding how democracies emerge, the conditions under which they stabilise, and the structural factors that facilitate their consolidation and endurance. However, the growing prevalence of democratic erosion, even in long-established and well-developed democracies, has necessitated a revaluation of these theoretical frameworks. The rapid spread of autocratisation has revealed critical gaps in existing research, particularly regarding the mechanisms that enable democratic erosion and the external and internal factors that drive it. This lack of clarity is further exacerbated by the proliferation of definitions and conceptual frameworks used to describe autocratisation, leading to inconsistencies and heterogeneity in both definitions and conceptualisations of different terms, variables, theories, and analyses across different studies.

This research seeks to address these gaps by developing a comprehensive and balanced theoretical framework for analysing autocratisation, in light of the current state of the art and literature in autocratisation studies. Specifically, the study aims to identify and categorise the key drivers and factors of autocratisation, including political, economic, institutional, and socio-cultural factors. Furthermore, the other main objective is to examine the modes through which autocratisation unfolds, contributing to both the decline in democratic agency and the acquisition of autocratic characteristics. Hence, particularly relevant is to compare autocratisation processes across different national contexts, identifying patterns and variations in democratic erosion based on regime type, institutional frameworks, historical legacies, and specific modes. Accordingly, the main questions to investigate such complex phenomenon relate to which main indicators signal a decline in democratic quality and the acquisition of autocratic characteristics, through which modes regimes transition towards more autocratic forms and what differences and similarities are shown by autocratisation processes across different national contexts.

This dissertation argues that autocratisation is not merely an incidental or isolated phenomenon, but a systematic and global process driven by both structural conditions and deliberate political agency. Through a comparative analysis of Türkiye, Tunisia, and Israel, this study demonstrates that autocratisation follows identifiable patterns, often facilitated by legal and institutional mechanisms that enable autocratisation under the guise of democratic procedures and legitimacy. The findings confirm broader trends observed in the third wave of autocratisation, illustrating how diverse political contexts exhibit common modes of autocratic regression. By identifying key drivers, mechanisms, and variations across cases, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how democracies erode and what strategies may counteract this process.

In particular, to ensure a robust empirical foundation, this dissertation employs a comparative case study methodology, focusing on three countries: Türkiye, Tunisia, and Israel. The selection of cases was guided by two key criteria.

First, all three countries belong to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which, as discussed in Chapter 1, remains the most autocratic region globally. Analysing cases from this region allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of autocratisation in a historically challenging political environment.

Second, the selected countries have all recently experienced or are still undergoing autocratisation, placing them within the framework of the third wave of autocratisation. However, their diverse political trajectories and institutional contexts make them particularly valuable for comparative analysis. Türkiye illustrates gradual autocratisation within a formally multiparty system, where democratic institutions have been systematically undermined while retaining an electoral façade. Tunisia represents a case of autocratic regression following an initial democratic transition, highlighting the fragility of democratic gains. Israel, on the other hand, provides insights into autocratising tendencies within a well-established democracy, demonstrating how autocratisation can emerge even in long-standing democratic systems.

This comparative approach allows for the identification of both shared patterns and unique pathways of autocratisation, offering a nuanced understanding of how democratic erosion unfolds across different political and institutional contexts. By examining countries with varying initial democratic conditions and degrees of autocratisation, the study sheds light on the broader implications of contemporary democratic decline.

To achieve the proposed objectives and to ensure a comprehensive and multidisciplinary analysis, the research, which combined qualitative and quantitative analysis, was based on literature able to provide a suitable theoretical and analytical framework. In particular, the fields of political science and comparative politics have been employed to analyse structural and institutional dynamics, while historical studies have been instrumental in tracing the evolution of key political and social processes. The integration of international politics and relations scholarship has further enriched the analysis by contextualising the case studies within broader geopolitical trends and transnational influence.

This interdisciplinary approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the subject, combining theoretical accuracy with empirical depth. The combination of these perspectives ensures a more holistic examination of the research question, facilitating a multi-faceted

interpretation that accounts for both macro-level systemic transformations and micro-level factors and actors.

The structure of this dissertation is designed to provide a clear and systematic analysis of the processes of autocratisation, combining theoretical foundations with empirical case studies. It is divided into three main chapters, each progressively building upon the previous one to develop a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

The introduction sets the stage by outlining the research question, objectives, and significance of the study. It provides an overview of the key themes explored and explains the methodological approach adopted for the analysis.

Chapter 1 establishes the conceptual framework necessary for understanding regime types and the processes of autocratisation. It begins by defining democratic and non-democratic regimes, drawing on political science literature to distinguish their core characteristics. The chapter then delves into regime change theories, focusing on the mechanisms and conditions that facilitate shifts from democracy to autocracy. Furthermore, it explores different methodologies for measuring democracy and autocracy, discussing key indices such as Freedom House, Polity IV/V, and the Varieties of Democracies Project. Lastly, it provides an assessment of the quantity and quality of democratic and autocratic regimes, highlighting trends in governance across different regions and periods.

Chapter 2 shifts focus to the third wave of autocratisation, examining its actors, drivers, and modes. It begins by laying out the conceptual foundations of autocratisation and then assesses whether the phenomenon is driven more by structural conditions or by political agency. The chapter identifies key autocratising actors, distinguishing between national and international agents that contribute to democratic erosion. A detailed analysis of autocratising practices and modes follows, covering authoritarian and illiberal strategies used to weaken democratic institutions. The chapter concludes by identifying broad trajectories and trends in the current third wave of autocratisation.

Chapter 3 presents a comparative analysis of autocratisation in Türkiye, Tunisia, and Israel, offering empirical case studies that illustrate the theoretical discussions from previous chapters. Each case is examined in depth, identifying the causes and modes of autocratisation specific to its political context. The chapter then conducts a comparative analysis to identify commonalities and differences in the patterns of democratic erosion across the three MENA cases.

Finally, the conclusion synthesises the findings of the dissertation, reflecting on the evidence emerging from the three empirical cases analysed. It then discusses the implications

of the current and ongoing wave of autocratisation for democratic governance at the global and local levels.

Chapter 1.
Conceptual framework and analysis of regime types

According to Easton's definition (1953), the three constitutive dimensions of every political system are:

a) The authority, meaning "the positions responsible for the governance" (Easton, 1965, 11);
b) The political community, meaning a group of individuals who identify with and consider themselves as an entity subject to the same authority;
c) The political regime, defined as a stable institutional framework (Vassallo, 2016) where the political community and the authority are connected through a structured system of relationships that defines the distribution of power among the various positions of the political system, the functioning of political processes, and the reference values of the political community (Capano et al, 2017).

The political regime is thus a crucial component of the political system, which links the authority and the political community. It comprehends the structures, rules, procedures, and, more broadly, the political institutions, along with their principles, values, and symbols, that shape and organise the competition for power or, alternatively, define the key positions within the political system and the processes for accessing them (Capano et al, 2017). In other words, it can be affirmed that a regime, entailed as an orderly and stable form of political organisation, can be described through three constitutive types of rules that ensure its functioning (Almond and Powell, 1966; 1978). Specifically, they concern:

a) The distribution (or, conversely, the concentration) of decision-making power among various institutions and actors (the "form of government" in the strict sense);
b) The limitation of governmental power through checks and balances between institutions (the "guarantee institutions") that safeguard mutual oversight;
c) The territorial distribution of decision-making authority, referring to the division of sovereign power between state, substate, and supra-state levels (the "form of state").

The first two types of rules pertain to the so-called "horizontal division" of powers (Finer, 1997), which refers to the distribution of functions among bodies or institutions that

hold sovereignty within a given political system, meaning the sovereign power to make binding decisions and enforce them. At an initial level of analysis, these rules primarily address the distribution of decision-making power among political elites. The third set of rules, on the other hand, relates to the "vertical division" of powers (ibid.), which determines whether institutional frameworks are more centralised or decentralised, depending on the demands that emerge from the territories.

In today's extensive literature on the topic, political regimes are broadly categorised into two macro-categories, which substantially differ according to the three constitutive rules mentioned above: democratic and non-democratic regimes. While a historical analysis of the origins and evolutions of both regime types would be valuable, this work's focus is on contemporary democratic and non-democratic regimes and the processes of autocratisation. Therefore, it is crucial to define in detail what differentiates democracy and autocracy. Given that the literature has predominantly focused on democracy, the discussion will begin with a theoretical and practical examination of the democratic ideal type, followed by an analysis of autocratic regimes.

1. Definition of Democratic Regimes

The word "democracy" is regarded as a straightforward term, easily tied to its literal meaning and Greek origin: *δῆμος*, "people" and *κρατία*, "power". At face value, the word translates directly to "power of the people", indicating that power belongs to the people. However, as Sartori stated, "this is nothing more than a word-word definition that renders in a known language the Greek meaning of the term. […]. What democracy *is* cannot be separated from what democracy *should be*. A democracy exists only insofar as its ideals and values bring it into being" (Sartori, 1987: 7) (emphasis in original).

Moreover, the concept of democracy as the power of the people appears to be reductive as the historical evolution of the notion of "democracy" has undergone a real mutation in society and politics and it is not possible to compare ancient and contemporary forms of democracy (Capano et al., 2017).

In the last decades, many authors have theorised what is and should be the contemporary democratic regime.

In Bobbio's view (1984), democracy is primarily a method: to properly understand democracy in contrast to autocratic governments, it must be seen as based on a set of core rules that determine who has the authority to make collective decisions and the procedures they must

follow. In a democratic system, decision-making power is granted to a large portion of the population. The central principle governing this process is majority rule, which means that decisions are considered collective, and thus binding for the entire group, when they have the support of at least a majority of those eligible to decide. Furthermore, it is essential that those involved in decision-making, or in electing decision-makers, are offered genuine alternatives and are able to make a meaningful choice between them.

Dahl (1971) expanded this theorisation by affirming that an ideal democracy that truly embodies the concept of "government by the people", is one where all individuals subject to collective decisions, and only those individuals, have an equal and effective opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. This rests on the assumption that each citizen's well-being deserves equal consideration and that every person is the best advocate for their own interests and preferences. For the decision-making process to be genuinely democratic, several key conditions must be met: almost all adults under collective decisions should be part of the *demos*, meaning they must be recognised as full citizens with complete political rights; every citizen should have an equal chance to express their preferences regarding which issues should be included on the agenda (i.e., those considered for collective decision-making) and to present arguments in favour of one solution over others; everyone must have access to full information about the possible outcomes of decisions; citizens' votes should have equal weight in the final decision; and citizens must maintain ultimate control over the agenda and any delegation of authority (so that even if power is handed to bureaucracies or independent bodies, they should always retain the ability to reclaim it).

However, Dahl remarks how such a situation is only ideal and almost impossible to replicate. For this reason, he introduced the concept of "polyarchy", which he maintains is the best socio-political approximation of the democratic ideal type (Dahl, 1971). In his view, the categorisation of regimes lies on their level of two essential dimensions: liberalisation and inclusiveness. Liberalisation, or the freedom to contest, pertains to how well a regime upholds the right for political opposition, public scrutiny, and open competition among individuals and major political groups. This process necessitates the acknowledgement and protection of personal freedoms and civil rights. As these rights are extended to increasingly larger portions of the population, the second process of inclusion or participation comes into play. This process involves broadening the segment of the population that is legally entitled to political rights, or "political citizenship" (ibid.).

By intersecting these two dimensions, Dahl identified a typology with four different types of regimes. The first type is the "closed hegemony", where both liberalisation and

inclusiveness are minimal. In such regimes, political power is concentrated in the hands of a small elite, and the general population has little to no involvement in the political process. Opposition and public criticism are severely restricted, creating a system where those in power remain unchallenged, with no meaningful avenues for political competition.

A second type is the inclusive hegemony, which, while broad in its participation, lacks meaningful liberalisation. Here, political rights may be extended to a large portion of the population, giving the appearance of inclusiveness. However, the lack of real opposition or contestation means that, despite the large number of participants, the regime remains dominated by a single ruling group or party that is rarely challenged. In contrast, competitive oligarchy represents a system with high levels of liberalisation but limited inclusiveness. In this regime, political opposition and competition are permitted, but participation is restricted to a small elite. Most of the population is excluded from the political process, leaving contestation to a narrow group of individuals. While this allows for competition and debate, it excludes broader public participation and leaves governance in the hands of a select few.

Finally, Dahl identifies polyarchy as the regime that combines both high liberalisation and high inclusiveness. In a polyarchy, the majority of the population is entitled to participate in the political process, and there is open competition for power among multiple political actors. This system is the closest approximation to democracy, where citizens have the right to both participate and contest political power, creating a balanced and representative governance model. Although polyarchy is not a perfect democracy, it represents a practical and achievable form of government that balances participation and competition (ibid.).

In other words, for Bobbio and Dahl, the core of democracy lies in the expansion of political participation, meaning the possibility for an increasing number of individuals to actively engage in collective decision-making, combined with the recognition and protection of political and civil rights. Democratisation, therefore, is not only about including more people in governance dynamics but also ensuring that these individuals effectively hold political rights (such as the right to vote) and other fundamental freedoms (such as freedom of expression, association, contestation, etc.). In this regard, the "liberal democracy" is the political regime that incorporates such characteristics, as it entails democratic decision-making and allocates and protects individual freedoms and rights.

This theorisation is also reflected and expanded in Rokkan's work (1970), which, from a historical perspective, identifies four thresholds necessary for the democratic transition and consolidation. The first threshold is legitimisation, where fundamental freedoms are formally recognised and protected. The second is incorporation, which refers to the expansion of political

citizenship, enabling more individuals to participate in the political process. Representation marks the third threshold, involving the broadening of the electoral and institutional system to include various political parties, thus reflecting the new social pluralism. Finally, the democratisation of executive power entails establishing rules that ensure a legitimate government is founded on an electoral principle, thus grounding political authority in the will of the electorate. The democratisation process can thus develop along three distinct paths. In some cases, it may prioritise the extension of civil and political rights first, creating the foundation for future participation; in others, it may focus on expanding political participation even without fully safeguarding rights; or, both dimensions may evolve simultaneously. Depending on which path is followed, more or less consolidated democratic regimes may emerge, where institutional guarantees may be weak or absent, as well as the material conditions (education, economic well-being, social equity) necessary to effectively support civil rights and freedoms. These incomplete democracies are more vulnerable to processes of de-democratisation or autocratisation, where the democratic process is gradually dismantled or compromised due to the lack of strong mechanisms to protect fundamental freedoms.

However, for other authors, such a vision of democracy, characterised by constant citizen participation and high levels of awareness on all collective issues, is a condition that cannot realistically be achieved due to limits on time, cognitive resources, and interest. Moreover, the classical view of democracy suggests that political representation arises from the grassroots, reflecting a popular will that is passed on to delegates responsible for gathering and formulating solutions that serve the common good. This perspective, however, assumes the existence of a well-defined and independent "popular will" one that exists before and apart from the ideas proposed by political parties or leaders. It also presupposes that the "common good" can be clearly identified through discussions among the representatives of the people. In this regard, Schumpeter critiques such an ideal form of democracy, highlighting the gap between the theoretical classical notion of democracy and how it can actually take form. In his view, governance inevitably falls to a relatively small, specialised group of people who are dedicated full-time to such responsibilities. While informed and engaged citizen groups may occasionally influence specific decisions, it is impossible for all citizens to be involved in every aspect. Therefore, democracy in any complex organisation, especially nation-states, is representative. This form of democracy allows for citizen participation but requires that power is ultimately concentrated in the hands of a small governing elite, whose competition for leadership represents the core of democracy. In fact, Schumpeter's elitist view of democracy shaped his procedural definition of democracy (1994: 269): "the democratic method is that institutional

arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote".

In Schumpeter's view, the free competition among parties and leaders vying for the public's mandate is not merely a formal requirement for democracy, but the actual mechanism that ensures the government remains representative. While competition is often imperfect, and politicians may try to outdo their opponents by making unrealistic promises or presenting distorted versions of reality, the presence of alternative candidates and the potential to be replaced by challengers compels them to take public opinion into account. This view is similar to another definition by Dahl, who assumed "that a key characteristic of a democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals". (Dahl, 1971: 1).

The theoretical shift from the classical model of democracy to the more realistic procedural models of Schumpeter and Dahl has had significant implications for how democratic governance is understood. Both authors highlight the limitations of public and large-scale engagement in democratic decision-making, emphasising the role of representative institutions and the inevitability of elite governance. In particular, both authors imply that the relationship between citizens and decision-makers is pivotal to distinguishing democratic regimes from non-democratic ones. Democracies are characterised by a biunique relationship in which citizens can vote through free, fair, and recurring elections their representative from a plurality of leaders and political groups who freely compete to win the support of voters and take on governing roles, remaining accountable and responsive to public preferences and opinion.

While we are far from the ideal model of democracy from which we began, we have moved closer to a procedural definition that is pragmatically applicable to differentiating democratic governments from non-democratic ones (Capano et al., 2017). However, procedural definitions of democracy, while capturing crucial aspects of democratic governance, are often deemed insufficient. They face criticism from those who argue that democratic regimes should not only focus on formal mechanisms but also uphold fundamental and substantial values, ideals, and principles. Some argue that it would be more appropriate to evaluate regimes based on the rights they protect, the values they defend, or the extent to which they promote the common good. Proponents of substantive theories of democracy contend that true democracy should ensure, inter alia, social justice, full employment, national integrity, and the moral conduct of the ruling class. However, this perspective assumes that there is a singular, objective vision of justice, values, or criteria for assessing governance. It overlooks the fact that these elements are inherently subject to differing opinions and conflicting interests. Liberal

democracies are built on the premise that no one can articulate a perfect vision of justice or what is universally good for everyone. Instead, the best outcomes for society arise from peaceful and regulated conflict between contrasting views of justice and competing interests.

Once again, it was Dahl who maintained how substantive theories of democracy lead to "the government of guardians" (Dahl, 1998), which legitimises autocratic regimes governed by a minority that claims to represent the general will or common interest. This was exemplified during the French Revolution when Robespierre used Rousseau's ideas to justify the Reign of Terror. Dahl warns that when substantive outcomes are prioritised over democratic procedures, it leads to anti-democratic justifications for authoritarianism. This notion underpinned Lenin's theory of the early 20th century, which positioned communist parties as the vanguard of the working class, claiming to embody a complete vision of justice. Such a doctrine, which rejects genuine competition between leaders and parties, was the foundation of Soviet-style "people's democracies" and remains in place in China today. The same logic can be seen in the Islamic Republic of Iran, established in 1979, where the theocratic framework allows for limited pluralism but prioritises a particular substantive vision of the common good over democratic procedures. In these regimes, certain candidates and political forces are excluded from elections, and not all decisions that could be made by majority rule are considered legitimate. In this regard, authors such as Zakaria (2003), highlight how the protection of freedoms and values are not inherently linked to democracy itself, and historically, the two have not always coincided, even in the Western world. Zakaria highlighted the current global trend, where democracy and freedom, once intertwined in the Western political system, are increasingly diverging. Zakaria maintains that "over the last half-century in the West, democracy and liberty have merged. But today the two strands of liberal democracy, interwoven in the Western political fabric, are coming apart across the globe. Democracy is flourishing; liberty is not" (Zakaria, 2003: 18). In other words, Zakaria posits that democracy does not necessarily lead to constitutional liberalism and that liberal democracy might thus just be one of several possible varieties of democracy. In particular, he uses the term "illiberal democracies" to describe regimes where elections are held, but civil liberties and checks on power are absent. Some authors refer to these systems as electoral democracies, highlighting that they meet the minimum definition of democracy but do not necessarily protect fundamental rights or impose meaningful limits on government authority. Such regimes will be the focus of the following section, where their characteristics will be discussed in detail.

It could be argued that even liberal democracies, like their "illiberal" counterparts, impose constraints, such as barring certain candidates and ideologies and imposing checks on

governmental power. However, such restrictions are designed to preserve the democratic process itself by safeguarding civil liberties, ensuring fair competition, and preventing the erosion of democratic guarantees (Dahl, 1998; Linz, 1978). In essence, as Dahl concludes (1998), democracy is a procedural system intricately woven with substantive goods.

The empirical definition of a democratic regime includes cornerstones such as:

a) the free competition among multiple leaders and political groups, all vying to gain the support of the electorate and take on governmental responsibilities;
b) the choice and replacement of those in power are determined through free, fair, and regularly held elections, where citizens cast their secret votes;
c) beyond the electoral process, essential civil liberties, crucial for maintaining genuine electoral competition, such as freedom of opinion, speech, information, and association, are safeguarded, ensuring that individuals can express dissent against the government;
d) the use of governmental power is restrained by a system of checks and balances, ensuring that it cannot be wielded to undermine political rights or civil freedoms, suppress opposition, or erode democratic protections, both written and customary constitutional norms limit governmental action, ensuring that even those in power are subject to the law, judicial independence is protected, and the military and judiciary remain neutral in the political arena (Dahl, 1971; Dahl, 1998; Linz, 1978).

In summary, while definitions of democracy vary, they consistently emphasise the importance of such features. These elements form the backbone of democratic systems, distinguishing them from other forms of governance, namely non-democratic regimes. The next section will delve into these forms of regimes, exploring how they differ fundamentally from democratic ideals.

2. Definition of Non-democratic regimes

In democratic regimes, the etymology suggests that the power belongs to and resides in the people, namely the citizens. In non-democratic regimes, citizens do not constitute the core of the legitimation of the regime around which the exercise of power revolves. Indeed, once again, the etymology of the word "autocracy" provides useful insights. The Greek word *αὐτοκράτεια* is composed by *αὐτός*, meaning oneself, alone, in other words, acting on one's own impulse, and *κρατία*, "power". In this regard, "autocracy" refers to a political regime highly concentrated, monistic, and thus inherently unrestricted. In its purest form, authority is vested

in a single individual, characterised by self-legitimation that requires no external validation, embodying the concept of self-power: the ruler derives the legitimisation and justification of their authority from themselves, from divine will, or other sources other than the popular (democratic) one (Tomini, 2024).

The classical theories on nondemocratic regimes, developed in the 1950s and 1960s, primarily focused on and discussed authoritarian and totalitarian regimes (Linz, 2000). However, these categories soon became outdated, even though they may still prove to be useful, as few regimes fully matched the totalitarian model, while the authoritarian category proved overly broad. To address this, Linz and Stepan (1996) expanded the typology by introducing "post-totalitarianism" and "sultanism" as additional categories. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this typological approach appears limited. The criteria for classification are debatable, and there has been little effort to apply the model consistently over time or across a wide variety of cases (Hadenius and Teorell, 2007).

A contemporary and more suitable classification of non-democratic regimes entails the identification of four main types: absolute monarchies, single-party regimes, military regimes, and limited multi-party regimes (Hadenius and Teorell, 2007; Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2014).

Each of these types constitutes an example of autocracy in that it contravenes one or more of the fundamental characteristics of the democratic regime. In particular, in absolute monarchies, power is transferred through inheritance, with power and authority being concentrated within a royal family whose legitimacy stems from ancestral traditions, often intertwined with religious beliefs, and from a claimed ownership over the entire territory. This is why Weber characterises these systems as "patrimonial regimes", that is a regime in which the flows of power come from and revolve around a patriarchal *oikos*. This kind of patrimonial "tends to arise whenever traditional domination develops an administration and a military force which are purely personal instruments of the master. […] Where the domain is mainly traditional, even if it is exercised by virtue of the personal autonomy of the sovereign, it will be called patrimonial authority" (Weber, 1978: 231-232). In other words, monarchies lack political participation and engagement of citizens (more correctly, subjects), political pluralism, institutional checks and balances, power separation, and elections. Also the freedoms and rights sides result negatively affected.

Single-party regimes are formed and upheld by organised political movements that gain control and formally eliminate pluralism by banning opposing parties. They derive support from an ideological foundation and, at least at the outset, enjoy a measure of public backing. This

type does not present, *inter alia*, political pluralism, institutional checks and balances, and free, fair, and competitive elections.

Military regimes generally are brought to power via a *coup d'état*. Therefore, the first democratic feature to be infringed is the electoral requisite. Indeed, they often justify their rule on technocratic grounds and their governance does not result impartial and does not present political pluralism, institutional checks and balances, the granting of freedoms and rights, and power separation.

The fourth type of autocracy is the limited multiparty regime. While these regimes allow elections with multiple parties, the process is typically neither free, fair, peaceful, nor genuinely competitive. As a result, the ruling party can suppress opposition and manipulate the results, thus substantially altering the democratic process.

It is worth noting that the four types outlined above represent "pure types", but many hybrid forms exist in practice. In some cases, the military seizes power under a specific ideological banner and assumes control of a political movement, while in others, both civilian political groups and military factions form part of the dominant coalition. Both pure and hybrid types can also evolve into personal dictatorships, where the coalition is bound less by party or military ties than by allegiance to a single leader. A common autocratic trend today is the emergence of autocratic and authoritarian-leaning leaders within democracies, which often drift toward corrupted types of democracy, which formally maintains its key features, but in practice assume autocratic traits.

This phenomenon has been described under various terms in the literature, with regimes of this kind referred to as "illiberal democracies", "electoral authoritarianisms/autocracies", "competitive authoritarianisms", "pseudo-democracies", "hybrid regimes", etc. While the terminology and each definition may differ slightly, they generally point to similar forms of governance where democratic structures exist in name but are undermined by authoritarian and illiberal practices, shifting towards the domain of autocracies.

Before proceeding, the author wants to clarify the conceptual distinction between "autocracy" and "authoritarian regime". While these terms are often used interchangeably in literature, an important distinction must be noted. "Autocracy" refers to a political system where legitimacy derives directly from the autocrat, impacting political pluralism, institutional independence, and governance structures. Conversely, one notable aspect in the study of authoritarianism is that it seldom begins with a precise definition of its central concept. Initially given substantial attention by Linz (1975), authoritarianism was defined as a residual category positioned between totalitarianism and democracy. Linz's influential work laid the foundation

for subsequent studies, often characterising authoritarianism as both a deficit of democracy and a broad, flexible category whose meaning depends heavily on its specific subtypes. While considerable research has focused on defining these subcategories, this has contributed little to the definition of authoritarianism as a standalone concept.

Another insight into the fundamental difference between democratic and authoritarian regimes relies on the concept of accountability, especially concerning elections. As Schmitter and Karl (1991) have argued, the core democratic principle is not merely the presence of elections but rather the accountability of rulers to the *demos*, the public. They define modern democracy as a system in which rulers are held accountable within the public sphere, primarily through the competition and cooperation of elected representatives. Later, Schmitter (2004) expanded this definition by removing the word "elected", thereby acknowledging informal types of representation as legitimate accountability mechanisms. Also, Linz's definition remarked the presence of a limited political pluralism which was not "responsible" (Linz, 1964: 255), another word for accountable to the public. By focusing on accountability rather than elections alone, it becomes possible to include elections as a commonly used, though not singular, indicator of accountability without conflating them with democracy itself. What has been highlighted is that rather than the absence of free and fair elections, authoritarianism is marked by an active effort to disrupt or sabotage accountability. This type of sabotage manifests itself through political practices rather than formal constitutional structures (Glasius, 2018). Beyond informal practices, sabotage of accountability can also manifest through formal institutional reforms. For instance, authoritarian-leaning regimes may expand the influence and authority of non-democratic entities such as technocratic or economic institutions, shifting decision-making away from democratically accountable bodies. Similarly, the decision-making autonomy of democratic institutions can be curtailed by external interferences, including those exerted by international or supranational organisations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), or even the European Union (EU). These interventions, often framed as technical or economic necessities, can undermine the responsiveness of democratic institutions to their citizenry, thereby weakening accountability (Follesdal and Hix, 2006). This phenomenon aligns with broader discussions in the literature on globalisation and democracy, which interrogate how global economic and political pressures reshape domestic governance. The rise of transnational networks, regulatory bodies, and financial systems has created conditions where key policy decisions are increasingly influenced by external actors, often to the detriment of local democratic processes (Rodrik, 2011). These dynamics highlight that accountability sabotage

operates on multiple fronts, both domestically and globally, posing significant challenges to democratic governance and underscoring the nuanced interplay between globalisation and autocratisation. Such (autocratic) practices, by sabotaging accountability, disrupt the link, typical of democracies, between citizens and rulers. In this sense, an empirical definition of an autocratic regime entails centralised power, dependent institutions, limited rights and freedoms, restricted checks and balances, disrupted and/or distorted access to information and pluralism, etc. Consequently, the terms "autocracy" and "authoritarian regime" are frequently treated as synonyms because autocracies often display authoritarian traits. However, such traits can also appear within democracies, where autocratisation manifests as an ideological and procedural tendency that erodes democratic values. Thus, when autocratic tendencies infiltrate democratic systems, they often produce phenomena termed "democratic backsliding" (Bermeo, 2016), "democratic recession" (Diamond, 2015), and "democratic erosion" (Gamboa, 2022; Gerschewski, 2021), each reflecting the encroachment of autocratic characteristics into democratic contexts and resulting in the affirmation of "democracies with adjectives" (Collier and Levitsky, 1997).

3. Regime change theory and autocratisation processes

If the study of democratic and non-democratic regimes is fundamental, it is equally valuable the study regime change and the transition from one regime to the other. The study of regime change has evolved through two primary perspectives: the transitologist and incrementalist approaches. While often treated as conflicting views, these perspectives can be seen as complementary, united by a common focus on understanding regime transformation (Jackman and Bollen, 1989). The transitologist approach focuses on regime shifts as discrete events, typically focusing on pivotal transition moments such as founding elections or sudden shifts from autocracy to democracy (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Diamond et al., 1989). This approach assumes a dichotomy between democratic and autocratic regimes, concentrating on identifiable transition points, such as elections. In contrast, the incrementalist perspective emphasizes continuous, often yearly, changes in democratic levels, positing democracy and autocracy at the extremes of a spectrum rather than as binary opposites (Teorell, 2010; Jackman and Bollen, 1989). Despite their unique insights, both perspectives face core limitations. The transitologist framework tends to overlook the heterogeneity among autocracies, sometimes treating regimes with sporadic liberalisation attempts as equivalent to more stable autocracies. Meanwhile, the incrementalist approach assumes that all incremental changes have equivalent

effects, regardless of the regime's baseline democratic level. This oversight risks oversimplifying the unique drivers behind democratic and autocratic trends. Furthermore, these frameworks tend to amplify short-term changes, potentially misinterpreting the complex, long-term processes involved in regime transformation. Additionally, they require scholars to approach democratisation and autocratisation as either distinct processes or interchangeable concepts, often resulting in a fragmented theoretical foundation with limited cross-applicability (Teorell, 2010; Bernhard and Edgell, 2019). Consequently, while each perspective offers valuable insights, a more integrated approach is essential to advancing a cohesive understanding of regime change.

A useful framework is offered by the V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) Institute, founded by Lindberg in 2014, in the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Among other interesting datasets, V-Dem developed the ERT (Episodes of Regime Transformation) framework, which gives the name to its dataset on regime change. The ERT proposes a unifying framework that combines the strengths of both transitologist and incrementalist perspectives, addressing key challenges in the study of regime change. Episodes of regime transformation are conceptualised as periods during which a country undergoes sustained and significant shifts along the democracy-autocracy spectrum (Maerz et al., 2021). These episodes result in substantial regime changes, consistent with the incrementalist approach, yet may not always lead to a complete regime transition, as viewed by transitologists. This framework adopts a "directional" approach to regime transformation, recognising processes of democratisation and autocratisation even when they do not meet a specific democratic threshold (Treisman, 2020). The ERT begins by broadly categorising episodes according to their directional movement along a spectrum ranging from liberal democracy to closed autocracy (Schedler, 2001). Regimes, whether democratic or autocratic, are understood as part of a single continuum or category, rather than as fundamentally separate entities. Within this category, each regime exhibits a degree of conformity, or non-conformity, to the "ideal type" of liberal democracy. This approach, which reflects the incrementalist perspective, assumes that democratic characteristics are not simply present or absent; rather, regimes can possess these characteristics to varying extents and may shift gradually along the democracy-autocracy spectrum. However, it also recognises a crucial dividing line between regimes that meet minimum democratic criteria and those that do not, reflecting a transitologist view. These minimum criteria align with Dahl's (1971) six institutional guarantees of participation and contestation.

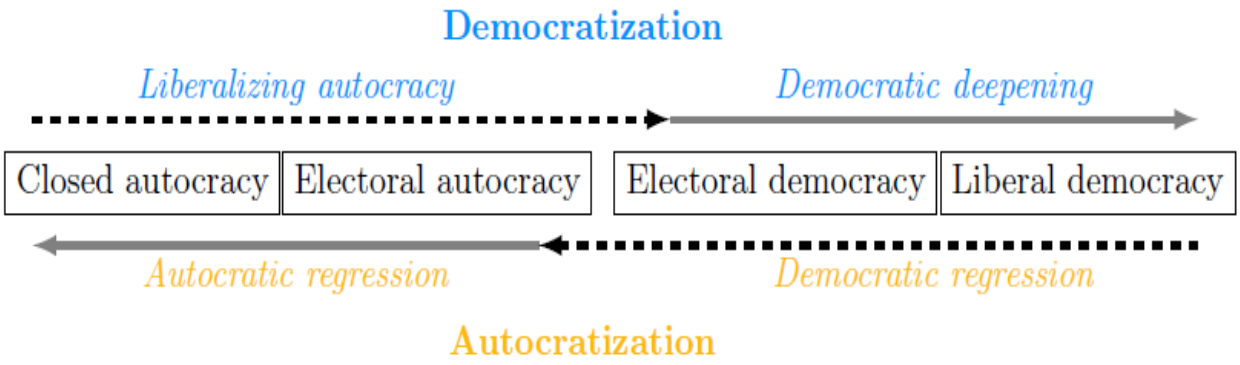

Figure 1. Episodes of Regime Transformation.
Source: Maerz et al. (2021: 7)

As illustrated in the upper part of Figure 1, democratisation encompasses episodes showing substantial and sustained improvements in democratic institutions and practices (Maerz et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2020). Conversely, autocratisation, shown in the lower part of Figure 1, represents episodes marked by a sustained and significant decline in democratic attributes (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). Thus, autocratisation and democratisation are considered inverse processes of regime transformation.

Further distinctions are drawn between episodes with the potential to trigger a full regime transition and those enhancing qualities within the current regime type. The former, shown by dashed lines in Figure 1, include democratisation episodes in autocracies (liberalising autocracy) and autocratisation episodes in democracies (democratic regression). The latter, represented by solid lines, include democratisation episodes within democracies (democratic deepening) and autocratisation episodes within autocracies (autocratic regression) (Maerz et al., 2021).

With the foundational elements of regime change theory established, the discussion can now turn to examine the specific dynamics and characteristics of transitions towards autocracy, often referred to as autocratisation. This next section will analyse how these shifts towards autocratisation unfold, the mechanisms driving these transitions, and the underlying conditions.

Autocratisation is best understood as a dynamic process rather than a static condition, defined by a shift toward autocratic governance and away from democratic principles. This dual perspective is crucial, as autocratisation involves both the acquisition of autocratic features and the erosion of democratic ones. When examining autocratisation, it is essential to consider not only the decline in democratic characteristics but also the concurrent emergence of autocratic traits. While the dismantling of democratic structures marks the beginning of the autocratisation

process, a comprehensive understanding of its outcome requires identifying the specific autocratic elements that replace them.

In defining autocratisation, the approach may rely on widely accepted and operationalizable criteria from the literature on political regimes (Dahl, 1971; O'Donnell, 1998; Diamond, 1999). These criteria focus on political participation (who has the right to select the government), public contestation (the extent to which the government can be criticised and replaced), and executive limitation (institutional and societal checks and balances that restrict government actions) as primary dimensions across political regimes. Observing change within these three dimensions provides a foundational framework. However, it may sometimes be valuable to broaden this conceptualisation by incorporating additional dimensions, such as participatory or deliberative aspects, or by considering other variations within autocratic regime types. From this perspective, there could be multiple extensive definitions of autocratisation, depending on the normative view of political regimes and specific research interests. Thus, when aiming for a maximal definition, it has been suggested to think of autocratisations in the plural. A maximalist perspective can help distinguish among different models of autocratisation based on more complex classification criteria. For instance, one could differentiate between an "egalitarian multiparty autocratisation" which dismantles the liberal component while reinforcing egalitarian aspects, as seen in Evo Morales' Bolivia, and an "illiberal one-party autocratisation", which predominantly targets the liberal dimension by establishing a dominant or single-party autocracy, as observed in Putin's Russia (Tomini, 2024).

In other words, autocratisation refers to a dynamic process where a political regime shifts away from democratic characteristics, eroding democratic principles and moving towards a more autocratic governance. This transformation can be understood on a continuum, where both democratic and autocratic features may coexist to varying degrees, without necessarily leading to a full regime transition. By focusing on key indicators like political participation, public contestation, and executive constraints, scholars can trace the progression of autocratisation in various contexts. Importantly, autocratisation is not a uniform phenomenon; different regimes may experience distinct forms of autocratic consolidation depending on specific ideological, structural, or normative factors. This complexity underscores the importance of considering autocratisation as a plural process, each manifesting unique features and pathways. This comprehensive understanding of autocratisation provides a foundational framework for examining how these shifts are tracked within different political contexts. In the next section, the focus will turn to how autocratisation has been measured and operationalised

within regime change research, exploring the various methodologies and indicators used to capture these complex transitions across different regimes.

4. Measuring Democracy and Autocracy

Measuring democratisation and autocratisation is fundamental in understanding the dynamics of political regimes and identifying trends in governance. Accurate measurement helps scholars and policymakers assess the extent to which a country aligns with democratic principles or is undergoing a process of democratic recession. Employing quantitative data and reliable indicators offers a systematic means to compare regimes globally and over time, providing insights into the characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses of democracies and autocracies alike. These measurements rely on established criteria derived from theoretical frameworks and often include aspects such as political rights, civil liberties, institutional independence, and government accountability. This quantitative approach, combined with qualitative insights, enables a nuanced understanding of political systems, supporting evidence-based policy and deeper academic inquiry into regime stability, change, and autocratisation.

Determining whether a country can be classified as democratic or not often involves a checklist of essential requirements based on established definitions of democracy. Political scientists and international organisations typically create such lists by operationalising core democratic principles into measurable attributes. For example, Dahl proposed a set of "institutional guarantees" that he argued were essential for democratic regimes, including the election of leaders through free, fair, and recurring elections, universal suffrage, freedom of expression and association, and access to alternative information sources (Dahl, 1971; 1998). While certain aspects of these guarantees can be directly verified through constitutional or legal examination, other aspects, such as election integrity or freedom from media manipulation, often rely on indirect indicators or assessments from independent experts and observers. Objectivity challenges arise when evaluating whether a government unduly influences media, uses intelligence and judicial resources to neutralise opposition, or otherwise restricts political pluralism through coercion.

4.1. Freedom House

One of the most comprehensive and influential investigations into democratic quality is conducted by Freedom House, which has been tracking political freedoms since 1972. This

assessment is carried out by country experts and analysts who answer ten questions related to political rights and fifteen questions focused on civil liberties. The political rights segment addresses electoral fairness, political pluralism, and governmental accountability, while the civil liberties component assesses freedoms of thought, expression, association, judicial independence, personal autonomy, and property rights protection. Responses are scored from 0 (maximum restriction) to 4 (maximum guarantee), and scores are then aggregated and converted to a scale where 1 represents high freedom and 7 represents severe restriction. Based on the average of these two scores, countries are categorised as "free" (scores between 1 and 2.5), "partially free" (scores between 3 and 5), or "not free" (scores between 5.5 and 7). Additionally, Freedom House classifies as "electoral democracies" those nations that uphold fundamental political rights and hold fairly open elections. Free countries with robust civil liberties qualify as "liberal democracies", while all others are grouped as "non-democratic regimes".

4.2. Polity IV/V

The Polity IV project (recently updated in version Polity V), another influential resource, assesses regime characteristics by awarding two scores to each country: one measures democratic attributes, such as electoral processes that enable citizens to choose among competing policies and leaders, limits on governmental power, and the protection of civil liberties. The second score evaluates autocratic features, including restricted political participation, elite co-optation practices, and the arbitrary exercise of governmental power. By subtracting the autocracy score from the democracy score, the Polity Index produces an overall score ranging from -10 to +10, with positive scores indicating democratic tendencies and negative scores indicating autocratic ones. Many researchers, however, only classify countries with a score above +4 as fully democratic.

The debate on whether to measure a regime's democratic quality or to categorise it based on certain minimum thresholds remains contentious. Political scientists often choose one approach or the other depending on the type of analysis they aim to conduct (Boix, Miller, and Rosato, 2013). Comparing Freedom House and Polity scores from 2015, we see that, despite different scales (1–7 for Freedom House and -10 to +10 for Polity), the two systems yield broadly similar yet not identical results. Discrepancies arise due to conceptual differences in democracy definitions, distinct indicators, and subjective judgment variances between the research teams. One solution to these challenges involves combining findings from multiple

sources. Hadenius and Teorell (2007) demonstrated that combining Freedom House and Polity indices yields a more reliable measurement. This combined metric, termed the FH/Polity index, is produced by converting both scores to a 0–10 scale and calculating an average, enhancing the robustness of regime classification and measurement accuracy.

4.3. Varieties of Democracies Project

Another insightful project is that of Varieties of Democracy (Lindberg et al., 2014), which is a globally influential research initiative that aims to provide a comprehensive and multi-dimensional framework for understanding the nature of democracy across the world. The project is based at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, and its main objective is to generate robust data that sheds light on the evolving and complex nature of democracy, autocracy, and hybrid regimes. The project produces several key datasets, including the V-Dem Dataset, the Episodes of Regimes Transformation (ERT), and Varieties of Party Identity and Organization (V-Party). Each of these datasets serves a specific purpose in assessing the dimensions and trajectory of democracy and autocracy.

4.3.1. V-Dem Dataset

Unlike traditional measures of democracy that rely on a dichotomous classification, V-Dem employs a multi-dimensional approach to capture the diverse forms of democracy and political regimes globally. This nuanced approach is grounded in a broad theoretical understanding of democracy that includes not only electoral processes but also civil liberties, political rights, accountability, and political participation.

V-Dem measures the democratic quality of a country using a vast range of indicators, compiled from over 350 variables across more than 180 countries and territories. These indicators are categorized into five distinct dimensions:

1. Electoral Democracy: measures the competitiveness of elections, the right to vote, and the inclusiveness of electoral processes.
2. Liberal Democracy: assesses the protection of civil liberties, political freedoms, and the rule of law.
3. Deliberative Democracy: evaluates the extent to which political decision-making is informed by open debate and the participation of citizens in public discourse.

4. Participatory Democracy: examines the depth and breadth of popular engagement in political life beyond the act of voting, including activism and public participation in decision-making.
5. Egalitarian Democracy: focuses on social and political equality, evaluating the extent to which power and resources are distributed fairly among different segments of society.

V-Dem uses these principles to create specific indicators, which are combined to generate indices for each dimension of democracy. By tracking these indices over time, V-Dem enables a more comprehensive understanding of the democratization and autocratisation processes. Autocratisation, in particular, is studied as a multi-faceted process that involves the gradual erosion of democratic institutions and norms, often occurring in the form of weakened electoral integrity, curtailed civil liberties, or reduced political competition. This approach allows for a more granular and dynamic understanding of political regimes, capturing the complexities of political life and the multiple dimensions that contribute to democratic or autocratic governance.

The V-Dem Dataset comprises more than 350 indicators that assess various aspects of democratic governance, including variables on:

a) Electoral Processes: measures the competitiveness, integrity, and inclusiveness of elections;
b) Civil Liberties: assesses freedom of expression, association, and protection from government harassment;
c) Rule of Law: captures the independence of the judiciary, equality before the law, and accountability mechanisms;
d) Political Participation: examines the extent and equality of citizen involvement in political life, including marginalized groups;
e) Checks and Balances: evaluates the extent of executive constraints and the strength of legislative and judicial oversight.

The V-Dem Dataset is a vital tool for analysing autocratisation because it captures the gradual and multifaceted decline in democratic institutions that characterizes this process. Using indicators on electoral competition, government transparency, judicial independence, and media freedom, the V-Dem Main Dataset allows researchers to track signs of autocratisation systematically. By observing shifts in these indicators, researchers can identify

a decline in democratic quality even if elections continue to be held, providing a more nuanced view than binary classifications of political regimes.

4.3.2. Episodes of Regime Transformation Dataset

As already mentioned earlier, the ERT dataset provides a refined framework for identifying and analysing significant shifts in political regimes, whether they lean towards democratisation or autocratisation. This dataset is particularly valuable in measuring autocratisation because it can detect not only overt regime changes but also more gradual, often subtle shifts that signal democratic erosion. By employing the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) as its primary metric, the ERT framework relies on a continuum scale from 0 (representing a fully autocratic regime) to 1 (signifying a full democracy), thus moving away from traditional binary distinctions between democracy and autocracy. The EDI, rooted in Robert Dahl's influential concept of polyarchy, is grounded in core institutional guarantees of democracy, such as the freedom to participate, compete, and form political associations. This foundation makes EDI-based analyses a robust method for tracking nuanced variations in political regimes, especially in detecting the phases of autocratisation in systems that may still retain some formal democratic structures.

The construction of the EDI is methodologically sophisticated. It combines over forty indicators, all of which are expert-coded and aggregated through a Bayesian Item Response Theory (IRT) model. The Bayesian IRT model has been specifically chosen for its ability to account for measurement error and interdependencies among indicators, making it suitable for high-dimensional political data. This model allows the dataset to reflect a diverse array of democratic features, including civil liberties, the rule of law, electoral integrity, and the presence of competitive political institutions. Such a multidimensional approach enables the ERT to capture the full spectrum of political regime shifts rather than limiting analysis to a few high-profile changes. The dataset thus offers an unparalleled granularity and enables the tracking of "episodes" of regime change in a way that considers the continuous nature of political transitions, including the processes of autocratisation which often occur incrementally rather than through abrupt regime collapses.

To operationalise an ERT, the dataset requires that countries meet a threshold of change in their EDI scores, which must reflect a substantial and sustained shift over time. Specifically, an episode of transformation is recognised when an initial annual change of at least ±0.01 occurs in the EDI. This initial threshold signals the onset of an episode. However, to ensure that these

episodes reflect genuine regime transformations rather than short-term fluctuations, the ERT dataset requires a cumulative change of at least ±0.10 in the EDI throughout the episode. This cumulative inclusion criterion serves as a robust filter, identifying only those episodes where changes in the EDI represent substantive political shifts rather than temporary variations. This approach allows researchers to detect periods of gradual democratic erosion or authoritarian strengthening, which are key aspects of modern autocratisation processes that may otherwise go unnoticed.

The dynamics of an ongoing ERT are governed by several nuanced criteria. For an episode to remain active, the EDI score must continue to change at least once in every five consecutive years. This five-year tolerance interval accounts for the fact that political changes may not occur linearly or annually but may still reflect an ongoing transformation if viewed over a slightly extended period. Furthermore, an episode is halted if there is a reverse annual change of 0.03 or greater, a criterion known as the annual turn. This annual turn threshold prevents an ERT from continuing if a country demonstrates a significant reversal in the direction of its regime transformation, thereby ensuring that only consistent transformations are coded as ongoing. Additionally, an episode is considered terminated if there is a cumulative reverse change of 0.1 in the EDI over five years, termed the cumulative turn. Together, these criteria provide a flexible yet stringent framework for determining the trajectory and durability of regime changes, allowing for a sensitive measurement of regime instability, which is often characteristic of autocratisation processes.

The final year of an ERT episode is marked by the year in which a country experiences a change of at least ±0.01 in the EDI after the episode's onset and immediately before meeting one of the termination conditions. If the episode extends to the final year of the available V-Dem data for that country, it is coded as a "censored" episode, meaning that the regime transformation may still be in progress or unresolved. This coding approach is particularly valuable for ongoing cases, as it provides an accurate account of potential long-term transformations in political systems that may still be subject to future developments. In cases where there is a gap in the V-Dem coding, an episode is similarly censored, preserving the integrity of the data while accounting for any temporal limitations in coding.

In practice, the ERT dataset provides critical insights into measuring autocratisation by enabling the study of early warning signals, such as incremental declines in judicial independence, freedom of the press, or political competition—factors that typically signify the onset of autocratic practices. Autocratisation is often marked by shifts that do not involve an immediate regime collapse but are instead characterised by the gradual erosion of democratic

norms and institutional checks. Through its multidimensional approach, the ERT dataset can track these forms of erosion, revealing how even relatively stable democracies might experience backsliding through subtle shifts in political practices and structures. By allowing researchers to observe how and when autocratic practices become embedded in political systems, the ERT framework offers a robust and comprehensive measure of the complex dynamics of autocratisation.

4.3.3. V-Party Dataset

The V-Party Dataset is designed to provide insights into political parties, including their ideological positions, organizational characteristics, and support for democracy or autocracy. This dataset includes information on:

a) Party Ideology: measures party positions on key issues like economic policy, immigration, social values, and foreign policy;
b) Party Structure: provides data on party organization, centralization, and membership;
c) Democratic Commitment: assesses parties' explicit support for democratic norms, including their willingness to accept electoral defeat and refrain from undermining democratic institutions.

The V-Party Dataset is essential for studying autocratisation because political parties are recognised to play a role in both supporting and challenging democratic norms. By tracking party positions on democracy, researchers can identify when political actors begin to support authoritarian values or resist democratic accountability. The V-Party Dataset can reveal trends in which previously pro-democratic parties adopt autocratic stances, often in response to shifts in power dynamics or ideological realignments. For example, political parties may begin to support autocratic or authoritarian leaders or adopt populist rhetoric that undermines institutional checks and balances, contributing to a gradual erosion of democratic norms.

The dataset is also valuable for examining the influence of specific political parties on national autocratisation trends. In some cases, the rise of populist or nationalist parties can accelerate autocratisation by promoting anti-democratic policies, limiting media freedom, or weakening judicial independence. By analysing the V-Party Dataset, researchers can better understand the ideological and organizational factors that drive political parties to either support or subvert democratic institutions, providing insights into the role of party systems in the broader process of autocratisation.

While the V-Dem Project's datasets are not without their limitations, their methodological rigour and depth make them invaluable for tracking the gradual erosion of democratic norms. Through its comprehensive approach, V-Dem provides the tools necessary to detect early signs of autocratisation and understand the mechanisms that drive political systems away from democracy. As the global political landscape continues to evolve, the V-Dem Project's datasets constitute a useful resource for cross-sectional, longitudinal, and party-level analyses of democratisation and autocratisation processes.

5. Quantity and quality of Democracies and Autocracies

The current global political landscape reveals a stark contrast between the prevalence of democratic and autocratic regimes, as well as the quality of democratic practices across states. Recent data from the V-Dem Institute's Democracy Report 2024 (Nord et al., 2024) illustrates that 71% of the world's population, or approximately 5.7 billion people, now live under some form of autocratic governance, marking a substantial increase from 48% just ten years ago. In contrast, 29% of the world's population, roughly 2.3 billion people, resides in liberal or electoral democracies. This chapter presents an in-depth quantitative examination of the world's distribution of political regimes, exploring the specific numbers, trends, and changes across regions, regime types, and democratic components.

At the end of 2023, the world was nearly evenly split between democracies and autocracies, with 91 democracies (including both liberal and electoral forms) and 88 autocracies (electoral and closed types). However, when considering population distribution, the scales are tipped heavily toward autocracies. The most populated countries tend to fall under autocratic rule, particularly in Asia and Eastern Europe. Notably, 44% of the world's population (approximately 3.5 billion people) live in electoral autocracies, while 27% (around 2.2 billion people) are governed by closed autocracies such as China, Iran, and Vietnam.

In contrast, liberal democracies, the highest quality of democracy with robust protections for civil liberties and institutional checks on power, constitute only 13% of the world's population, with the United States, Japan, and some Western European nations leading this group. The remaining 16% reside in electoral democracies, a regime type that, while less institutionally robust than liberal democracies, still upholds fair electoral competition and fundamental freedoms.

The world's political regimes are marked by substantial volatility, with numerous countries experiencing shifts between democratic and autocratic governance. Currently, 42

countries are undergoing autocratisation, collectively housing about 2.8 billion people or 35% of the global population. Among these 42, 28 were democracies at the beginning of their autocratisation episodes, yet only half remain democratic as of 2023. Autocratisation processes are most common in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where large populations are subjected to deteriorating democratic conditions. For example, Hungary and Russia have increasingly centralized executive power, reduced judicial independence, and imposed stringent limitations on civil society and the media.

On the other end, democratization is underway in only 18 countries, representing a mere 5% of the global population or approximately 400 million people. Brazil is the most prominent example of recent democratization, accounting for over half of the population experiencing positive shifts in democratic governance. Other democratizing nations are typically small, less populous states, such as Seychelles and Timor-Leste, which have a relatively limited impact on global democratic trends.

It is insightful to look at the regional distribution of regime types and their population distribution.

Eastern Europe and Central Asia have seen one of the sharpest declines in democracy, with 66% of the region's population now residing under electoral autocracies such as Russia, Hungary, and Serbia. This represents a significant shift from previous decades, as Eastern Europe's overall democratic score has declined to levels comparable to the early 1990s, immediately following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Only 5% of the population lives in liberal democracies, primarily in the Baltic nations, such as Estonia and Latvia, while 29% live in electoral democracies.

South and Central Asia rank among the most autocratic regions globally, with over 90% of the population residing in electoral autocracies. The most populous country in this category, India, has undergone extensive democratic backsliding, impacting 1.4 billion people through restrictions on press freedom, increased state censorship, and diminishing independence of democratic institutions. Pakistan and Bangladesh, similarly, classified as electoral autocracies, contribute to the region's overall autocratic dominance. Closed autocracies such as Afghanistan and Turkmenistan account for 4% of the regional population, leaving only a fraction (3%) in electoral democracies, such as Armenia and Georgia.

Latin America and the Caribbean present a mixed but largely positive picture of democracy. Approximately 86% of the region's population lives in electoral democracies, with large countries like Brazil and Argentina maintaining relatively robust democratic institutions. The region also includes a small proportion of 4% in liberal democracies, such as Uruguay and

Chile, which offer high levels of institutional checks and civil liberties. However, autocratic governance persists in countries like Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba, which together make up about 10% of the regional population.

Sub-Saharan Africa displays significant diversity in regime types, with 82% of the population residing in electoral or closed autocracies. Countries like Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo fall within this category, where democratic principles are consistently undermined by autocratic and authoritarian leaders. Nevertheless, 18% of the population lives in electoral democracies, including South Africa and Ghana, which have shown resilience against autocratic pressures. Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced frequent regime changes, with four countries shifting their classifications in 2023 alone, highlighting the region's political volatility.

The MENA region is the most autocratic in the world, with 98% of the population residing under autocratic rule. Closed autocracies such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Libya account for 45% of the population, while 53% live in electoral autocracies. Notably, in 2023, Israel transitioned from a liberal democracy to an electoral democracy for the first time in over 50 years, due to significant declines in judicial independence and legal protections. This shift underscores the region's broader trend of restrictive governance, where only small populations in countries like Tunisia (in the grey zone of electoral autocracy) experience limited democratic freedoms.

Western Europe and North America remain the most democratic regions globally, with 96% of the population living in liberal democracies. The quality of democratic governance remains high, with robust protections for civil liberties and well-established institutional checks on power. However, recent shifts indicate a slight decline, as countries like Cyprus, Portugal, Austria, and Greece have transitioned from liberal to electoral democracies over the past three years, affecting 4% of the regional population.

The quantitative decline in democracy is evident across multiple components of democratic governance, particularly in freedom of expression, electoral integrity, and civil society rights. These components have seen some of the most severe regressions, impacting not only autocratic states but also hybrid and transitional democracies.

The freedom of expression component has seen the most pronounced decline, with 35 countries experiencing significant reductions in 2023 alone. This figure marks an increase from only 11 countries a decade ago. Nations such as India, El Salvador, and Mauritius have heightened censorship measures, curtailed press freedom, and intensified government control over media outlets. In 45 countries, government censorship of the media has worsened over the

past decade, while journalistic harassment has increased in 36 countries, impacting the overall quality of public discourse.

The integrity of electoral processes, traditionally a pillar of democratic governance, has experienced substantial degradation. Electoral fairness has declined in 23 countries in 2023, in stark contrast to ten years ago, when it was improving in a similar number of countries. The independence of electoral management bodies (EMBs) is a key indicator here, with autonomy under attack in 24 countries. In places like Bangladesh, Egypt, and Venezuela, government interference in election management has eroded public confidence in electoral outcomes, further consolidating autocratic power.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a critical role in democratic resilience, yet 20 countries have restricted freedom of association in 2023, and 35 have seen an increase in government repression of CSOs over the past decade. Russia, Türkiye, and the Philippines are among the countries imposing stringent regulations on CSO operations, limiting their capacity to challenge government policies or mobilise public support for democratic reforms.

Despite the prevailing trend of autocratisation, a small subset of countries have demonstrated resilience against democratic decline. Notable among these are "near-miss" cases, where countries faced potential autocratisation but managed to stabilise. Malaysia and Mongolia, for instance, were at high risk of democratic backsliding but effectively countered this through civil society mobilisation and institutional reinforcement. Such cases suggest that, although rare, resilience is possible with the right combination of public engagement, judicial independence, and vigilant political institutions.

Additionally, Brazil stands out as a large nation experiencing a positive shift in democratic governance. With 216 million people, Brazil alone accounts for more than half of the population in democratizing countries. Its recent reforms and anti-corruption measures reflect a renewed commitment to democracy, countering the general trend of autocratic influence in Latin America.

To conclude, the quantitative data on global democracy reveals a world increasingly divided between a smaller, concentrated population enjoying democratic freedoms and a growing majority under autocratic rule. The numbers illustrate that 71% of the world's population now lives in autocracies, with significant declines in core democratic components such as freedom of expression, electoral integrity, and freedom of association. This trend reflects not only individual cases of regression but also a global shift towards autocratic and authoritarian governance, particularly in populous regions.

Chapter 2.
The third wave of autocratisation: actors and modes

The diffusion of democracy in the last two centuries has been theorised as a process characterised by waves and counterwaves, a phenomenon first systematically conceptualised by Huntington (1991). He introduced the notion of "waves of democratisation" to describe periods when the number of countries transitioning to or reverting to democratic governance significantly exceeded those experiencing autocratic regression. Conversely, "ebbs" represent phases dominated by the reverse trend, with democratic regimes being dominated by autocratic ones. This oscillatory pattern has been substantiated by statistical analyses, such as those by Boix, Miller, and Rosato (2013), and by trends in indexes of democratic performance such as Freedom House, Polity IV/V and V-Dem, confirming the theorisation of Huntington.

In his analysis, there has been a steady increase in the number of democracies from the early 19th century to the 1920s (the first wave), followed by a pronounced decline during the 1930s (the first ebb). The second wave emerged after World War II, with the restoration of democracy in Western European nations under the American geopolitical umbrella and the decolonisation of former European colonies, many of which, however, regressed into autocratisation during the 1950s and 1960s (the second reflux). The third wave, beginning in the mid-1970s, initially transformed the political landscape of Southern Europe (e.g., Spain, Portugal, Greece) and Latin America (e.g., Venezuela, Brazil, Peru), later extending to former British colonies and the post-1989 democratisation of the Soviet bloc nations. This wave, driven by global economic integration and the rise of supranational organisations, propelled democracies to an unprecedented numerical peak, particularly in regions such as Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Pacific.

During those years, the remarkable progress of democratic systems gave rise to a compelling yet simplistic thesis regarding the superiority of the liberal democratic model sustained by market economics. This perspective culminated in Fukuyama's (1992) influential thesis of "the end of history", wherein he saw liberal democracy as the final and most evolved form of political governance, signifying the endpoint of humanity's ideological evolution.

However, at the time Huntington wrote about the third wave of democratisation and in the following years, there was little evidence to suggest the onset of a third reflux. Statistical data from indices like FH/Polity highlighted the profound impact of the third wave, with

democracy scores rising significantly across various global regions during the 1970s and 1980s. Liberal democracies categorised as "free countries" by Freedom House grew steadily from 1975 to 1999, subsequently entering a phase of relative stability in the early 21st century. However, contemporary scholars, supported by major democracy indices, have increasingly recognised the emergence of a trend of autocratisation reflux in recent years. Such third autocratisation reflux can be defined as the period during which "the number of countries undergoing democratization declines while at the same time autocratisation affects more and more countries" (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019: 1102), as shown in Figure 2. This period is marked by quantitively and qualitatively democratic recession, with numerous countries experiencing the erosion of democratic norms and practices. This growing consensus in the literature reflects the ongoing challenges of autocratisation in the current global landscape.

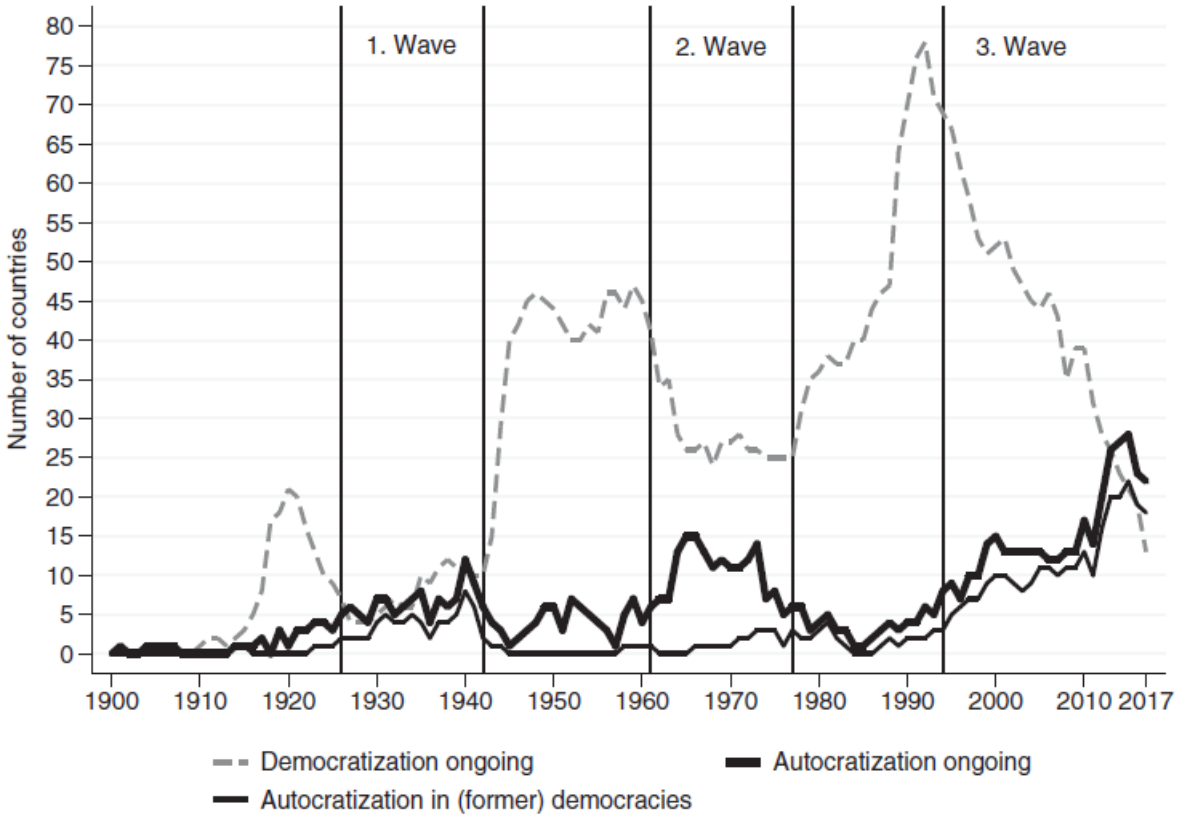

Figure 2. Three waves of autocratisation. Source: Lührmann and Lindberg, (2019: 1103).

Indeed, recent evidence increasingly indicates that a global democratic reversal is underway, challenging even well-established democracies. Notably, the United States was downgraded by both Freedom House and V-Dem in 2018. Over the past decade, significant

episodes of autocratisation have been documented in a diverse array of countries spread across all continents. This trend paints a bleak picture of the current global state of democracy, despite some scholars arguing that the accomplishments of the third wave of democratisation remain evident. Waldner and Lust (2018) aptly described democratic recession as "an important new research frontier", underscoring the urgency of this emerging area of study.

In the past, analyses of regime change processes were often less nuanced and limited to specific cases, reflecting a limited approach, focusing for example solely on breakdown processes. However, contemporary autocratisation processes differ significantly from previous historical patterns, necessitating a corresponding shift in the methodologies and frameworks used to study it. This chapter aims to address how regime changes occur in the present day, identifying the factors, actors, and contexts involved in these transformations.

While the literature acknowledges that the nature of autocratisation has evolved, it has yet to establish a systematic framework for measuring and studying these new dynamics. Many contributions rely on case studies, statistical indicators, or specific events such as military coups and electoral fraud, often using binary frameworks that fail to capture the gradual, opaque, and complex nature of modern autocratisation (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). This approach excludes significant variations, such as instances where democracies experience autocratic shifts without collapsing entirely, as seen in Hungary, or cases where electoral autocracies, like Sudan, experience setbacks without ever transitioning to democracy.

The archetype of dramatic reversals to closed autocracy, once common, has become increasingly rare. In 1980, closed autocracies accounted for about half of all regimes globally; by 2017, they represented only 12%. Instead, contemporary autocrats often subvert democratic norms while maintaining the appearance of democracy, employing tactics that sustain a "democratic façade". This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as "illiberal democracy", highlights how autocrats adapt to global expectations. Multi-party elections, a global norm since the Cold War, influence even autocratic leaders, as a blatant rejection of electoral processes implies significant legitimacy costs, both domestically and internationally. Mass protests and international sanctions, often tied to the maintenance of electoral standards, have disincentivised overt authoritarian takeovers. For example, in Gambia in 2016, international pressure, including military intervention, forced President Jammeh into exile after he refused to concede defeat.

Instead, gradual transitions into electoral authoritarianism have become the dominant strategy for aspiring autocrats. Such transitions are less visible and harder to oppose, as they avoid outright violations of democratic norms. Electoral autocrats maintain their competitive

edge through subtler means, including media censorship, harassment of civil society, restrictions on political parties, and undermining electoral processes and management bodies. These tactics and modes, often shared and refined among authoritarian regimes, present a significant challenge for both domestic opposition and international observers aiming to safeguard democratic principles. The next sections will discuss in detail how such tactics unfold into episodes of autocratisation and through which actors and modes.

1. Conceptual foundations of autocratisation modes

The processes of autocratisation have remained a relatively understudied aspect of regime change. Linz (1978), in his seminal work on democratic breakdowns during the interwar and post-World War II periods, identified three primary pathways to autocratisation. These include:

1. a regime's attempted breakdown followed by a democratic re-consolidation;
2. efforts by incumbents to co-opt a disloyal opposition, ultimately leading to the gradual erosion of democracy;
3. an opposition-led takeover, typically occurring in contexts of extreme political polarisation or pre-civil war conditions.

While Linz's framework was innovative, it has faced criticism for its limited empirical testability (Coppedge, 2012), highlighting the necessity of disentangling the causes and modes of autocratisation. Addressing the distinct questions of "why" and "how" autocratisation occurs remains essential, particularly for comparative analysis across multiple cases.

Between the 1980s and 1990s, the academic focus shifted predominantly to the study of democratisation, given the increase in democratic transitions worldwide (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Przeworski, 1991; Huntington, 1991). These studies' focus was primarily on the role of agency. However, more recent debates on autocratisation have concentrated largely on identifying the socio-economic, cultural, political, institutional, and international determinants of these processes (Diskin et al., 2005; Berg-Schlosser, 2008; Kapstein and Converse, 2008; Svolik, 2008; Tomini and Wagemann, 2018). Although valuable, such studies, by focusing on causes, often fail to systematically address the modes of autocratisation.

Scholarly investigations into the processes of autocratisation are typically case-specific and focus on limited instances (Fish, 2001; Kornai, 2015; Adebanwi and Obadare, 2011). While these studies provide critical insights, their findings are often difficult to generalise due to differences in the examined cases. Furthermore, the modes of autocratisation are rarely the

central focus of these works (Cassani and Tomini, 2019). A broader comparative discussion is still necessary to understand how autocratisation processes unfold across varying contexts.

Initial distinctions in autocratisation modes often differentiate between abrupt and incremental regime changes. Scholars like O'Donnell (1992), Schmitter (1994), and Schedler (1998) categorise regime changes as either "sudden breakdowns" or "lingering demises". Similarly, Lueders and Lust (2018) distinguish regime breakdowns from backsliding. While these classifications highlight differences in the pace of regime change, they offer limited insight into the practical mechanics of autocratisation.

Bermeo (2016) provides a more nuanced categorisation, identifying three varieties of coups d'état: open-ended coups, promissory coups (those ostensibly carried out in the name of democracy), and executive coups, such as Fujimori's self-coup in Peru (1992). She also outlines three less disruptive modes of regime change: executive aggrandizement, election-day fraud, and electoral manipulation. Although her work offers a valuable framework for diachronic comparisons between past and present autocratisation processes, it has limitations. The categories sometimes blur the distinction between modes and objectives, and some distinctions, such as between promissory and open-ended coups, are less analytically rigorous (Cassani and Tomini, 2019). Furthermore, Bermeo highlighted the declining prevalence of blatant electoral fraud and coups, which have given way to more subtle strategies like executive aggrandizement and electoral manipulation, underscoring the evolving nature of autocratisation.

Ultimately, while existing classifications provide important context, they underscore the need for a more systematic and contemporary analysis of autocratisation processes, particularly in the post-Cold War era. This approach would help illuminate the specific pathways through which regimes transition toward autocracy in an increasingly complex global landscape.

2. Autocratisation drivers: agency or structure?

Before delving into the analysis of actual processes and modes of autocratisation, it seems relevant to briefly discuss the debate over the role of agency and/or structure in the onset of autocratisation episodes.

The debate over whether autocratisation is better analysed through the lens of agency or structural and contextual factors remains a contested yet crucial area of inquiry within political science. Structural approaches, which emphasise socio-economic, cultural, or institutional conditions, often dominate large-scale, cross-national studies of regime change. According to this perspective, the erosion of democracy is due to the "democracy-not-providing" thesis. It posits that democratic regimes are more susceptible to transitioning into non-democratic ones

when they fail to deliver satisfactory socio-economic and institutional outcomes. In such contexts, public dissatisfaction with the regime's inability to meet acceptable standards of governance and service provision creates fertile ground for anti-democratic forces to emerge. These forces often capitalise on perceived inefficiencies within the democratic system, presenting themselves as capable alternatives promising effective solutions and governance, thus facilitating the erosion of democracy. In other words, "in the last analysis, [democratic] breakdown is a result of processes initiated by the government's incapacity to solve problems for which disloyal oppositions offer themselves as a solution" (Linz, 1978: 50). In this sense, many analyses on autocratic transition have focused on structural factors and indicators such as economic development, income inequality, unemployment rates, education levels, etc, (Lipset, 1959; Przeworski et al., 2000; Przeworski and Limongi, 1997; Knutsen and Skaaning, 2024).

However, structural explanations often face limitations, particularly their tendency to assume deterministic pathways. They overlook the endogenous nature of political processes, where actors themselves can generate grievances or weaken institutions, complicating the causal narrative (Schedler, 2024).

Recent evidence suggests that the primacy of structural explanations is challenged by the contextual diversity of autocratisation. Democratic erosion has occurred in vastly different socio-economic and cultural contexts, from relatively poor nations like Bolivia and Nicaragua to wealthier ones such as Hungary and Türkiye (Schedler, 2024). This pattern undermines long-held assumptions about the stabilising role of economic affluence in democratic resilience (Przeworski and Limongi, 1997). Cases like Poland, where robust economic performance preceded democratic regression, further weaken the "democracy-not-delivering" hypothesis as a comprehensive explanation for autocratisation. Instead, these instances highlight the role of a variety of societal cleavages (class, religion, or national identity) in eroding democratic norms (Schedler, 2024).

In this sense, another structural factor that is worth to be discussed is ideology. Ideology, defined here as a set of interrelated ideas about socio-political structures and the appropriate conduct within them, transcends mere political theory by connecting ultimate political goals with everyday values. If it is true that there is no such thing as politics without ideological elements, it is equally true that there is no politics driven exclusively by ideological considerations. Indeed, in contemporary discussions, ideology is often overshadowed by analyses prioritising power dynamics, patronage networks, and kleptocratic motives (Schedler, 2013; Lewis, 2022). However, authors such as Enyedi (2024), sustain that ideology plays an important role in driving autocratisation. In fact, data show that "the ten countries that

autocratised most between 2012 and 2022 (Brazil, India, Serbia, Türkiye, Hungary, Poland, Thailand, Mauritius, El Salvador, and Tunisia) were coded to be more ideological than the rest of the world" (ibid: 155).

Nonetheless, a key feature of contemporary politics is the absence of an explicit autocratic ideology. Most political parties, movements, and leaders outwardly adhere to democratic principles and mandates, at least *prima facie*. Illiberal and autocratic practices occur while formally respecting democratic norms, subtly exploiting liberal and democratic discourses to advance their own agendas. This duality helps maintaining the appearance of democratic legitimacy even as they systematically undermine democratic procedures and institutions. The facade of democracy is preserved to placate both domestic constituencies and international observers, while the substantive erosion of democratic values proceeds unabated.

Structural conditions, such as socio-economic inequality, cultural divisions, institutional fragility, and ideologies create fertile grounds for the occurrence of autocratisation. However, structures alone cannot explain why some democracies resist autocratisation while others succumb to it. The diversity of autocratisation contexts illustrates that structural conditions are necessary but insufficient without the catalytic role of agency.

In particular, ideology acts as both a structural condition, shaping societal norms and expectations, and an instrument of actors, enabling political actors to mobilise support and suppress dissent. The challenge lies in disentangling the extent to which ideological narratives are products of structural conditions versus tools of strategic socio-political manipulation by political actors. Recognising the dual role of ideology as both a structural factor and instrumental for agency offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding contemporary autocratisation processes.

Theoretically, the argument for privileging agency over structure gains additional support from its capacity to explain both democratic transitions and reversals. Przeworski et al. (2000) argue that regime changes are not determined by structural conditions but emerge randomly with respect to their environment. This perspective aligns with contemporary autocratisation trends, where leaders skilfully manipulate democratic institutions to their advantage, crafting an appearance of legitimacy while consolidating autocratic power. In this "third wave of autocratisation" (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019), the tactics of autocrats, such as undermining judicial independence, censoring media, or co-opting opposition parties, demonstrate how actors, rather than static conditions, drive regime transformations.

Practically, the focus on agency offers useful insights, particularly for scholars and policymakers aiming to counter autocratic tendencies. While structural analyses provide

valuable context, they often lack the immediacy required to address ongoing democratic erosion. By studying the strategies and dynamics employed by illiberal leaders, researchers can identify intervention points to protect democratic institutions and norms. This focus is especially pertinent in a world where autocratisation increasingly takes the form of gradual, opaque processes rather than abrupt regime breakdowns.

Even though the aim is to shift the focus towards agency, it is important to acknowledge that the increasing number of cases of democratic decline, in quality and quantity, falling under the framework of the third wave of autocratisation cannot be attributed solely to individual cases of agency. Structural factors undoubtedly play a crucial role in creating a fertile ground for agency to become a key driver of autocratic regression.

In particular, economic crises, deepening economic and social inequalities, and growing political instability create conditions in which alternative ideological narratives gain traction. These narratives often portray democratic regimes as inefficient or incapable of addressing pressing socio-political and economic challenges. When both national and supranational democratic institutions, as well as international organisations, focused on cooperation, fail to provide effective solutions, a shift can occur at both elite and mass levels. This shift fosters a perception that less democratic or autocratic systems are more effective in governance and better equipped to address complex problems.

Moreover, globalisation has played a significant role in amplifying and disseminating these perspectives. The visibility of autocratic regimes that appear more adept at crisis management, economic stability, and long-term policy implementation, or that are simply not subject to the same democratic constraints and inefficiencies, has reinforced the idea that democratic governance may be inadequate in certain contexts. This perception, whether justified or not, contributes to the broader erosion of democratic legitimacy and fuels the appeal of autocratic alternatives.

In conclusion, while structural factors offer important context for understanding autocratisation, their explanatory power is limited by their inability to account for the agency-driven nature of many contemporary cases. The diversity of structural socio-economic and cultural conditions in which autocratisation occurs, even though their importance, underscores the need for a nuanced, actor-centric approach that acknowledges the strategic behaviour of leaders in eroding democracy. This dual lens, recognising both the constraints and opportunities created by structures and the decisive role of political agency, provides a more comprehensive framework for analysing the complexities of autocratisation.

3. Autocratising actors

As discussed above, a growing body of literature has shifted attention towards the role of different actors who are increasingly recognised for their ability to trigger autocratisation episodes and exploit structural factors and societal cleavages in doing so.

The focus of this section is on those types of actors, both internal and external to a specific political system, who are pivotal agents in autocratisation. The analysis will start by discussing different types of national actors. Then it will move on to international ones.

3.1. National actors

As explained in the first chapter, autocratisation can manifest in both democratic and non-democratic regimes. However, in the context of democracies, the actions of political leaders, elected and not, and political parties have earned significant scholarly attention. This is because the autocratic manoeuvres of actors operating within democracies, often under the guise of democratic legitimacy, are particularly insidious compared to their counterparts in already-established autocracies. In the post-Cold War era, autocratisation has increasingly unfolded within democratic systems through the gradual erosion of key democratic dimensions, often led by elected incumbents (ibid.). Consequently, the interplay between political parties, government members, and political leaders in competitive settings has emerged as a critical focus of analysis.

Political parties, as fundamental representatives of public interests, are cornerstones of representative democracies. Institutionalised parties and party systems have traditionally been viewed as vital to democratic stability, legitimacy, and accountability. As highlighted by Mainwaring and Scully (1995), well-structured party systems promote democratic practices and deter personalist or authoritarian tendencies. Similarly, Bernhard et al. (2020) have demonstrated that institutionalised parties possess the organisational and mobilisation resources necessary to resist power grabs, acting as formidable barriers to autocratisation. Conversely, weakly institutionalised party systems create opportunities for personalist leaders to exploit democratic vulnerabilities. Such leaders, as noted by Levitsky and Cameron (2003), can assault democratic institutions while further weakening the party system, establishing a cyclical erosion of democratic norms.

Parliamentary resistance carried out by parties, in particular, emerges as a crucial strategy for blocking or delaying legislative initiatives by aspiring autocrats (Gamboa, 2017). Legislative bodies become critical arenas of struggle where opposition parties can leverage their

institutional foothold to challenge autocratic encroachments, especially when democratic guarantees remain partially intact.

At the same time, aspiring autocrats, recognising the democratic functions of political parties, strategically seek to neutralise their resistance. Autocrats often try to co-opt opposition parties or de-institutionalise ruling parties to erode their democratic "antibodies" (Yardimci-Geyikçi and Yavuzyilmaz, 2022; Kavasoglu, 2022). While such strategies raise concerns about the fragility of institutional resistance to autocratisation, recent findings suggest that dispersed decision-making structures and extensive organisational frameworks can mitigate the risk of party co-optation, offering some optimism for democratic resilience (Kavasoglu, 2022).

Therefore, it emerges how elected leaders and party leaders often serve as key initiators of autocratisation. Personalist, charismatic, and populist leaders have been identified as catalysts for democratic erosion, particularly in highly consolidated democracies, as demonstrated by cases such as Trump in the United States and Orbán in Hungary. Personalist leadership fosters polarisation and undermines horizontal accountability (Frantz et al., 2021; Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid, 2020). Charismatic leaders, meanwhile, use their appeal to justify autocratic moves under the guise of democratic reform, minimising legitimacy costs (Balderacchi, 2018). When combined with anti-establishment rhetoric and high popularity, these traits enable leaders to dismantle democratic institutions while maintaining public support (Levitsky and Loxton, 2013).

The strategic playbook of autocrats typically involves leveraging electoral success to erode democratic safeguards. This gradualist approach includes manipulating laws, disabling accountability mechanisms, and distorting electoral competition, often using democratic rhetoric (Scheppele, 2018; Bermeo, 2016). Scholars like Kneuer (2021) and Alizada et al. (2021) have identified recurring sequences in these strategies, such as initial polarisation and legislative attacks, followed by media suppression, disinformation campaigns, and the ultimate targeting of elections. These tactics, discussed in detail in the following sections, underscore the interplay between individual agency and systemic vulnerabilities in shaping autocratisation processes.

3.2. International actors

Autocratisation is not only a domestic phenomenon as it is reflected also on the international stage. It interacts with regional and global dynamics, norms, rules, and institutions of the international order, a framework increasingly shaped by the fluidity and emergence of multipolarity. International actors central to these processes are primarily government members

and officials, who's domestic autocratising efforts often are reflected in the international sphere through their foreign policy strategies. "The more domestic projects of erosion are linked to ideological motives and narratives, […] the more it can be expected that ideological principles also play a role in the transformation of the international system" (Kneuer, 2022: 95). Such influence in the international arena expands their capacity to reshape bilateral and multilateral agreements. Consequently, autocratisation may spread across regional and international organisations, even those with limited political mandates. Therefore, any autocratic or autocratising state may have a role in triggering and driving autocratisation processes in other states and/or international institutions and organisations.

In addition to such actors, a crucial role is clearly played by great autocratic powers, who, thanks to more material and ideological resources, can easily encourage autocratic activities. For example, great autocratic powers like China and Russia have sought to alter the "ecology of the international order" (Cooley and Nexon, 2020), encouraging both democratic and autocratic leaders to rely more on ad hoc alliances, limiting traditional multilateral diplomacy and agreements.

Indeed, autocratic regimes increasingly collaborate within regional and international forums. Such interactions can significantly determine the trajectory of autocratisation within individual countries, underscoring the necessity for autocratic research to extend beyond state-centric analysis (Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2021). The multipolarity of the current international order has created opportunities for regional autocratic actors to expand their global influence. Platforms like the Astana Format, involving Russia, Iran, and Türkiye addressing the Syrian civil conflict, highlight how autocratic states build alternative cooperation frameworks to challenge established norms within the international order (ibid.).

Another important role may be played by international organisations and institutions. These often play a dual role in autocratisation processes. While traditionally perceived as champions of democracy, rule of law, and human rights, these entities can inadvertently or directly influence autocratic tendencies within states. On one hand, international organisations such as the United Nations or regional bodies like the European Union aim to enforce democratic norms and monitor compliance with standards of governance, often acting as barriers to autocratic shifts. However, their effectiveness can be undermined by selective enforcement, double standards, autocratic influences from within, or geopolitical interests, which may embolden aspiring autocrats to exploit the gaps. Moreover, institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or World Bank, despite their focus on economic objectives, can indirectly contribute to autocratisation when their policies result in socio-economic

instability or are not entirely shared by political leaders and citizens, reducing public trust in democratic institutions, and calling for more sovereignty. Alongside, policies perceived as "imposed" by non-elected bodies may encourage narratives which enhance autocratic responses within political actors and citizens. Additionally, authoritarian regimes often leverage international platforms to sanitize their image and build legitimacy, using tools such as disinformation campaigns or co-opting global governance norms to shield themselves from external criticism. This complex interplay underscores the need for nuanced strategies to reinforce the role of international organisations as defenders of democracy while mitigating their vulnerabilities to autocratic manipulation.

4. Autocratising practices and modes

As discussed in the first chapter, autocratisation processes are those that cause a shift towards a more autocratic regime in the democracy-autocracy spectrum. Such processes occur through strategies that directly impact the fundamental dimensions that make a political regime less democratic and more autocratic. Therefore, as seen in the previous chapter, the broad dimensions that are being targeted and eroded are those related to political participation and contestation, which comprehend the essential features of a polyarchy, such as, *inter alia*, the protection of civil and political liberties and rights, political and electoral accountability and competition, governmental and institutional checks and balances, rule of law, independent judicial power. All these dimensions serve as critical arenas for intervention during autocratisation processes. The subsequent discussion will begin with a general conceptual analysis before transitioning to the exploration of practical modes.

4.1. Authoritarian and illiberal practices

According to Glasius (2018), autocratisation strategies occur through the adoption of a series of practices, understood as "patterned actions embedded within specific organised contexts" (Adler and Pouliot, 2011: 5). In particular, Glasius (2018.) distinguishes such practices between authoritarian and illiberal ones.

Authoritarian practices are best understood as recurring patterns of action designed to undermine accountability, owed by a political actor to the people under their control (vertical accountability) or to other political actors, powers and institutions of the state (horizontal accountability). Crucially, authoritarian practices are not simply a lack of accountability caused by institutional inefficiency or incapacity. Instead, they represent deliberate efforts to sabotage accountability mechanisms, including secrecy, disinformation, and the suppression of

dissenting voices to disrupt the flow of information and restrict avenues for expression (Glasius, 2018), with the ultimate goal of centralising power to use it in a discriminatory and not impartial way. For example, the separation of powers is fundamentally aimed at ensuring accountability, much like free and fair elections. Therefore, undermining the separation of powers, akin to election fraud, constitutes an authoritarian act. Patterns of bypassing parliamentary authority, whether through secrecy or overtly through unmandated presidential decrees, should also be categorized as authoritarian practices. These actions undermine one of the most critical mechanisms of accountability: parliamentary oversight (ibid.).

According to Gerschewski (2013), authoritarianism rests on three fundamental pillars: repression, legitimacy, and co-optation.

Repression involves the use of legal sanctions, bans, intimidation, and harassment to suppress dissent and maintain control over political and social organisations. This requires a robust institutional infrastructure capable of enforcing prohibitions, conducting police raids, and implementing targeted harassment to circumscribe tolerated political and social activities.

Legitimacy is cultivated through strategies designed to secure popular support and obedience, often by promoting ideological narratives like nationalism, demonstrating economic performance, or organising public mobilisation events to bolster the regime's credibility.

Co-optation ensures the loyalty of strategically significant actors by incorporating them into the regime through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, institutional arrangements, and networks of corruption and clientelism (ibid.)

In other words, authoritarian practices thus represent a profound threat to democratic processes by enabling domination through rule-breaking, interference with representativeness, and the suppression of civic engagement essential for accountability (Trandinis, 2022). These intentional, patterned actions obstruct transparency, participation, and access to information while silencing dissent, consolidating control over power, manipulating governance structures, and disrupting accountability mechanisms (both vertical and horizontal).

Different from authoritarian practices, illiberal ones can be defined as a recurring pattern of actions embedded within an organized context that infringes upon an individual's freedoms, autonomy, and dignity. Such practices include interference with legal equality, denial of legal recourse or the absence of recognition before the law, and violations of fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression, fair trial rights, freedom of religion, the right to privacy, and physical integrity (Glasius, 2018). Authors such as Kauth and King (2020) expanded the analysis on illiberalism identifying two constitutive subtypes: disruptive illiberalism and ideological illiberalism.

Disruptive illiberalism manifests as covert anti-democratic actions, often employed by aspiring autocrats to undermine procedural democratic norms. This subtype focuses on dismantling democratic processes and institutions while maintaining an outward facade of compliance.

In contrast, ideological illiberalism emerges from broader ideological struggles within ostensibly "liberal" democracies. It involves the unequal allocation of rights and responsibilities, reflecting deeper conflicts over values and principles in such systems.

While authoritarian practices are primarily aimed at shielding powerholders from accountability and enabling the unchecked use of concentrated power, illiberal practices serve a broader spectrum of purposes. These may range from silencing dissenting voices that threaten those in power to advancing an ideological agenda. Although conceptually distinct, there is considerable overlap between authoritarian and illiberal practices. For example, suppressing freedom of expression qualifies as an authoritarian practice by undermining mechanisms of accountability, while simultaneously constituting an illiberal practice by infringing on individual autonomy and dignity. This dual impact underscores the interconnectedness of these practices in eroding liberal-democratic principles.

4.2. Autocratisation modes

Not all autocratisation trajectories culminate in outright democratic breakdowns. It is, therefore, useful to distinguish between those defined as radical autocratisation, which dismantles a democratic regime and establishes an autocratic one, and moderate autocratisations, which bring about less drastic changes, such as transitions from liberal democracies to electoral democracies or from electoral autocracies to closed autocracies. Additionally, not all autocratisation processes result in fully closed autocracies. Full autocratisations, which lead to closed autocratic regimes, should be differentiated from partial processes that result in electoral democracies or electoral autocracies (Cassani and Tomini, 2019; Cassani and Tomini, 2020).

In relation to the modes of autocratisation, Bermeo (2016) identified four main ways: executive aggrandizement, election-day fraud, electoral manipulation, and coup d'état (which is threefold, with open-ended, promissory, and executive coups).

Open-ended coups involve illegal attempts by military or state elites to oust a sitting executive with the intent of retaining power indefinitely. In contrast, executive coups, or self-coups, occur when a freely elected leader suspends the constitution outright, consolidating power in a single decisive act. A more nuanced variation, promissory coups, frames the removal

of an elected government as a measure to protect democratic legality, often accompanied by pledges to hold elections and restore democracy, though these promises are seldom fulfilled.

Beyond coups, autocratisation can manifest in subtler ways. Executive aggrandisement occurs when elected leaders dismantle checks on their power, typically through legal mechanisms such as constitutional amendments, referenda, or by leveraging legislative majorities. This strategy undermines opposition forces while maintaining a facade of democratic legitimacy, as changes are framed as reflecting the will of the electorate.

Electoral manipulation also plays a crucial role. While blatant election-day fraud, such as ballot stuffing or falsifying results, has become less common, it has been replaced by strategic manipulation. This encompasses actions like restricting media access, exploiting state resources for incumbents' campaigns, obstructing opposition candidates, influencing electoral commissions, and altering electoral rules to favour incumbents. Unlike overt fraud, these tactics occur well before election day, often within legal boundaries, making them harder for observers to detect or denounce (Beaulieu and Hyde, 2009).

Building on Bermeo's framework, Cassani and Tomini, (2019; 2020) have updated it to better capture contemporary dynamics, identifying five ideal-typical and non-mutually exclusive modes of autocratisation: military intervention, manipulation of the electoral process, restriction of political liberties, limitation of civil liberties, and the erosion of accountability (Cassani and Tomini, 2019; Cassani and Tomini, 2020).

In particular, military interventions represent a significant and often disruptive mechanism in autocratisation, marked by an active and overt role of the army. Such interventions may involve the military acting independently to overthrow an elected government or operating at the behest of a civilian chief executive, often through a declared state of emergency in a self-coup. While these events typically undermine political participation and public contestation, they do not always lead to the establishment of a non-elected government and may instead result in new elections. Paramilitary groups and rebel forces may also play a role in these interventions, adding complexity to their impact and outcomes.

Electoral manipulation, another critical mode of autocratisation, encompasses actions directly related to the conduct of elections. These include blatant practices like ballot stuffing, vote buying, and irregularities in voter or candidate registration, vote counting, or polling accessibility. Subtler tactics, such as interfering with electoral management bodies, removing presidential term limits, redrawing districts, altering electoral thresholds, and postponing elections for extended periods, also fall within this category. Such manipulation undermines

universal suffrage and compromises political participation and public contestation, particularly concerning electoral competition.

In contrast, and in addition to Bermeo's framework, the limitation of political rights pertains to actions unrelated to electoral procedures but still influential in government selection processes. These include restrictions on freedoms of association, assembly, expression, and information, along with harassment, intimidation, imprisonment, and violence against journalists, politicians, and political supporters. Suppression of media pluralism further erodes political rights, limiting the watchdog role of independent media and hindering the exercise of political power.

Civil liberties, addressing the non-political dimensions of life, are curtailed by measures that compromise physical integrity, equality before the law, autonomy rights, religious and academic freedoms, minority rights, and the independence of civil society organisations. Curtailing freedoms and rights, such as association or expression, can limit citizens' ability to engage in political discourse or join political organisations, weakening the participatory foundation of the regime.

Finally, the weakening of horizontal accountability involves measures that dilute the checks and balances constraining executive power. These include constitutional reforms and other formal or informal actions designed to shift the balance of power in favour of the executive, subordinate the judiciary, or suppress independent regulatory and accountability agencies.

This updated framework highlights the evolving nature of autocratisation processes. The following section will specifically examine the ongoing transformations that have characterised the third wave of autocratisation since the 1990s.

4.3. Trends of the third wave of autocratisation: trajectories and modes

Autocratisation processes in the post-Cold War era have demonstrated a notable evolution, both in their trajectories and modes of operation, revealing complex patterns that underscore the multifaceted nature of democratic decline.

Since the 1990s, there have been four key trajectories: transitions from liberal democracy to electoral democracy, electoral democracy to electoral autocracy, electoral democracy to closed autocracy, and electoral autocracy to closed autocracy. Crucially, no transitions from liberal democracy to either electoral or closed autocracy were observed during the last thirty years, underscoring the resilience of liberal democracies in avoiding radical shifts toward authoritarianism (Bermeo, 2016; Cassani and Tomini, 2019; Cassani and Tomini, 2020).

Electoral democracies emerged as the most frequent victims of autocratisation, accounting for over half (53%) of the episodes of autocratisation (Cassani and Tomini, 2020). These regimes, characterised by weakened democratic norms and institutions, often transitioned into either electoral or closed autocracies. This trend signals their vulnerability as intermediate regimes, caught between democratic ideals and authoritarian and illiberal pressures. Indeed, data from the first two decades of the 21st century show that the frequency by which electoral democracy has undergone autocratisation has increased when compared to the other regimes, as shown in figure 3. Meanwhile, approximately 30% of autocratisation processes occurred within electoral autocracies, a finding that challenges earlier scholarly assumptions: electoral autocracies, once considered transitional phases on the path to democracy, have shown the tendency to regress further into the autocratic sphere, highlighting the non-linear nature of regime change (ibid.).

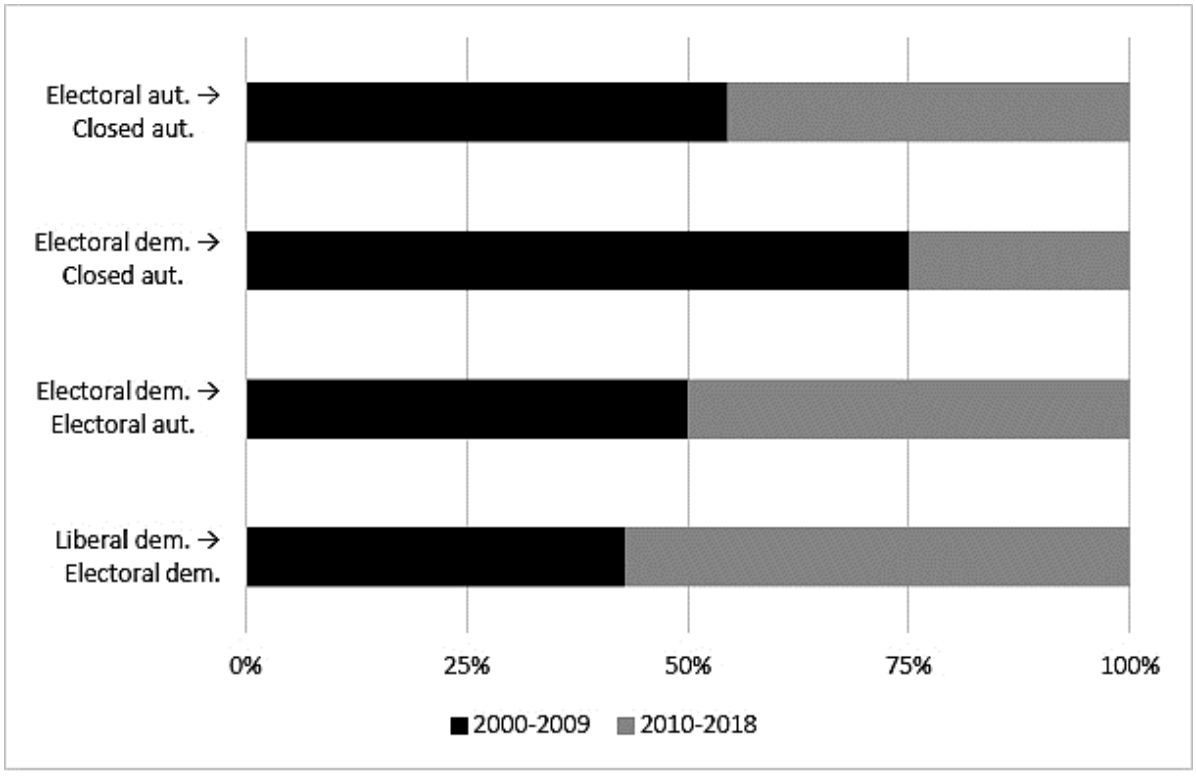

Figure 3. Autocratisation trajectories by period, between 2000-2018.
Source: author's adaption by Cassani and Tomini (2020: 1546).

The modes through which autocratisation unfolds have also undergone significant changes and during the third wave specific patterns have emerged.

Historical evidence reveals a recent significant reduction in the occurrence of coups, particularly the open-ended military coups that frequently led to enduring and often violent

dictatorships during the Cold War era. In the third wave of autocratisation, the probability of a democratic government falling victim to a successful coup has also decreased substantially, reaching near-zero levels in the early 2000s. Although there has been a modest uptick in recent years, the long-term decline in the success rate of coups, which began during the Cold War, remains firmly in place (Bermeo, 2016).

One possible explanation for the lower correlation between democratic regimes and the occurrence or success of coups can be derived from the analysis conducted by Germano, Grilli di Cortona, and Lanza (2014). Their findings suggest that in democratic regimes, even in contexts of widespread discontent, frustration, and dissatisfaction with political and economic performance, the presence of elections serves as a significant deterrent to coups. This is because, unlike autocracies, which provide no avenue for political participation or the replacement of policymakers, democracies allow citizens to engage in the political process and decision-making through electoral mechanisms. Regular elections empower citizens by offering a legitimate and structured opportunity for leadership turnover, thereby reducing the likelihood of resorting to extrajudicial or violent methods to instigate political change.

In parallel with the decline of traditional military coups, there has also been a marked reduction in executive coups. These power grabs were relatively common during the Cold War and persisted into the decade following its conclusion. For instance, the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines (1965-86) exemplifies this form of autocratic consolidation. During the 1990s, five notable executive coups occurred: in Peru in 1992 under Alberto Fujimori, in Armenia in 1995 under Levon Ter-Petrosian, in Belarus in 1995 under Alyaksandr Lukashenka, in Zambia in 1996 under Frederick Chiluba, and in Haiti in 1999 under René Préval. Encouragingly, the prevalence of executive coups in democracies has sharply declined since then. Between 2000 and 2013, only one democratic regime, Niger, experienced an executive coup, highlighting a significant downward trend in this form of democratic backsliding (ibid.).

On the contrary, one persistent form of democratic recession is the phenomenon of promissory coups. Unlike the Cold War era, when coup leaders often justified their power grabs as open-ended and final, contemporary coup makers frequently present their interventions as temporary measures. They frame these actions as necessary steps toward establishing a renewed and better-functioning democratic system. The proportion of coups categorized as promissory has increased dramatically, rising from 35% before 1990 to 85% in the years since. However, an analysis of the twelve successful promissory coups that occurred in democracies between 1990 and 2012 paints a bleak picture. Competitive elections rarely followed these coups

promptly, and even fewer instances resulted in genuine democratic improvements. Despite their rhetorical commitment to restoring democracy, these interventions have often failed to deliver on their promises (ibid.).

Looking at the electoral dimension of autocratisation, there has been a significant reduction in blatant election-day vote fraud. While electoral malpractice as a whole remains a concern, there is broad agreement that overt manipulation on election day has decreased noticeably. One of the main reasons could be the backfire that such a tactic could have. Indeed, resorting to blatant vote fraud can provoke significant political backlash. The risk is to alienate the public, galvanize opposition coalitions, and trigger adverse institutional responses, potentially undermining the very power they were intended to consolidate (Trandinis, 2022).

In this context, actors prefer to resort to more subtle tactics of electoral manipulation, such as limiting opposition access to media, misusing government resources to bolster incumbent campaigns, disqualifying opposition candidates from the ballot, obstructing voter registration, influencing electoral commissions, altering electoral rules to benefit incumbents, and engaging in targeted harassment of political adversaries. Unlike open election-day fraud, strategic manipulation typically occurs well in advance of elections and seldom involves overt legal violations. It is "strategic" in that it is deliberately crafted to evade detection and criticism by both international and domestic observers. As monitoring improved and the costs of blatant fraud increased, politicians adapted by developing subtler methods to secure electoral advantages (Bermeo, 2016).

Similarly, also violations of political rights, restrictions on civil liberties, and the weakening of horizontal accountability mechanisms have increasingly become the preferred strategies of autocratisation. These methods are subtler, often cloaked in legality, and strategically employed to erode democratic foundations without triggering an immediate backlash.

Data from the period provided by Cassani and Tomini (2019) highlights that autocratisation is rarely a result of a single mode. Instead, it tends to involve multiple, interlinked strategies. Interestingly, military interventions and electoral process manipulations often function as alternative rather than complementary modes. Conversely, violations of political rights, restrictions on civil liberties, and the weakening of horizontal accountability frequently co-occur, reflecting their interdependence in undermining democratic structures.

The relationship between trajectories and modes, shown in figure 4, reveals specific patterns. Military interventions overwhelmingly lead to full autocratisation, often resulting in the establishment of closed autocracies. These interventions are particularly prevalent in

transitions from electoral democracy to closed autocracy. Electoral process manipulations, meanwhile, are most commonly associated with shifts from electoral democracy to electoral autocracy and, to a lesser extent, from electoral autocracy to closed autocracy. These manipulations encompass a range of tactics, from blatant election-day fraud to more sophisticated strategies like gerrymandering, disqualifying opposition candidates, and exploiting electoral management bodies. Violations of political rights and restrictions on civil liberties are more evenly distributed across trajectories but are especially prominent in radical transitions from electoral democracy to either electoral or closed autocracy. Finally, the loosening of horizontal accountability mechanisms emerges as a critical mode in transitions involving democratic regimes. This includes constitutional reforms, judicial subordination, and the erosion of checks and balances, which collectively dismantle the institutional safeguards of democracy (Bermeo, 2016; Cassani and Tomini, 2019; Cassani and Tomini, 2020).

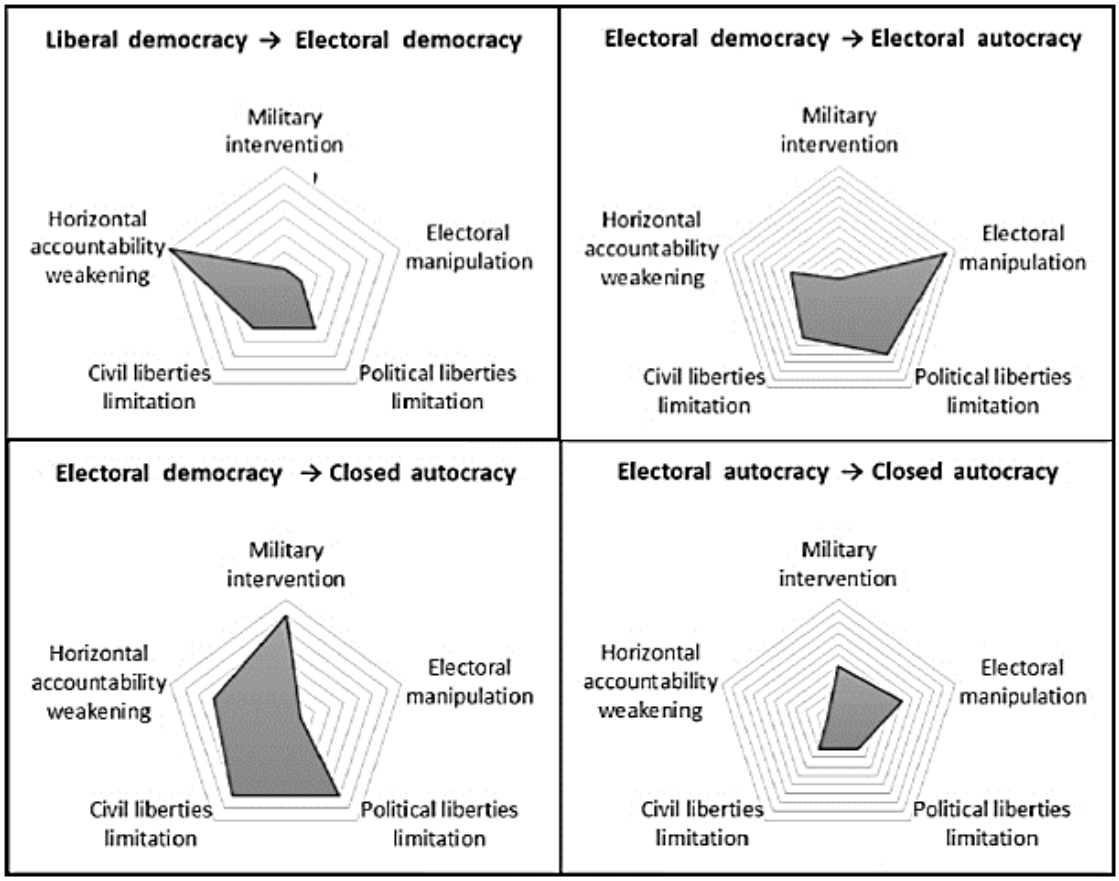

Figure 4. Autocratisation by trajectory and mode between 2000-2018.
Source: author's adaptation by Cassani and Tomini (2020: 1547).

The evolution of autocratisation processes reflects a broader shift in the global political landscape. While military interventions remain a significant factor, their prominence has waned

in favour of less conspicuous yet equally damaging tactics. This shift aligns with the broader trend of eroding democratic norms incrementally rather than through overt acts of subversion. The findings highlight the need for nuanced analyses that capture the interplay between trajectories and modes, shedding light on the diverse pathways through which regimes transition toward autocracy.

Chapter 3.
Comparative analysis of autocratisation in Türkiye, Tunisia, and Israel

As discussed in the previous chapter, the third wave of autocratisation is a global phenomenon unfolding at different paces and patterns across regions. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) remains the most autocratic region in the world, with 98% of its population living under autocratic regimes. Over the past decades, and particularly since the Arab Spring, democracy in the MENA region has suffered a marked decline, a trend that has remained relatively stable over the past two years.

This dissertation examines three case studies from the MENA region, selected for their distinct trajectories of autocratisation, which offer valuable insights into the broader regional and global trends.

The first country analysed is Türkiye, a state that connects the geopolitical divide between the West, the East, and the Middle East. As a key NATO member with significant military and diplomatic influence, Türkiye has played a crucial role in shaping regional politics, with its presence extending across the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Africa. Over the past two decades, Türkiye has experienced a profound episode of autocratisation. However, in recent years, this process appears to have stabilised.

Tunisia, often regarded as the Arab Spring's sole success story, represents a starkly different case. Historically, the country had never achieved high levels of democracy, except for the decade following the 2011 revolution, during which Tunisia experienced an unprecedented democratic opening. However, in 2021, this progress was abruptly reversed, leading to a full democratic breakdown. Tunisia's trajectory is particularly noteworthy as it exemplifies a rare case of rapid political U-turn: transitioning from autocracy to democracy and back to autocracy within a remarkably short time frame. By the end of 2023, Tunisia remained classified as an electoral autocracy, with democratic indicators significantly lower than at its post-revolution peak in 2012.

The final case study, Israel, differs significantly in democratic history and institutional structure from the previous two examples. However, its inclusion is critical due to its unprecedented democratic decline, well before the outbreak of the Gaza conflict. In 2023, for the first time in over 50 years, Israel lost its classification as a liberal democracy, now

designated as an electoral democracy. This shift is primarily attributed to sharp declines in legal transparency and predictability, as well as government-led attacks on the judiciary. Since taking office in late 2022, Israel's government has pursued a series of controversial reforms that threaten to further erode its democratic foundations. As these reforms continue to unfold, Israel's democratic trajectory remains uncertain, raising concerns about long-term institutional integrity and governance stability.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first three sections, dedicated to the cases mentioned above, will start with a brief historical and socio-political introduction, followed by a discussion on the main autocratisation modes. The fourth and last section will be a comparative analysis of these cases. An appendix is added, containing detailed information and clarification regarding the indicators of this chapter's figures.

1. Türkiye

The Turkish Republic was founded in 1923 on the remnants of the Ottoman Empire. On 10 August 1920, the defeated Empire and its Sultan signed the Treaty of Sèvres, which proposed the "dismemberment" of Türkiye, reducing its territory to the Anatolian peninsula. However, the resistance and War of Independence led and won by General Mustafa Kemal rendered the treaty obsolete. It was replaced in 1923 by the Treaty of Lausanne, which restored significant portions of the Ottoman Empire's territory to Türkiye. This victory transformed Mustafa Kemal into a national hero, and in 1934, he was officially given the surname Atatürk ("Father of the Turks").

Atatürk devised a "doctrine" that abolished the Sultanate and Caliphate while initiating a programme of modernisation, secularisation, and Westernisation of public life. This effort decisively broke with the Ottoman past and sought to impose a new national identity, particularly through an authoritarian regime that he led after resigning from the military in 1925.

Though a civilian regime, it concentrated power in the Presidency, held by Kemal himself, despite the existence of an elected unicameral parliament (the Grand National Assembly) and the office of the Prime Minister. Kemal's authority rested on the military, the bureaucracy of a centralised state, and the single party, the Republican People's Party (CHP).

In 1938, following his death, Atatürk was succeeded by his close associate and former Prime Minister, Mustafa İsmet İnönü, another ex-military officer. İnönü preserved the regime's structure but introduced limited political liberalisation in 1946 by opening the system to multiparty competition. The 1950 elections, the first multiparty ones, brought the Democratic

Party to power, although the political framework remained largely unchanged. A clear separation of powers was still absent, and the real centres of authority remained the military and the Kemalist bureaucracy. Meanwhile, elected politicians lacked the legitimacy, power, and experience to establish a liberal democracy (Germano, Grilli di Cortona, and Lanza, 2014).

The socially and religiously conservative and free market-oriented Democratic Party tried to maintain a line that made a synthesis between Kemalist principles (Coşkun and Kölemen, 2021), which would bring the votes of the more conservative wing, and a more progressive line guaranteeing greater freedoms, which would bring the votes of the religious wing and the Kurds (McDowall, 2004). Therefore, exiles were allowed to return, greater religious freedoms were granted, and a more liberal system was introduced, mirroring US economic penetration into Türkiye. In 1952, indeed, it became part of NATO, emerging as a key member. Thus, the more pluralistic and democratic climate that had been created allowed greater freedom of the press and a greater influx of news from outside (Germano, Grilli di Cortona, and Lanza, 2014).

However, in 1960, a group of officers deposed the Prime Minister, accusing him of undermining Kemalist constitutional principles of Turkish nationalism, secularism, reformism, and statism through governance marked by abuses and reforms contrary to its ideology (Gunes, 2012). The coup brought the military back to power for roughly a year, during which three government members, including the Prime Minister, were executed. In 1961, a new Constitution was introduced to formalise measures aimed at safeguarding individual rights and curbing government overreach. Key provisions included the establishment of a Constitutional Court, a High Council of the Judiciary, and a second legislative chamber, the Senate, which was dismissed soon after. It also created the National Security Council, a body that would play a significant role in national politics. Electoral reforms introduced proportional representation, further shaping the political system (Germano, Grilli di Cortona, and Lanza, 2014). Following the Constitution's enactment, civilian governance resumed, though the military coup's leader, Cemal Gürsel, assumed the Presidency and chaired the newly established National Security Council.

However, the military's power remained intact. Kemalist doctrine explicitly recognised the military's "right and duty" to intervene in politics whenever the Republic's core principles were under threat (Germano, Grilli di Cortona, and Lanza, 2014). Over the 20th century, this mandate was invoked four times to address political instability and radicalism stemming from deep ethnic and religious divisions. The proportional representation system introduced in 1961

further exacerbated these tensions, justifying interventions aimed at safeguarding secularism from perceived Islamist threats.

The first coup d'état occurred in May 1960, as mentioned earlier. The second, less violent, took place in 1971, forcing the resignation of conservative Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel. This intervention was justified as necessary to end the political crisis and instability of the time. Subsequent caretaker governments led to elections in 1973.

The third coup occurred on 12 September 1980, during a period of escalating violence, radicalism, and a de facto civil war. This was the most severe intervention: the military dismissed Demirel's government, dissolved all political parties, suppressed dissent, and particularly targeted the Kurdish minority and the PKK. The military junta retained power for over two years, during which political freedoms were heavily curtailed. Provisions allowing the limitations of political and civil liberties were inserted in the 1982 constitution which marked the civilian return to the institutions of Turkish politics.

The fourth intervention took place in February 1997, when Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, leader of the primary partner in the governing coalition (Islamist Welfare Party), was forced to resign in what became known as a "post-modern coup" (Coşkun and Kölemen, 2021). He was banned from political activity for five years, and his party was disbanded. The military justified its actions as necessary to defend the principles of Kemalism against the perceived threat posed by Erbakan's overtly Islamic policies, seen as endangering Türkiye's secularism and international alignment (Germano, Grilli di Cortona, and Lanza, 2014).

The rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in 2002 was catalyzed by the crises occurring between 1997-2001, including economic turmoil and political instability. Initially, the AKP's first term (2002–2007) was characterized by economic stabilization and the introduction of democratic reforms, offering a sense of progress and optimism. However, following its overwhelming re-election in 2007, the AKP began to display increasingly authoritarian and autocratic tendencies, a pattern that intensified at every critical juncture, revealing a growing inclination toward autocratisation.

After its 2007 re-election, the party began to curtail military influence and expand control over the judiciary, initially garnering liberal support by framing its actions as democratizing reforms.

Subsequent events, including the 2013 Gezi Park protests and the AKP's response to them, further underscored its shift toward authoritarianism. The protests revealed widespread dissatisfaction with Erdoğan's increasingly autocratic governance, marked by suppression of civil liberties and violent crackdowns. The party's trajectory continued toward centralization of

power, culminating in the aftermath of the failed 2016 coup attempt, which Erdoğan used as a pretext to declare a state of emergency. This period saw mass purges in the public sector, widespread arrests, and the suppression of Kurdish and leftist opposition. The 2017 constitutional referendum cemented Erdoğan's power, transitioning Türkiye to a presidential system with minimal checks and balances. This transformation rendered the AKP's initial democratic promises a distant memory, with Türkiye fully entrenched in an autocratic governance model.

The latest presidential and parliamentary elections have been dominated by Erdoğan and the AKP. However, it is important to highlight how in the March 31st, 2024, local elections Türkiye's main opposition party delivered a significant and unexpected setback to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rule by achieving a decisive victory, one of the best performances in decades, in the country's local elections. The opposition retained control of Türkiye's largest and key cities, including the capital, Ankara, and Istanbul, as well in smaller rural districts in the country's heartland, well beyond their traditional strongholds along the coast.

1.1. Causes and modes of autocratisation

As discussed above, during the 20th century there have been different autocratisation processes, three of which occurred blatantly through military intervention. However, the rise of the AKP since 2002 marked a significant departure from Türkiye's political history and laid the groundwork for a profound restructuring of the political regime.

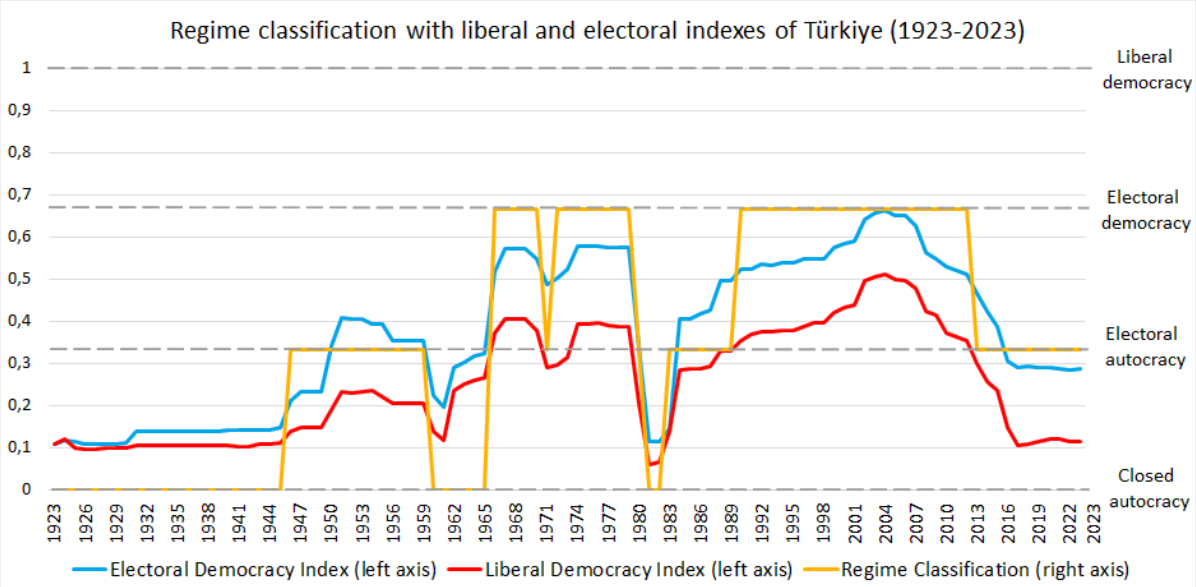

Figure 5. Regime classification and liberal and electoral democracy index in Türkiye (1923-2023).
Source: author's elaboration from V-Dem dataset and V-Dem ERT dataset.

The previous Figure 5 shows the type of Turkish political regime since its foundation in 1923, and it also focuses on the levels of the liberal and electoral components of democracy. The first datum visible is that the Turkish republic never reached the status of liberal democracy, attaining at maximum the status of electoral democracy. The second crucial insight is the steep decrease in the liberal and electoral components and the downgrade to electoral autocracy or closed autocracy due to the autocratisation episodes through military interventions in 1960, 1971, and 1980.

The third crucial information provided by the graph is the autocratisation episode that started in the early 21st century, coinciding with the first term in office of the AKP and Erdoğan. During this episode, which transitioned the regime into an electoral autocracy, the liberal component of democracy suffered a greater decline than the electoral component, as shown by the dominance of the blue line (electoral democracy index) over the orange one (liberal democracy index). The meaning and the implication of such difference between these two democratic components will be discussed in detail in the next paragraph concerning the unfair electoral environment (section 1.1.1.).

During the past two decades, the country has autocratised significantly, even if now it appears to have stabilized and no longer results as an ongoing autocratiser under the more scientific ERT methodology (Nord et al., 2024).

If, in the case of military interventions, the explanation of the autocratisation process results quite linear, the explanation of the autocratisation episode under AKP and Erdoğan's rule appears more complex and varied. In the next sections, it will be discussed how such an autocratisation episode unfolded and through which modes.

1.1.1. Unfair electoral competition, limited freedoms of media, expression, and information

While there is no systematic and substantial electoral manipulation in Türkiye, there are not also either entirely free or fair elections. First, the election laws in Türkiye restrict parties from campaigning for extended periods, which creates a significant advantage for the ruling AKP (Esen and Gumuscu, 2016). Moreover, the electoral environment in Türkiye has been fundamentally tampered with by three primary factors: the politicisation of state institutions, disproportionate access to resources, and uneven media access. Together, these elements have created an unbalanced platform that seriously undermines the principles of free and fair elections, jeopardising democratic tenure.

Since its first term in office, the AKP has tried to create an imbalanced political environment in order to disadvantage the opposition (Ayan Musil, 2024; Coşkun and Kölemen, 2021; Esen and Gumuscu 2016).

A first move was to blend state and party apparatuses, resulting in deeply politicised institutions that openly favoured the ruling party. The complementary step has been the politicisation and appropriation of public and private resources to solidify its electoral advantage. Indeed, the party has used state funds to organise partisan events disguised as public functions, with officials leveraging discretionary funds to support campaign activities free from oversight. By exploiting these institutional, media, and resource asymmetries, the AKP has eroded electoral fairness, transforming the political playing field into one heavily tilted in its favour (Ayan Musil, 2024; Burç and Tokatlı, 2020; Esen, 2021).

Another crucial strategy employed has been creating unequal access to media, limiting freedom of expression and information. This has entrenched a structural bias in favour of the AKP, severely limiting the opposition's ability to communicate with voters effectively.

The AKP under Erdoğan has systematically implemented a range of strategies to consolidate control over Türkiye's mainstream media, resulting in a substantial restructuring of the country's media landscape, undermining substantially freedom of expression and dissent, as well as journalistic and media independence.

This process occurred in a threefold manner. One strategy concerned the reconfiguration of media ownership, whereby entities closely aligned with the government acquired significant shares in major media corporations, ensuring that these outlets adopted narratives favourable to the ruling party (Coşkun and Kölemen, 2021; Esen and Gumuscu, 2016). Data show that by 2019, nearly 95% of Türkiye's mainstream media was under the direct or indirect influence of President Erdoğan and the AKP government, as reported by the International Press Institute (IPI, 2019).

This structural dominance was complemented by other two practices aiming at undermining media independence, such as the intimidation and the criminalisation of dissenting journalists, alongside broadcasting bans, financial penalties, and the forced closure of independent news agencies, television networks, and radio channels (Coşkun and Kölemen, 2021; Esen and Gumuscu, 2016; OSCE, 2015). Indeed, government officials frequently interfered with content coverage of newspapers and television newsrooms to dictate priorities about topics to be covered or excluded. Such directives were often accompanied by either implicit threats or the promise of rewards. Journalists who resisted such pressure were dismissed or coerced into resigning (Yeşil, 2016, OSCE, 2015). Those who persisted in

reporting critically, particularly through alternative media channels, faced severe reprisals: criminal charges were frequently brought against such individuals, leading to lengthy periods of pretrial detention and imprisonment. Following the declaration of a state of emergency in 2016, these practices intensified. Over the two-year state of emergency, which was repeatedly renewed until July 2018, the government ordered the closure of 18 television channels, 22 radio stations, 50 newspapers, and 20 magazines through emergency decrees (Coşkun and Kölemen, 2021). Although emergency decree laws did not substantively alter existing criminal law, their implementation facilitated the escalation of judicial harassment against journalists. By 2019, Türkiye had the world's highest number of incarcerated journalists, according to the Journalists' Union of Türkiye, and was ranked 157th out of 180 nations on the World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (Coşkun and Kölemen, 2021; Esen and Gumuscu, 2016).

In practice, the AKP government has systematically dismantled media independence in Türkiye through a combination of structural interventions, legal measures, and coercive tactics. Through this comprehensive strategy, Türkiye's media landscape has become a tightly controlled environment, with little space for independent journalism or opposition voices. This transformation, which has profoundly undermined democratic and liberal norms, is captured by data shown in the following Figure 6.

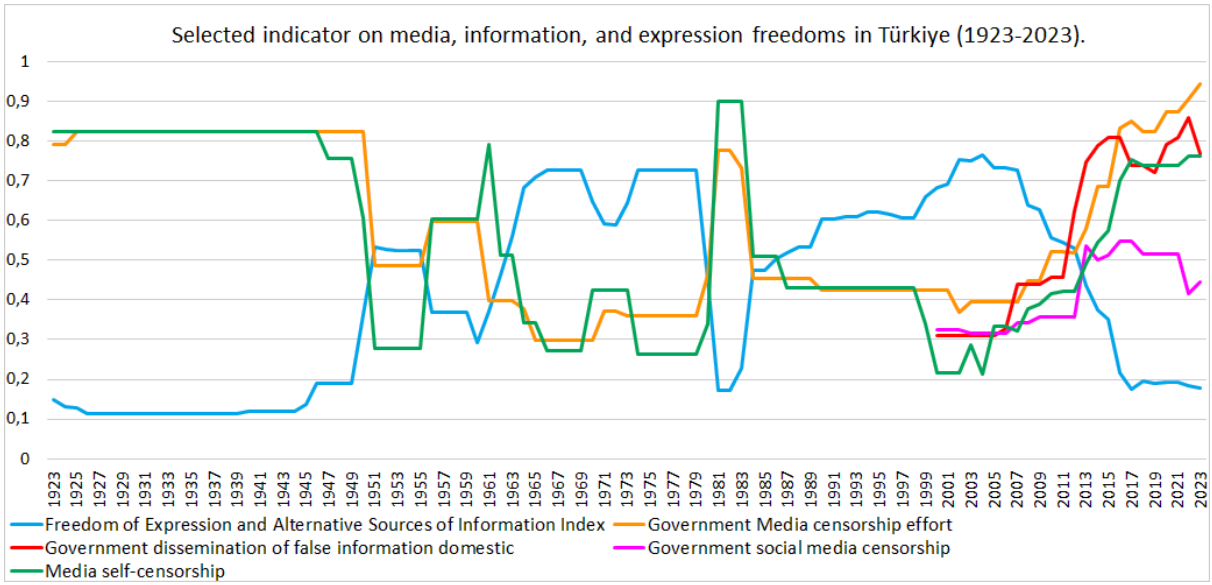

Figure 6. Selected indicator on media, information, and expression freedoms in Türkiye (1923-2023).
Source: author's elaboration from V-Dem dataset.

This graph, based on data from the V-Dem dataset, traces the evolution of media independence and freedom of expression over the century-long existence of the Turkish Republic. It highlights how these indicators reflect pivotal moments in Türkiye's political history.

The "Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index" (blue line) demonstrates relative stagnation at low levels during the early Republic years, reflecting the centralized and authoritarian nature of the state under one-party rule.

In the 1950s, following the first multiparty elections in 1950, there was a notable improvement in indicators such as the Alternative Source of Information Index and Freedom of Expression, accompanied by a decline in media self-censorship. However, this more pluralistic environment also saw an increase in government censorship efforts, as authorities sought to counterbalance the growing plurality and autonomy of media outlets.

From the 1960s onward, the indicators display a cyclical pattern, particularly during the military coups of 1960, 1971, and 1980. These periods are marked by sharp declines in media plurality and freedom of expression, which only slightly improved after the military relinquished power.

Since the early 2000s, however, the data reveals a sustained and significant decline in media independence and freedom of expression, a trend that aligns with the rise of the AKP and Erdoğan's increasingly autocratic rule.

Key indicators, such as the Alternative Source Information Index and the Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index, show a marked decline, particularly after 2010, reflecting the increasing consolidation of power by Erdoğan and the growing suppression of independent journalism. This period is characterized by heightened government censorship efforts, as evidenced by the steady rise in the censorship index, which peaks around 2017 following the attempted coup in 2016. Emergency decrees issued in the wake of the coup were used to close critical media outlets, jail journalists, and tighten control over the media landscape. Social media platforms also became significant targets, with increasing restrictions and censorship measures introduced, especially after 2011 (year in which AKP won the elections with 49,83% of votes), as the government sought to control dissenting voices online. Since 2020, the government has tightened its constraints on social media, successfully censoring a significant portion of political content, as shown by data of the index represented by the yellow line.

The dissemination of false information by the government similarly increased from 2015 onwards, highlighting a strategy of disinformation and propaganda aimed at shaping

public opinion domestically and abroad. Additionally, the rise of media self-censorship, particularly after the 2016 attempted coup, underscores the climate of fear fostered by state repression, where journalists and media outlets pre-emptively silence themselves to avoid government reprisals. These trends collectively illustrate the systematic erosion of media and expression freedoms under Erdoğan's rule, driven by legal and structural reforms, control over media ownership, and a crackdown on dissent, which has significantly undermined Türkiye's democratic institutions.

In other words, fair and free elections can only occur when opposition forces enjoy equal rights to organize and have a genuine chance of winning office, comparable to that of the incumbent (Przeworski et al., 2000). This organizational capacity relies on the presence of an independent public opinion, which is fostered by a polycentric structuring of the media and their competitive interplay. Additionally, it depends on the safeguarding of fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, access to information, association, and the protection of individual rights from arbitrary state intervention. Under Erdoğan's two decades of rule, however, these freedoms have been systematically eroded. The government's extensive interference in the media and journalistic sphere, as well as asymmetrical access to state resources, has severely compromised these essential rights, undermining the foundations of a democratic and liberal society.

1.1.2. The President v. the separation of powers

Even if the President is elected regularly through popular vote, reforms over the last two decades have provided this figure with prerogatives and powers which have jeopardised the effective separation of powers. As discussed below, the actual presidential system subjugates the legislative and judicial powers to the president.

In its early years, the AKP under Erdoğan appeared to offer a promising path toward strengthening the rule of law in Türkiye. Driven by the ambition to secure European Union membership, Erdoğan implemented a series of political and legal reforms. These included adopting a new Criminal Code and Criminal Procedure Code designed to align more closely with the European Convention on Human Rights (Tahiroglu, 2020). Furthermore, a constitutional amendment in 2004 formally acknowledged the supremacy of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in matters concerning fundamental rights.

However, over the years Turkish judicial independence has been eroded through many different reforms carried out by the AKP, such as passing constitutional amendments that

expanded executive control over the judiciary, reorganizing the Council of Judges and Prosecutors (previously named "High Council of Judges and Prosecutors) to align it more closely with government interests, and fostering lower courts to defy rulings of higher courts, further undermining judicial authority (Coşkun and Kölemen, 2021).

The Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSK), one of Türkiye's most powerful legal bodies, oversees the appointment, promotion, transfer, and suspension of judges and prosecutors. The HSK is chaired by the minister of justice, a political appointee, and its 13 members are elected by the President (six) and parliament (seven) (art. 159 of the Turkish Constitution). The HSK also selects all members of the Court of Appeals and 75% of the Council of State, while the President appoints the remaining members (arts. 154 and 155). Similarly, the President and parliament appoint all 15 members of the Constitutional Court, with the President selecting 12 and parliament 3 (art. 147). Erdoğan's parliamentary majority allows his government to control these appointments entirely, effectively shaping the composition of Türkiye's highest legal institutions: the Constitutional Court, the Court of Appeals, and the Council of State. This consolidation of power enables the executive branch to exert significant influence over the judiciary, compromising the principle of judicial independence (Coşkun and Kölemen, 2021; Yılmaz, 2020).

Such a situation is the result of different reforms and actions, many of which occurred in the aftermath of the attempted coup on 15th July 2016. Following this failed coup, the Turkish government declared a nationwide state of emergency under Articles 120–121 of the Constitution. Initially set for three months, the state of emergency was extended seven times before finally being lifted on 18 July 2018. Its stated purpose was to restore state authority and remove coup supporters from public institutions. However, the state of emergency also introduced sweeping emergency decrees with a scope that extended far beyond its declared objectives. These decrees regulated nearly every aspect of public life, leading to widespread purges and significant changes to state institutions. Measures included the dissolution of organizations, mass dismissals of public officials, and the deprivation of fundamental rights. Public officials, particularly within the judiciary, military, police, and other state departments, were dismissed en masse. Additionally, these decrees facilitated significant legislative changes and the introduction of new laws. By the conclusion of the state of emergency, a total of 32 emergency decrees had been issued (Yılmaz, 2020).

This reliance on emergency decrees rendered legislative and judicial processes nearly irrelevant, consolidating power within the executive branch. These decrees effectively subordinated all branches of government to the decisions of President Erdoğan, who now held

unparalleled authority. Following constitutional amendments, the presidency became the most powerful political position in Türkiye, with the President directly controlling the legislative, executive, and judicial branches (Burç and Tokatlı, 2020). The amendments permitted the President to serve three consecutive five-year terms while retaining the role of party leader, marking a significant departure from Türkiye's post-1980 tradition of presidential neutrality. Although the 1982 Constitution granted the presidency symbolic and limited authority, the new system redefined the role, allowing the President to exert direct influence over candidate selection for parliamentary elections and legislative processes (Yılmaz, 2020).

The president's authority now extends to issuing presidential decrees on executive matters, enabling the circumvention of legislative processes, which are already constrained by presidential dominance. Additionally, the President can veto and return legislation to parliament for reconsideration. As both head of state and government, the President appoints ministers and high-ranking state officials, determines the national budget, and holds the power to dissolve parliament, whereas the parliament must reach a three-fifths majority to remove the president. Furthermore, the President can unilaterally declare a state of emergency, opening the possibility of prolonged periods of extraordinary governance (Burç and Tokatlı, 2020; Coşkun and Kölemen, 2021).

Such an autocratisation process is graphically represented in the following Figure 7, which contains few but insightful indicators measuring the evolution of executive, judiciary, and legislative powers in Türkiye from 1923 to 2023, illustrating significant shifts in democratic governance, institutional oversight, and constitutional adherence over a century.

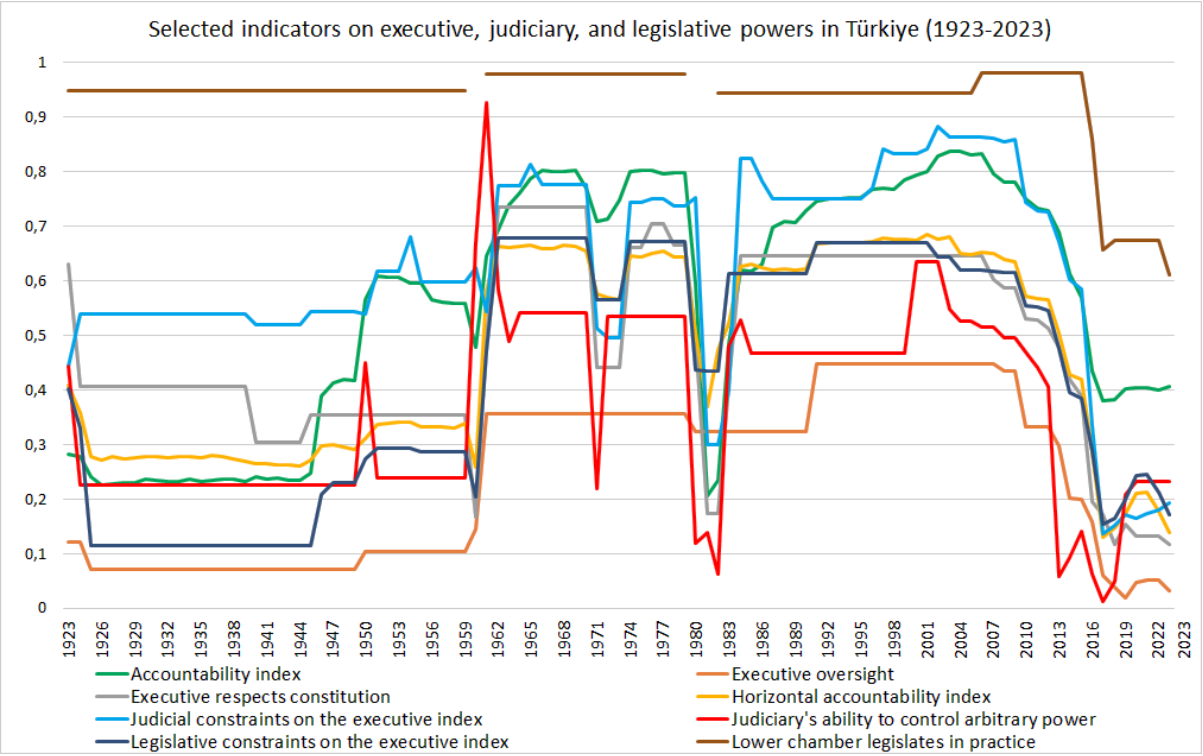

Figure 7. Selected indicators on executive, judiciary, and legislative powers in Türkiye (1923-2023). Source: author's elaboration from V-Dem dataset.

In the early years of the Turkish Republic, the indicators show uniformly low levels of accountability and institutional checks on executive power, reflecting the highly centralized governance structure under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and later İsmet İnönü. During this period, the Accountability Index, Horizontal Accountability Index, and Judicial Constraints on the Executive Index remain stagnant at minimal levels, while executive respect for the constitution is also low, indicating limited institutional pluralism or adherence to liberal democratic principles.

A turning point occurs in the 1950s, with the introduction of multiparty politics and the first free elections in 1950. During this decade, there is a noticeable rise in the Accountability Index, Horizontal Accountability Index, and Legislative Constraints on the Executive Index, reflecting a strengthening of democratic institutions and a more balanced distribution of power among branches of government. However, this progress is tempered by a concurrent rise in executive overreach, as political polarization and weak institutional safeguards begin to destabilize the system. This trend culminates in the military coup of 1960, which is clearly marked by a sharp decline across all indicators, signalling the collapse of legislative and judicial oversight and the centralization of power under military rule.

The subsequent decades, including the military interventions of 1971 and 1980, exhibit a cyclical pattern of democratic erosion and partial recovery. Each coup results in a dramatic reduction in accountability and constraints on the executive, as reflected in the plummeting indices during these periods. However, the post-coup recovery phases, particularly in the late 1980s and 1990s, show gradual improvements, with a modest resurgence in judicial and legislative constraints and increasing accountability. This period marks Türkiye's efforts to align with democratic norms, partly driven by its aspirations to join the European Union, leading to reforms aimed at enhancing the independence of the judiciary and the legislature.

The early 2000s, marked by the rise of the AKP and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, initially sees some positive trends in judicial and legislative oversight as well as executive respect for the constitution, in line with the party's pro-reform rhetoric. However, from 2010 onwards, the graph depicts a sustained and steep decline in almost all indicators. The "Judiciary's ability to control arbitrary power" and "Executive Respects Constitution" indices collapse sharply, reflecting the systematic weakening of the judiciary's independence and the erosion of constitutional checks on the executive. Legislative constraints on the executive and horizontal accountability also diminish significantly, indicating the consolidation of executive dominance over the legislative branch. The transition to an executive presidential system further entrenches this imbalance, as seen in the near-total decline of the "Lower Chamber Legislates in Practice" index, highlighting the marginalization of parliamentary powers.

By 2023, the graph illustrates the near-total dismantling of democratic checks and balances in Türkiye. The "Accountability Index" reaches its lowest point since the early years of the Republic, reflecting an executive operating with minimal oversight or constraints. The collapse of the "Judicial Constraints on the Executive Index" and "Executive Oversight" further underscores the erosion of institutional independence and the judiciary's inability to act as a counterweight to the executive. These trends reveal the AKP's systematic efforts to dismantle Türkiye's democratic infrastructure, undermining the separation of powers and concentrating authority in the hands of Erdoğan. The concentration of such extensive powers in the presidency has fundamentally altered Türkiye's political system, creating an imbalance with no effective mechanisms to supervise or limit the president's authority. This centralization of power has transformed the President into a unified embodiment of the state and the ruling party, eroding democratic accountability and further consolidating authoritarian control over the country (Burç and Tokatlı, 2020).

In conclusion, the AKP leadership systematically eroded the rule of law by consolidating control over the legislative and judicial branches, effectively dismantling institutions designed to provide checks and balances (Esen and Gumuscu 2016).

2. Tunisia

The three centuries of Ottoman domination (1574-1881) and two of the Husainid dynasty (1705-1957) were ended by the instauration of the French protectorate which lasted 75 years (1881-1956).

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the independence movement born under the protectorate began to grow stronger among the Tunisian population. The negotiation with the French authorities was guided by the nationalist leader Habib Bouguiba, who in 1934 founded the Neo-*Destour* (constitution) party. This process ultimately led to Tunisia's independence in 1956, when the Kingdom of Tunisia was established under Bey Muhammad VIII al-Amin. However, the monarchy was short-lived. On July 25th, 1957, the Republic of Tunisia was proclaimed, Bourguiba was elected as its first president, and the constitution was promulgated in 1959 (El Houssi, 2017; Pizzardi, 2003).

Following independence, the Neo-*Destour* Party under Bourguiba initiated a series of transformative reforms. These efforts prioritised advancements in education, the emancipation of women, and significant legal changes, laying the foundation for a modernised and secular society. While economic development progressed more gradually, the government placed a strong emphasis on addressing the needs of the country's impoverished regions, striving to reduce disparities and promote social equity. A priority in his agenda was curtailing the political influence of Islam and distancing the nation from the pan-Islamic identity of the Muslim Ummah, which would cause political and social conflicts in Tunisian politics (Pizzardi, 2003).

However, even if Bourguiba and his party maintained an unchallenged monopoly over domestic politics, his socio-political and economic agenda was the cause of growing tensions among Tunisian society. The cooperative economic model of the 1960s faltered in the 1970s, giving way to liberalisation and growing public discontent. Tunisia's first general strike in 1978 ("Black Thursday") and the 1984 "Bread Riots" exposed rising inequalities and dissatisfaction among marginalised groups, particularly youth and the rural poor. Internal frustrations grew over Bourguiba's increasingly centralised grip on power. Bourguiba responded by becoming even more authoritarian, further alienating the party's base, and failing to deliver on promises of political liberalisation (ibid.).

Despite Bourguiba's secularist efforts, Islam remained deeply ingrained in Tunisian society, especially among the non-elite. The 1970s saw the rise of the Islamic Tendency Movement (*Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique*), led by Rached Ghannouchi, which gained traction among those excluded from economic development. Bourguiba's refusal to legitimise the movement and formalise it as a political party radicalised its members, triggering episodes of violence and strong government repression. On October 2nd, 1987, Bourguiba appointed General Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, a former Minister of the Interior, as Prime Minister, intending to escalate the repression of Islamist movements. Ben Ali was resolute in opposing Bourguiba's directives, as a violent escalation could have resulted in further radicalising the movement's supporters, some of whom were embedded within Tunisia's security forces. Recognising the danger of plunging the country into violence, Ben Ali refused to carry out Bourguiba's orders. Instead, through a "medical" coup, Ben Ali was able to remove Bourguiba from office, effectively ending his thirty years rule (ibid.).

On the night of November 6th, 1987, a commission of seven doctors signed a medical report attesting to Bourguiba's mental and physical incapacity to continue his presidential office. By assuming the presidency in accordance with constitutional art. 57, Ben Ali successfully dismissed Bourguiba, averting political violence.

The first two years of Ben Ali's regime were marked by an apparent commitment to restoring the rule of law and embracing political openness. In 1988, Ben Ali introduced a law stipulating that parties must uphold the Personal Status Code and refrain from referencing religion, language, race, or region in their principles, goals, actions, or programmes. The law intended to exclude the Islamist movement from the political sphere. Drawing on his diplomatic background, Ben Ali offered the Islamist movement a compromise, granting amnesty to imprisoned members and tolerating their activities, on the condition that they delay their efforts to formalise as a political party (ibid.).

However, this initial period of reform quickly unravelled. Eager to secure popular legitimacy, Ben Ali called for early elections in 1989, running as the sole presidential candidate with unanimous support from all parties. His landslide victory, securing 99.27% of votes, was accompanied by parliamentary elections that revealed an unexpected challenge: the success of the "Independent List", largely composed of Islamist candidates unable to officially run under the Movement *Ennahda*, whose members and supporters would be targeted by Ben Ali repression (ibid.).

Indeed, despite some real achievements in economic and social development, these advances remained disconnected from the promised democratisation of the political system.

Ben Ali's regime systematically silenced dissenting voices, not only among Islamists but across the political spectrum. The distinction between Bourguiba and Ben Ali is notable: Bourguiba openly denied democracy, while Ben Ali consistently promised it but failed to deliver. Instead, Ben Ali's governance relied on repression and police control, echoing Bourguiba's authoritarianism, prioritising state control and stability over genuine political openness (ibid.).

Ben Ali's presidency lasted until 2011, when massive social unrest and protests forced him to abandon the country and its office.

The origin of the protests was a small town in the middle of Tunisia, Sidi Bouzid, and the triggering event was the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi, a young Tunisian with a diploma, who, like many others of his generation, found himself facing a future with limited prospects. Despite his education, he had to work as an unlicensed street vendor selling vegetables to support himself and his family.

Bouazizi's suicide came after yet another police raid on the market where he worked. During this raid, the authorities confiscated his goods once again, citing his lack of a license. Faced with this repeated targeting of the poorest and most vulnerable, on December 17th, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of the town hall in Sidi Bouzid. It was the catalyst for the so-called Jasmine Revolution, which, like a domino effect, spread to neighbouring and distant Arab countries. The Jasmine Revolution led to the phenomenon of the Arab spring, or better, springs, given other countries' very different outcomes.

From that moment, popular demonstrations began, expressing solidarity with Bouazizi, frustration over the lack of hope for better economic and social conditions, and condemnation of the violence inflicted on the population. Initially, the protests started with Bouazizi's immediate community in Sidi Bouzid, but within days they spread to the capital, Tunis, and other Tunisian cities.

The protests escalated as the armed forces responded with violence, leading to numerous deaths among the demonstrators. This created a cycle of intensifying protests and increasingly violent repression. The deaths caused by police crackdowns fuelled further outrage among the population, resulting in even more determined demonstrations.

These popular uprisings eventually led to the fall of Ben Ali's regime. He resigned and fled the country on January 14, 2011, nearly a month after Bouazizi's tragic suicide. From that moment it opened a completely new page for the Tunisian republic and its citizens.

The role of civil society was greatly expanded, fostering a more open and tolerant political system. The new rights of association and freedom of speech created space to address previous issues, further enriching its civic landscape. Emerging watchdog and electoral

observation organizations played pivotal roles in ensuring accountability and transparency in democratic institutions. Meanwhile, advocacy groups focusing on women's rights, social justice, corruption, and transitional justice began to monitor and challenge government policies actively.

Ennahda, the Islamist political party, became a major player in the new political environment and especially in the composition of the newly elected Constituent Assembly (October 2011). Progress toward a new constitution gained momentum in late 2013, as *Ennahda* leaders made significant concessions to secularists and liberals, particularly regarding the role of Islam in public life. These efforts culminated in January 2014, when the Constituent Assembly, elected in Tunisia's first free and fair elections since independence, approved a new constitution. The document was lauded by both Tunisian leaders and international observers as a landmark achievement and a model of successful democracy and compromise between Islamist and secular political forces.

Tunisia was seen as the "Arab anomaly" (Masri, 2017), as it was the only Arab country which transitioned to democracy in 2011 and further improved in 2014. However, its democracy never fully consolidated and started autocratising in 2021 under the presidency of Saied, elected in 2019 as an independent (Huber and Pisciotta, 2022).

2.1. Causes and modes of autocratisation

As shown in Figure 8, post-independence Tunisia has never displayed high levels of democratic attributes. Since the foundation of the Republic, it classified as electoral autocracy, even though both electoral and liberal components were very low. This resulted in a political system always halfway between electoral and closed autocracy. This latter classification was actually targeted in the aftermath of the "medical" coup perpetrated by Ben Ali in 1987, to then return to a situation similar to the Bourguiba era.

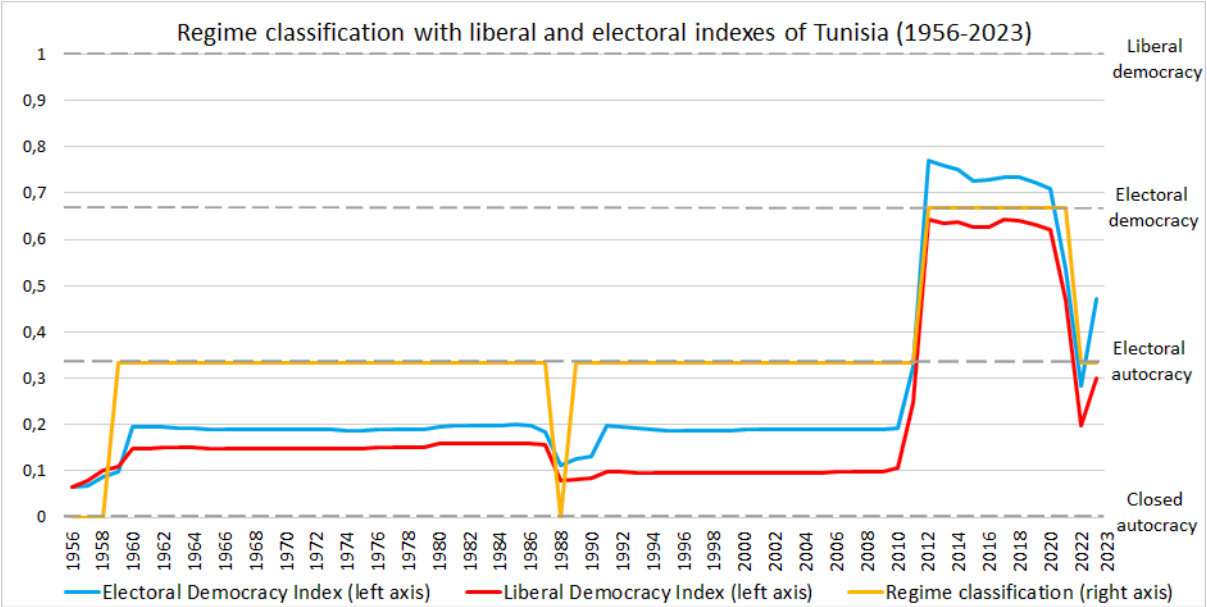

Figure 8. Regime classification and liberal and electoral democracy index in Tunisia (1956-2023). Source: author's elaboration from V-Dem dataset and V-Dem ERT dataset.

The first substantial episode of democratisation in Tunisian history occurred in 2011 with the Jasmine Revolution. Such an episode brought a great improvement in the quality of different democratic traits, such as representation, political competition, freedom of expression and association, and in civic and political liberties in general.

However, this lasted for almost a decade, until 2021. In these 10 years, Tunisia could experience three free parliamentary elections (2011, 2014, and 2019) and two presidential ones (2014 and 2019). This latter presidential election was won by Saied, who after two years was the driver responsible for the ongoing autocratisation episode that Tunisia is experiencing.

Although Saied had a primary role in Tunisian autocratisation, it must be noted that flaws in the constitutional and institutional order and the chaotic parliamentary situation played a significant role in creating the "perfect storm" and a fertile ground for Saied's agency. In other words, while Saied's actions were pivotal, structural preconditions, such as defects in the constitutional and institutional framework, political instability, and judicial gridlock, also played a crucial role (Tamburini, 2023).

As discussed in detail in the following sections, such preconditions allowed Saied to stage what Bermeo (2016) would describe as a self-coup. Even if this autocratisation mode occurred incrementally, the Tunisian case stands out because it unfolded at a significantly faster pace compared to many other contemporary cases (Koehler, 2023; Yssen and Stokke, 2024).

2.1.1. Self-coup, erosion of horizontal accountability, and autocratic legalism

The Tunisian autocratisation episode under President Saied started on July 25th, 2021, with a sort of constitutional self-coup.

On that day, following almost six months of social turmoil, Saied announced a state of emergency, through which he suspended the parliament, lifted representatives' immunity, and removed several ministers, including Prime Minister Mechchi (Yssen and Stokke, 2024).

A few weeks later, on September 22, 2021, Saied issued presidential decree 2021-117 which granted him the authority to legislate by decrees. This act allowed him to also override the constitution in several domains, including the judiciary, military, civil society associations, and political parties. Moreover, the decree also envisaged the suspension of key constitutional articles, reaffirmed earlier measures that curtailed parliamentary powers, and infringed the constitutional requirement that parliament must remain in session during a state of emergency. Since then, Saied's legislative and executive authority has expanded significantly, as oversight mechanisms have been progressively weakened (El-Sadany and Tounsi, 2022). The following graph captures the interference of the executive in the legislative, to the detriment of the latter.

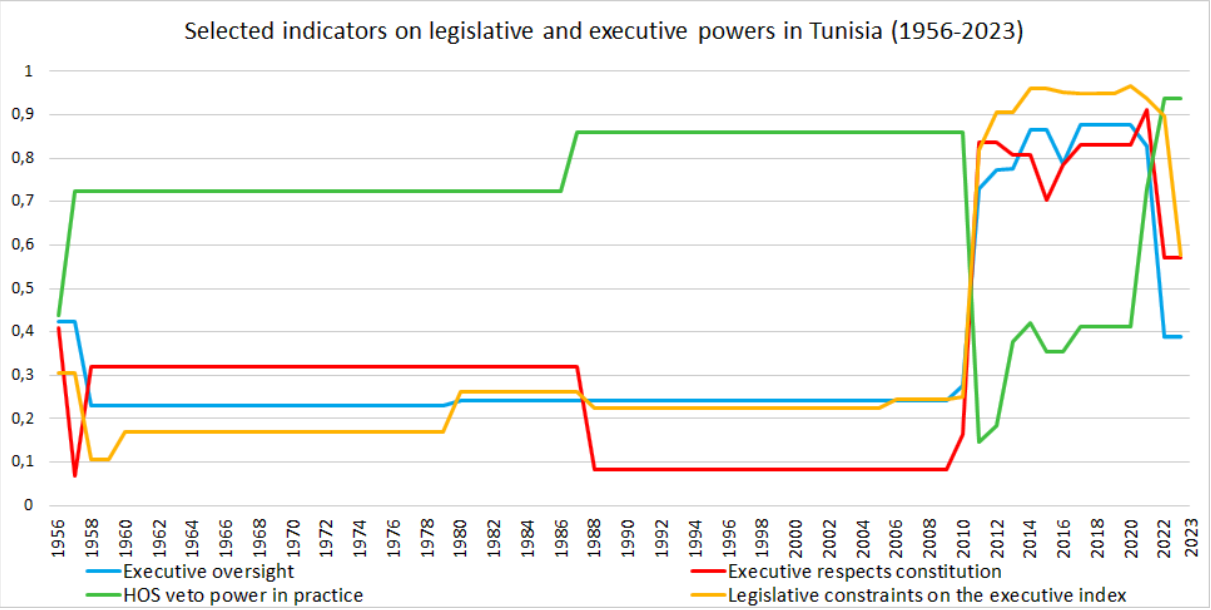

Figure 9. Selected indicators on legislative and executive powers in Tunisia (1956-2023).
Source: author's elaboration from V-Dem dataset.

Figure 9 illustrates the evolution of legislative and executive power dynamics in Tunisia from 1956 to 2023, highlighting significant shifts in executive oversight, constitutional

adherence, legislative constraints on the executive, and the exercise of veto power by the Head of State (HOS).

In the post-independence years (1956-1958), low levels of executive oversight and legislative constraints reflect Bourguiba's centralized regime. By the 1960s, a slight rise in the "Executive Respects Constitution" index suggests limited constitutional adherence, while the consistently high "HOS Veto Power in Practice" index underscores the presidency's dominance. From the late 1960s to the 1980s, stagnation across indicators highlights Bourguiba's authoritarian consolidation. Following Ben Ali's rise in 1987, modest increases in oversight and constraints appear but are short-lived as his regime centralizes power. By the 1990s and 2000s, indicators stagnate again, reflecting entrenched authoritarianism under Ben Ali.

The most significant changes occur after the 2011 Tunisian Revolution, marking a great improvement in nearly all indicators. The "Executive Oversight" and "Legislative Constraints on the Executive" indices rise sharply, reflecting the establishment of a more democratic system with greater checks and balances following the ousting of Ben Ali. Similarly, the "Executive Respects Constitution" index improves substantially, indicating a newfound adherence to constitutional norms during Tunisia's transition to democracy. These improvements persist throughout the 2010s, though the graph also reflects some fluctuations, particularly in the "HOS Veto Power in Practice" index, which declines slightly, signalling a reduction in the direct influence of the presidency on legislative processes.

However, from 2021, the graph reveals a sharp decline in "Executive Oversight" and "Legislative Constraints on the Executive", coinciding with President Saied's decrees of suspension of parliament and the concentration of executive authority. The concentration of powers in the President is also captured by the sharp increase of the "HOS veto power in practice" index, which reached in 2022 the highest level since Tunisia's independence. Similarly, the autocratic consolidation of power is shown by the decrease of the index "executive respects the constitution". This index stabilised in 2022 as the new "hyper-presidential" constitution was implemented, legitimising the autocratic prerogatives that Saied adopted since 2021.

Overall, the graph captures Tunisia's political trajectory, from the autocratic rule of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, through the democratic gains of the post-2011 revolution, to the recent substantial erosion of oversight mechanisms and constraints on the executive under Saied, illustrating the fragility of institutional checks and balances in the face of concentrated executive power.

However, horizontal accountability has been severely impaired, not only regarding the legislative branch, but also in the judicial one. Indeed, again through a presidential decree, Saied has dissolved permanently both the already suspended parliament and the High Judicial Council (the highest Tunisian judicial oversight body along with the already stalemated Constitutional Court). The President has replaced the High Judicial Council with a provisional judicial council. The new body envisages a different number of judges and appointment process, granting the President disciplinary authority, the power to remove members and dismiss judges accused of compromising judicial independence or integrity. This amendment has led to the dismissal of 57 judges under presidential decree 315-2022. (Yerkes & Alhomoud 2022).

The following Figure 10 illustrates the evolution of key indicators related to judiciary and executive powers in Tunisia from 1956 to 2023.

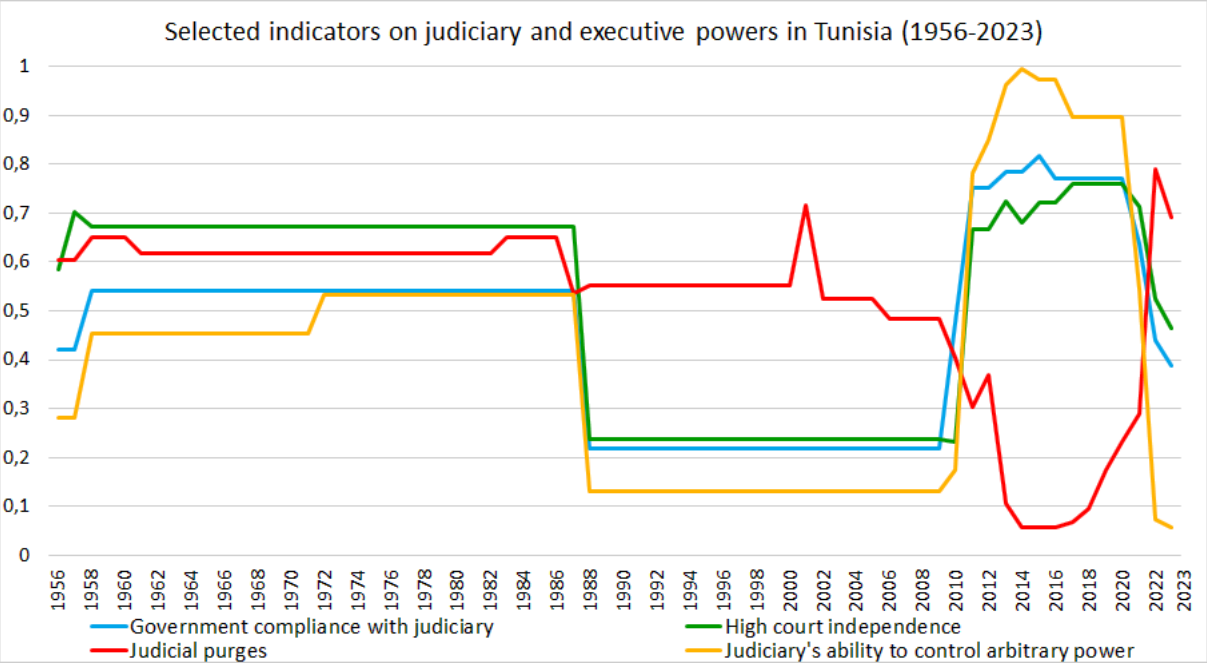

Figure 10. Selected indicators on judiciary and executive powers in Tunisia (1956-2023).
Source: author's elaboration from V-Dem dataset.

In the early post-independence period (1956-1960), the "Government Compliance with Judiciary" and "Judiciary's Ability to Control Arbitrary Power" indicators were moderate but steadily increased until the 1970s, reflecting a relative, albeit limited, judicial independence. The "High Court Independence" index remains stable during this period, indicating minimal interference with judicial autonomy. However, the "Judicial Purges" index remains low, signalling limited overt governmental manipulation of the judiciary. From the 1980s onward,

the judiciary's ability to control arbitrary power and the government's compliance with judicial decisions steadily declined under Ben Ali, with judicial independence remaining constrained. Particularly in the 1990s and 2000s, all indicators stagnated or declined, showing an erosion of judicial oversight, and increasing executive dominance.

Following the 2011 revolution, there was a sharp improvement in judicial indicators, particularly between 2012 and 2014. The "Judiciary's Ability to Control Arbitrary Power" and "Government Compliance with Judiciary" indices peaked during Tunisia's democratic transition, indicating significant progress in judicial independence and the rule of law. However, starting in 2016, a downward trend is evident across most indicators, particularly in the compliance and independence metrics, reflecting increasing executive interference under Saied's regime. This trend culminates in a sharp rise in "Judicial Purges" around 2021-2022, signalling overt efforts to restructure and control the judiciary. By 2023, judicial independence and government compliance remain significantly weakened, reflecting the consolidation of executive power and the erosion of democratic institutions.

Since 2021, through acts amounting to "autocratic legalism", defined as the use or abuse of the law, legal, and constitutional changes to consolidate powers, disempower other players serving an illiberal and autocratic agenda (Corrales, 2015; Scheppele, 2018), Saied has concentrated executive powers in the presidential figure, while voiding both the legislative and judicial branches. This resulted in an unchecked power led by a President who incarnates the executive and legislative powers, also able to override constitutional norms and principles (Yssen and Stokke, 2024).

2.1.2. The new constitutional and electoral order

After this executive aggrandizement, Saied adopted several measures to change the entire Tunisian political order. The first objective has been to tamper with the highest electoral body. This step paved the way for the constitutional referendum for redrafting the 2014 constitution, as well as for the presidential elections.

In early 2022, Saied initiated a two-month online consultation to gain public endorsement and legitimise his proposed constitutional reforms. In March 2022, he declared the consultation a success and proceeded with plans for a referendum in July, despite widespread and bipartisan criticism for its low participation (only 7.5% of eligible voters), flawed methodology, and lack of inclusivity, with experts and independent bodies highlighting unequal representation across gender and regional lines. The Tunisian General Labor Union

(UGTT) condemned the exclusion of national actors, while the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe questioned the legitimacy of the process and its ability to achieve a meaningful constitutional synthesis (El-Sadany and Tounsi, 2022).

The referendum to vote on whether to adopt the new draft or not occurred after a major amendment to the laws governing the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE, the Tunisian electoral commission). Saied passed a decree that gave him the power to appoint the commission's heads and members, and revoked the parliament's disciplinary and oversight functions over the body, raising significant concerns over the independence of the electoral authority (El-Sadany and Tounsi, 2022).

Such power over the electoral commission resulted useful in two important electoral appointments. The first was the constitutional referendum, which was voted on the anniversary of the implementation of the state of emergency, on July 25th, 2022. The result was a low turnout of 30.5% (due to boycotts by many parties, associations and trade unions) and 94.6% of votes in favour of the abolition of the post-revolutionary constitution and the adoption of the new one after a few days.

The second occasion in which the new commission had a crucial role was the presidential election of October 6th, 2024.

For this election (the third presidential vote since the revolution), seventeen candidates expressed interest in running. However, the electoral commission (ISIE), under Saied's control since 2022, disqualified fourteen candidates for lack of bureaucratic requirements. Thus, the competition occurred only between three candidates, including Saied, in stark contrast to the 26 candidates approved for the 2019 election.

Tunisia's Administrative Court, the highest authority on electoral disputes, ruled that three of the seventeen disqualified candidates should be reinstated. Despite this, the ISIE did not comply with the court's decision, asserting that the ISIE is the only body constitutionally entrusted with the integrity of elections (Ezzamouri, 2024; Yerkes, 2024).

This heavily contested election, conducted in a climate of targeted repression against opponents, witnessed an exceptionally low voter turnout (28.8%), ultimately delivering a landslide victory for Saied, who gained almost 91% of votes (Yerkes, 2024).

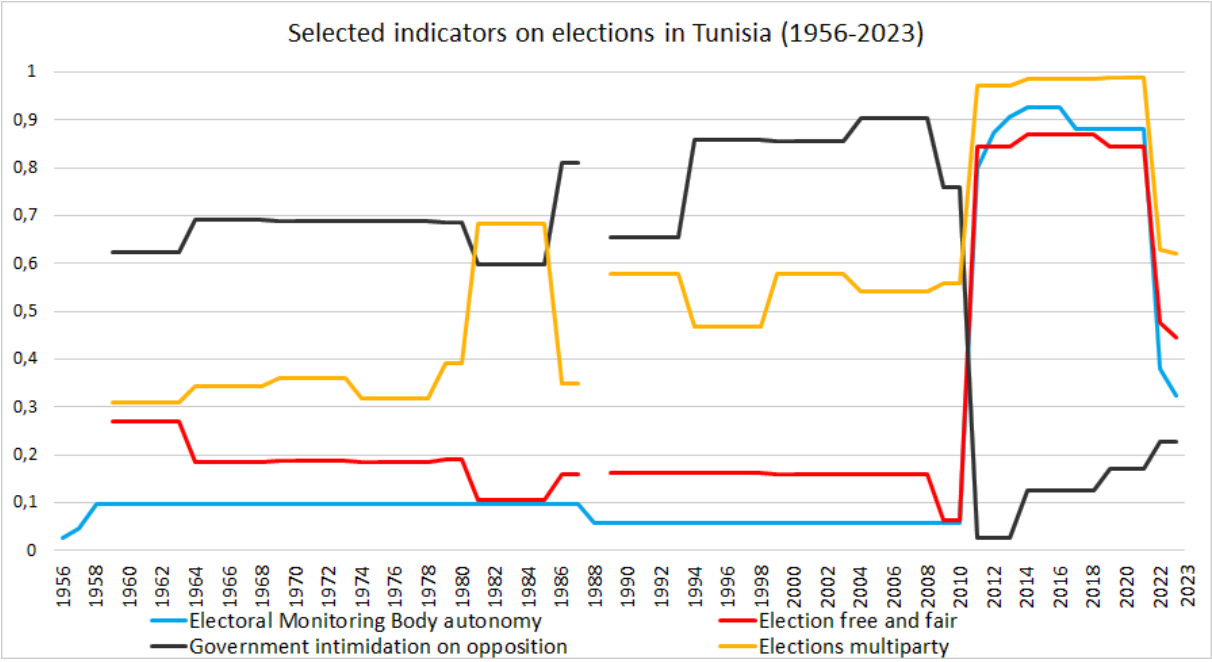

Figure 11. Selected indicators on elections in Tunisia (1956-2023).
Source: author's elaboration from V-Dem dataset.

Figure 11 illustrates key electoral indicators. Between 1956 and 2010, Tunisia was characterised by autocratic rule, reflected in consistently low levels of autonomy for electoral monitoring bodies (blue line). Elections during this period were neither free nor fair (red line), and government intimidation of the opposition (yellow line) gradually increased, peaking around 1980 before stabilising at a high level. From the 1980s, multiparty elections (black line) were present in principle but either one main opposition party was prevented (*de jure* or *de facto*) from contesting and competition was highly constrained.

The post-2011 period marks a dramatic turning point following the Tunisian Revolution and the collapse of the Ben Ali regime. From 2011 to 2014, all indicators improve sharply. Electoral monitoring body autonomy rises steeply, reaching its highest levels, reflecting the establishment of independent electoral institutions such as the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE). Elections are rated as freer and fairer during this period and multiparty competition also reaches unprecedented levels symbolising the introduction of genuine political pluralism. Government intimidation of the opposition declines significantly.

However, after the 2021 self-coup, the indicators reveal a concerning reversal. Electoral monitoring autonomy plummets, due to Saied restructuring and control of the body, eroding its independence. The fairness of elections also declines significantly, reflecting a shift towards less competitive and more restricted electoral processes. Concurrently, government intimidation of the opposition begins to rise again (as discussed in detail in the next section).

Although multiparty elections remain nominally in place, the black line begins to decline slightly, returning to pre-revolution levels, with increasing restrictions on political competition and the concentration of power.

Re-elected as President in October 2024, Saied could have continued ruling the country as he had since the 2021 self-coup. However, this re-election took place under a significantly altered political and constitutional framework. The 2022 constitution, which replaced the 2014 post-revolutionary one, consolidated executive power and reshaped the balance of authority, marking a decisive shift in Tunisia's governance.

In particular, the new constitution abandoned the semi-presidential system in favour of a hyper-presidential republic (Biagi, 2022; Fruganti, 2022; Grewal, 2023; Koehler, 2023; Tamburini, 2023). This new framework concentrates significant powers in the hands of the President, drastically weakening the checks and balances that were a hallmark of the 2014 Constitution. The President now determines "the general policies of the state and defines its essential choices" (art. 100), while the government's role is reduced to implementing these policies "according to the orientations and choices of the President of the Republic" (art. 111). Moreover, the President is empowered to dissolve the government and dismiss individual members at will. The new constitution also grants the President legislative initiative, with priority given to presidential draft laws (art. 68), and exclusive authority to submit budget bills and international treaty ratifications to the legislature (Biagi, 2022; Fruganti, 2022).

The Parliament is no longer unicameral. In addition to the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (the lower chamber), a second chamber, the National Council of Regions and Provinces, has been introduced (art. 56), ostensibly to promote decentralization, though this principle is not meaningfully emphasized or structured in practice. The President also gains the authority to appoint judges based on "recommendations" from the High Judicial Council (art. 120) and to declare a state of emergency without the Constitutional Court's oversight, even after 30 days (art. 96). Furthermore, the power of Parliament to impeach the president, as outlined in art. 88 of the 2014 Constitution, has been removed. The new constitution also prohibits judges, military personnel, and members of the national security forces from striking (art. 41) (Biagi, 2022; Fruganti, 2022).

A particularly troubling provision pertains to presidential term limits. Although the constitution sets a maximum of two five-year terms, consecutive or otherwise, art. 90 allows for the extension of the presidential term in cases of war or imminent danger. This echoes the justification Saied used in 2021 to declare a state of emergency (Biagi, 2022; Fruganti, 2022).

Additional signs of democratic erosion include the removal of provisions guaranteeing the independence and neutrality of the military and national security forces. Several independent bodies established under the 2014 Constitution have been dismantled, including the Independent Audio-visual Communication Authority, the Human Rights Authority, the Sustainable Development Authority, and the Good Governance and Anti-Corruption Authority. Saied has also blocked the establishment of key constitutional bodies, such as the Constitutional Court, or replaced and restructured others, as seen with the High Judicial Council and the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE), placing them under his direct control (Biagi, 2022; Fruganti, 2022).

The 2022 Constitution also states (art. 5) that "Tunisia is part of the Islamic Ummah, and the State alone, within a democratic system, must strive to achieve the *Maqasid* [objectives] of Islam in the preservation of life, honour, property, religion, and freedom". This definition appears to diverge from the traditional *Maqasid al-Sharia*, which emphasizes the preservation of religion, life, reason, lineage, and property. The implications of this article remain unclear. While some commentators fear it could pave the way for a theocratic state, especially since the new constitution no longer defines Tunisia as a "civil" state, as the 2014 Charter did in art. 2, others argue that it positions the State as the sole interpreter of divine will, granting it authority to define the objectives of Islam (Biagi, 2022; Fruganti, 2022).

After the self-coup and the concentration of executive and legislative powers and the impairment of electoral processes, which were fundamental for the restructuring of the Tunisian polity and his re-election, Saied was able to institutionalise the erosion of Tunisian democracy through the adoption of a new constitution, bringing Tunisia back in a political situation resembling the one under Bourguiba and Ben Ali.

2.1.3. Political and civil rights violations

Since July 2021, Tunisia has seen a steady erosion of civil and political rights, characterised by a rapid shift towards electoral autocracy. This shift has involved targeted repression of political opponents and critical voices, with politicians, journalists, and activists facing various forms of harassment, including travel bans, arrests, investigations, trials (including military trials for civil matters), and physical intimidation by security forces (Yerkes & Alhomoud 2022).

In the spring of 2023, the repression intensified, marked by a surge in arrests and assaults on anti-Saied activists and politicians, accelerating the country's democratic decline (Amnesty

International, 2023). The introduction of Decree Law 54 in September 2022, aimed at regulating communication and media to combat disinformation, further aggravated the situation, as it was used to arrest numerous political and media figures, given the broad and vague scope of the law (Ezzamouri, 2024; Yerkes, 2024).

The military also became central to the autocratisation process, deploying troops to key government buildings and public spaces and conducting military trials against political opponents and journalists (Amnesty International, 2021; Nassif 2022).

Legal measures have been strategically utilised to entrench Saied's power and undermine opposition. Decree-Law 2022-55, which was originally intended to address vote-buying and other electoral irregularities for the December 2022 parliamentary elections, was instead used to target Saied's potential presidential rivals. Many were disqualified on accusations of vote-buying, forging voter signatures, or attempting to influence voters through donations (Yerkes, 2024). Moreover, the 2022 constitution further consolidated Saied's dominance by imposing restrictions that hindered presidential competition. Art. 89, for example, raised the eligibility age for presidential candidates, excluded dual citizens, and disqualified individuals facing legal challenges, effectively barring several prominent opponents from standing in presidential elections (ibid.). Collectively, these measures signal a systematic dismantling of democratic principles, as power is consolidated through legal manipulation, state repression, and the instrumentalization of state institutions.

3. Israel

The state of Israel was unilaterally proclaimed on May 14th, 1948, on the date it expired the twenty-eight years of the British mandate on Palestine (1920–1948). On that day, the declaration of independence legally realised the Zionist project of the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people, as declared in the Balfour Declaration of 1917.

The UN General Assembly resolution 181 of 1947 on the partition of Palestine in a two-state solution with Jerusalem under international control was never realised as the day after Israel proclaimed its independence, a coalition of Arab countries, composed by Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, attacked the neo-born Israeli state.

This first Arb-Israeli war ended after one year with the victory of Israel, which succeeded in drawing its own borders, which included 78% of Mandate Palestine and the west part of Jerusalem, compared to the 56% envisaged in the UN partition plan. These ceasefire lines later became known as the Green Line. The Gaza Strip and the West Bank remained outside Israeli territories and were occupied by Egypt and Jordan respectively.

In the aftermath of the war and independence, Israel faced immense challenges in the state- and nation-building process. Its leaders had to establish a government, create a judicial system, and transition the *Yishuv*'s communal organizations into national institutions. Additionally, because Israel's identity was rooted in its claim as a Jewish nation, its leadership had to define the role of religion in state institutions. While a consensus was reached on the country's administrative framework in the early years of independence, opinions on the role of Jewish religious law in public life varied significantly (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009).

Israel's military success in the six-days War of 1967 instilled newfound confidence but also introduced significant challenges. With the capture of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Golan Heights, Israel became an occupying power, governing over a million Palestinian Arabs who were brought under its control against their will. The future of these territories sparked intense national debate. While some Israelis condemned the occupation as unjust, others saw it as a divine mandate to reclaim the historic lands of ancient Israel. As Israel entered its fourth decade of independence, tensions deepened between peace activists and settlers, as well as between secularists and those advocating for a greater role of religious law in public life (Goodman and Levy, 2018).

As Israelis debated the future of the occupied territories, Palestinian exile groups took action to reclaim their homeland. One of the most significant consequences of the 1967 War was the emergence of Palestinian resistance movements. Frustrated by the Arab states' failure to secure their repatriation, Palestinians took it upon themselves to fight for liberation. Guerrilla groups launched attacks against Israel and carried out international acts of terrorism to draw attention to their cause. In doing so, they became a political force within the Arab world, compelling regional leaders to acknowledge their demands. While these militant operations never posed a serious military threat to Israel, they triggered large-scale Israeli reprisals and fuelled ongoing tensions in the Middle East from the 1970s onward. Meanwhile, outside the region, the diplomatic efforts of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and its chairman, Arafat, successfully placed Palestinian rights on the United Nations agenda and brought global attention to Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009).

Between 1967 and 1977, Israeli politics underwent a significant shift due to the ongoing occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the political upheaval of the 1977 elections. In a historic reversal, the right-wing Likud bloc, led by Menachem Begin, defeated the long-dominant Labour Party, marking a new era in Israeli governance. Begin's rise to power coincided with the emergence of a religious settler movement, which he actively supported by

promoting Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. His administration's firm stance against territorial compromise intensified tensions with Palestinians, leading to the intifada, a mass uprising from 1987 to the early 1990s, driven by demands for an end to Israeli occupation and Palestinian self-determination. The uprising also gave rise to Hamas, an Islamic alternative to the secular PLO. The intifada, coupled with shifting global dynamics, especially U.S. dominance post-Gulf War and the election of a Labour government in Israel, set the stage for renewed efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The peace process formally with the Madrid Conference in 1991, which was organised by the United States and the Soviet Union. This conference marked the first time that Israeli officials engaged in direct negotiations with Palestinian representatives, although the latter were not recognised as an independent entity but as part of a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. While the Madrid Conference itself did not yield concrete agreements, it set the stage for further dialogue.

This led to the landmark Oslo Accords, a series of agreements negotiated in secret and officially signed in 1993 by Israeli Prime Minister Rabin and PLO Chairman Arafat. The accords, facilitated by Norwegian diplomats, resulted in mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO. Under the agreement, the Palestinian Authority (PA) was established, granting it limited self-governance in parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In return, the PLO renounced violence and recognised Israel's right to exist. The Oslo process was followed by the Oslo II Accord in 1995, which expanded Palestinian self-rule to additional territories. The accords were seen as a major breakthrough, and their architects, including Rabin, Arafat, and US President Clinton, were widely praised for their efforts. However, Oslo left many contentious issues unresolved, including the status of Jerusalem, the fate of Palestinian refugees, Israeli settlements, and final borders.

The assassination of Rabin in 1995 by an Israeli extremist opposed to the peace process dealt a severe blow to negotiations. Following Rabin's death, Israeli politics took a more right-wing turn, and trust between the two sides began to erode. In 2000, US President Clinton hosted the Camp David Summit, bringing together Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Barak, who proposed a peace plan offering significant territorial concessions. However, the talks ultimately collapsed, with both sides blaming each other for the failure. Soon after, the Second Intifada erupted, a period of intense violence between 2000 and 2005, which saw suicide bombings, Israeli military incursions, and widespread destruction. This significantly undermined the peace process, as mutual distrust deepened.

A significant unilateral move occurred in 2005 when Israeli Prime Minister Sharon withdrew Israeli settlements and military forces from Gaza, in what was known as the Gaza Disengagement Plan. This was intended to reduce tensions, but it also led to a power vacuum that was soon filled by Hamas. In 2006, Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections, leading to internal Palestinian divisions and eventually a violent split between Hamas in Gaza and the PA-controlled West Bank. Israel and the international community largely refused to engage with Hamas, complicating further negotiations.

Throughout the 2010s and into the 2020s, diplomatic efforts shifted towards regional normalisation rather than direct peace talks. The 2020 Abraham Accords, fostered by US President Trump, saw several Arab states, including the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, normalise relations with Israel. However, these agreements did not directly address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and were rejected by Palestinian leaders, who viewed them as a betrayal of the broader Arab commitment to their cause.

A key figure of the last thirty years of Israeli politics is current Prime Minister Netanyahu. Its political career started in the 1990s when, after being leader of the opposition, he first became Prime Minister in 1996, defeating Shimon Peres in the wake of Rabin's assassination. His first term in office (1996-1999) was defined by a sceptical approach to the Oslo Accords, heightened tensions with the Palestinians, and internal political struggles. He lost the 1999 election to Barak and temporarily left politics.

Returning as Finance Minister (2003–2005) under Sharon, he pushed neoliberal economic reforms but resigned in protest over Sharon's withdrawal from Gaza. After Sharon formed the party Kadima, Netanyahu regained Likud's leadership and, in 2009, returned as Prime Minister. His second term (2009-2013) was marked by opposition to the Iranian nuclear deal, settlement expansion, and strained ties with the Obama administration.

Re-elected in 2013 and 2015, he fostered closer ties with Gulf states, championed the Abraham Accords (2020), and deepened right-wing policies. However, corruption charges in 2019 led to political deadlock and multiple elections. In 2021, a broad anti-Netanyahu coalition ousted him, but in 2022, he staged a comeback, forming a right-wing government once again.

Shortly after Netanyahu's new government was sworn into office in December 2022, Justice Minister Levin (Likud) announced a reform that aimed at drastically changing Israel's judiciary, as discussed in the following section. The announcement sparked an immediate and unprecedented wave of protests across Israel, with Tel Aviv becoming the centre of weekly mass demonstrations. Critics saw the reform as a direct threat to Israel's democracy, fearing it would undermine checks and balances and allow Netanyahu's government to consolidate

power. Many also believed Netanyahu had a personal interest in weakening the judiciary due to his ongoing corruption trial.

As protests intensified, opposition came not just from liberal and left-wing Israelis but also from former military leaders, economists, tech industry leaders, and even members of Netanyahu's own Likud party. Business leaders warned of economic fallout, and some military reservists threatened to refuse service. The crisis deepened in March 2023 when Defence Minister Gallant, a senior Likud figure, publicly called for the suspension of the judicial reform, citing national security risks as protests disrupted military readiness. In response, Netanyahu fired Gallant, triggering an even larger wave of protests that saw hundreds of thousands take to the streets. The backlash was so intense that Netanyahu was forced to reverse course and reinstate Gallant.

The judicial crisis fuelled deeper divisions in Israeli society, and Netanyahu eventually agreed to delay parts of the reform, but key elements were still passed in 2023, further escalating tensions over this and other reforms' legitimacy. Netanyahu's government, reliant on far-right and ultra-Orthodox allies, continued pushing policies that exacerbated divisions, including settlement expansion and restrictions on minority rights (Gidron, 2023).

By late 2023, Israel remained deeply polarised, in particular due to the onset of an unprecedented large-scale conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza strip and West-Bank.

3.1. Causes and modes of autocratisation

Contrarily to the two previous cases, since its foundation, Israeli democracy has always been well-developed and classified as a liberal democracy. However, in 2023, Israel lost its long-standing status as a liberal democracy and was reclassified as an electoral democracy for the first time in over 50 years, as shown in the following Figure 12.

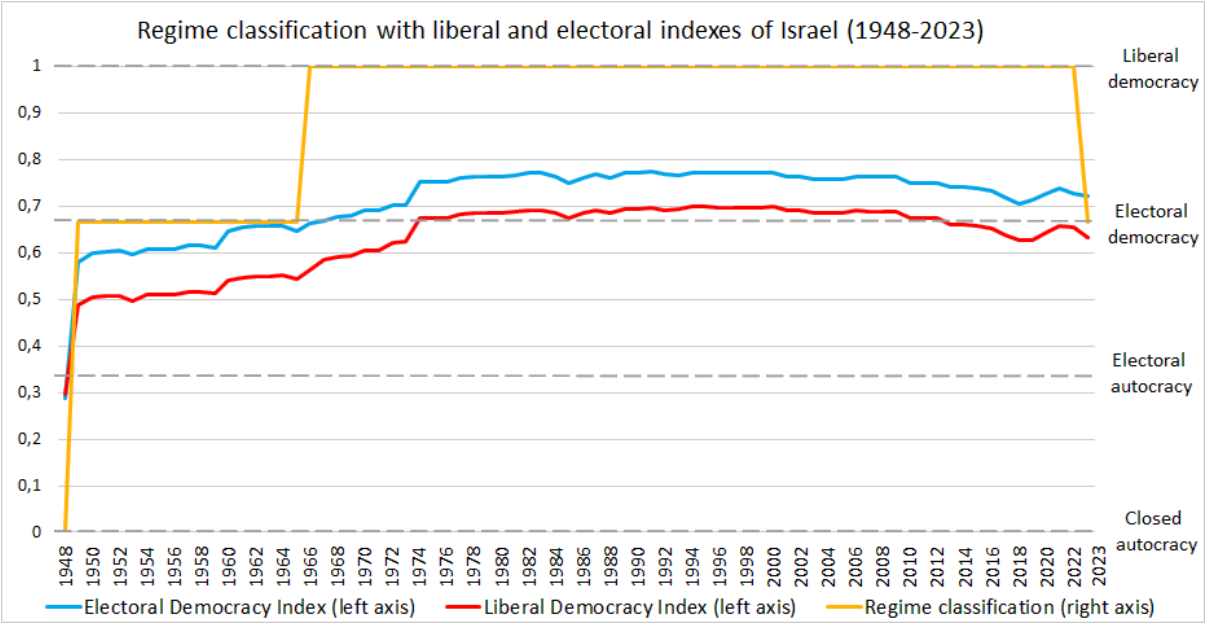

Figure 12. Regime classification and liberal and electoral democracy index in Israel (1948-2023). Source: author's elaboration from V-Dem dataset and V-Dem ERT dataset.

This shift was driven largely by a significant decline in legal transparency, alongside escalating government efforts to undermine judicial independence. A key development in progressive this erosion of democratic safeguards is the process of reform in different but crucial fields, as, *inter alia,* the judicial reform that is currently being implemented.

A key factor shaping Israel's political landscape is its institutional and party system. Established as a parliamentary democracy, Israel has a unicameral legislature, the Knesset, composed of 120 elected representatives. Rather than representing specific districts, candidates run on national party lists, making elections a nationwide contest. This system grants the Prime Minister and cabinet significant influence over policy formulation and decision-making. However, Israel's proportional representation system, with its historically low electoral threshold, has fostered a highly fragmented party landscape. Initially, any party securing at least 1% of the vote gained Knesset representation. Although this threshold was raised to 1.5% in 1992, it did little to limit the proliferation of parties. As a result, even extremist factions had a realistic chance of entering parliament and, in some cases, participating in coalition governments (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009). Over the past two decades, Israel has maintained an average of around eight effective political parties, a notably high number in comparative terms (Gidron, Sheffer, and Mor, 2022).

This fragmented electoral system has made coalition governments a necessity, contributing to frequent political instability. In just two years, Israelis went to the polls four

times (April 2019, September 2019, March 2020, and March 2021). The 2021 elections led to the temporary ousting of Netanyahu, who had held the premiership since 2009 (Gidron, Sheffer, and Mor, 2022). However, following the 2022 elections, Netanyahu returned to power by forging a coalition with far-right and religious extremist parties, securing a parliamentary majority.

Israel's political spectrum has often been described as a contest between a hawkish right and a more dovish left (Arian and Shamir, 2008; Shamir, Dvir-Gvirsman, and Ventura, 2017). This divide reflects the hard-line positions of right-wing and especially ultra-religious factions, which contrast with the more conciliatory stance of the Israeli left. By leveraging their influence within Netanyahu's coalition, far-right and religious parties have pushed government policies further to the right, advancing more radical and chauvinistic agendas. Scholars have noted that the rise of far-right populism in Western democracies has typically depended on the cooperation of mainstream conservative elites, who wield greater institutional power and provide legitimacy to these movements (Müller, 2021; Ziblatt, 2017). This dynamic appears to be playing out in Israel's current democratic crisis, where the mainstream right's alliance with the far-right has accelerated the erosion of democratic norms (Gidron, 2023).

3.1.1. Reform of the judiciary

Before evaluating the merits of the proposed reform, it is essential to consider key characteristics of Israel's constitutional and legal framework. Unlike many democracies, Israel does not have a fixed constitution or an extensive bill of rights. Instead, it relies on Basic Laws, which hold constitutional status but can be easily amended by a simple majority in the Knesset, the country's parliament. This legislative structure is further characterised by being unicameral, so without additional oversight of a second chamber. Moreover, as a unitary state with proportional representation nationwide, Israel lacks the local power centres typically found in federal systems or those with district-based representation. Finally, Israel has not joined any international courts, further giving an important role to its judicial branch in executive and legislative oversight (Gidron, 2023; Oren and Waxman, 2022; Roznai, Dixon, and Landau, 2023).

The proposed reform of the judiciary consisted of mainly six changes, which should be read in accordance with the institutional structure outlined above to have a clearer assessment of potential shortcomings in the interplay between the three powers.

First, Minister of Justice Levin suggested centralizing judicial review authority exclusively within the Supreme Court. Currently, any court in Israel can exercise judicial review over executive and legislative actions, declaring laws unconstitutional if they violate the Basic Laws. Levin's proposal would restrict this power to the full bench of fifteen Supreme Court judges, requiring a super-majority of twelve justices to invalidate a law. Many commentators and opponents believe that this high threshold would severely limit judicial oversight, weakening the effectiveness of constitutional review.

In addition to confining judicial review of ordinary law to the Supreme Court, Levin proposed removing the courts' authority to review Basic Laws. Although Basic Laws hold constitutional status, they are currently subject to judicial scrutiny to ensure they do not violate core state values or serve unjustified personal or temporary interests. This proposed reform would eliminate this oversight, allowing Basic Laws to be enacted or amended by a simple Knesset majority (61 out of 120) often in a single day, given the fact that every government is constitutionally required to have such a parliamentary majority. At the moment, these two parts of the proposal on judicial review of ordinary laws and Basic Laws have passed at the first reading, waiting to be passed in the second and third readings.

The third proposed step envisages an override clause, enabling a simple parliamentary majority to override court decisions deeming a law unconstitutional and re-enact the law. This proposal, combined with the super-majority requirement for judicial invalidation of laws, would effectively dismantle judicial checks on legislative power. Again, considering that the government typically controls a parliamentary majority, this clause risks eroding fundamental rights and freedoms, concentrating unchecked power in the executive. This bill as well has been passed at first reading and it is due to be brought for Second and Third Readings before being implemented.

A fourth element of the proposal aimed at abolishing the "reasonableness" standard in judicial review of administrative actions. This part is the only one which so far has been passed and adopted by the Knesset on July 24th, 2023. Previously, this standard required the Prime Minister, government, ministers, or other elected officials, to consider relevant factors and balance them appropriately when legislating, allowing the Court to intervene if such laws are deemed extremely unreasonable. Now, the Court has no authority to review actions on grounds of unreasonableness. In effect, this removes a critical layer of judicial oversight, leaving these decisions unchecked and largely concealed from public scrutiny, undermining transparency, and accountability in governance.

Fifth, it was proposed to alter the judicial appointment process. Currently, judges are selected by a nine-member committee comprising three Supreme Court judges, two ministers, two members of the Knesset, and two members of the Israeli Bar Association, requiring a special majority of 7 out of 9 members. This system ensures collaboration and balance among branches. The proposal would grant the parliamentary coalition, and thus the government, control over judicial appointments, although later revisions limited this to the appointment of two judges. Even so, this change risks politicizing the judiciary and undermining its independence. This bill, passed at the first reading, is still due for Second and Third Readings.

Finally, the proposal aims to overhaul the process for appointing legal advisers to the government and its ministers, replacing the current independent selection committee with a system of personal appointments made by ministers. Legal advisers play a pivotal role, as their opinions on legal matters are binding on the government and its authorities. By granting the executive full control over their selection, this reform would place these critical gatekeepers, who are responsible for ensuring the legality of drafted legislation, entirely under the influence of the executive, significantly undermining their independence. Furthermore, the legal authority of these advisers would be reduced from binding to non-binding advice. This change would erode the independence of legal counsel, weakening the safeguards against arbitrary or unlawful executive actions. Together, these proposed reforms threaten to undermine judicial independence, constitutional protections, and the balance of powers within Israel's political system (Gidron, 2023; Roznai, Dixon, and Landau, 2023).

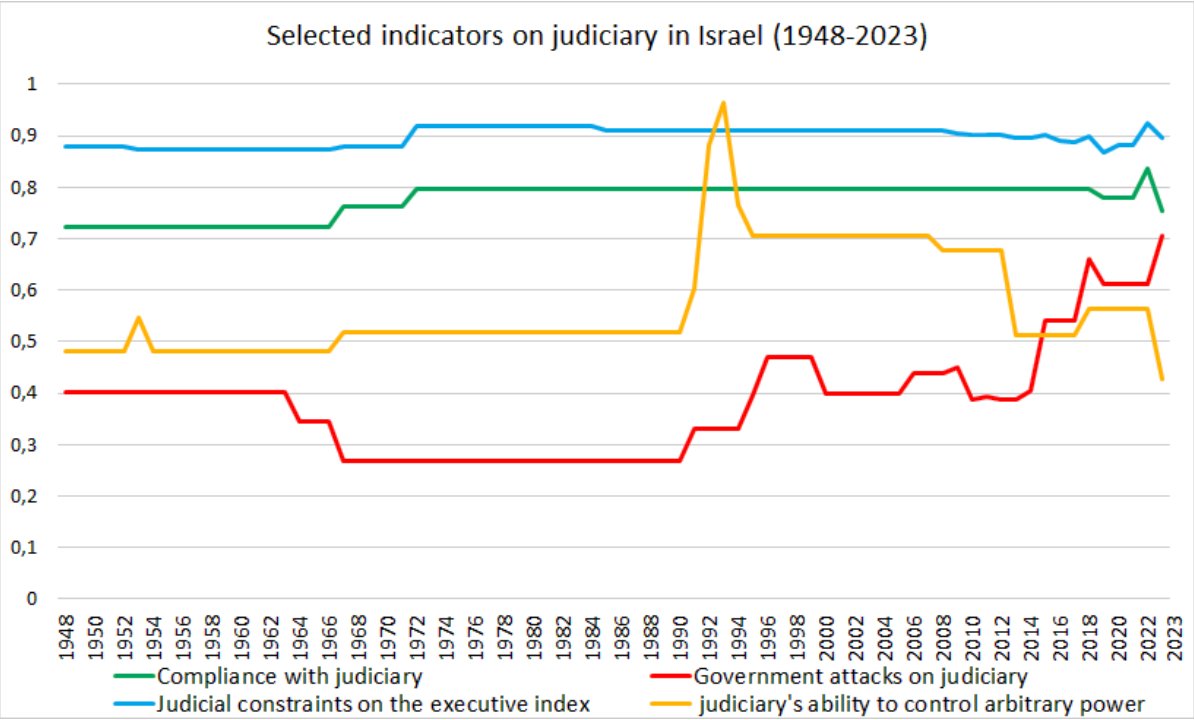

Figure 13. Selected indicators on judiciary in Israel (1948-2023).
Source: author's elaboration from V-Dem dataset.

Figure 13 illustrates trends in judicial constraints on the executive, compliance with judiciary rulings, government attacks on the judiciary, and the judiciary's ability to control arbitrary power. The blue line, representing judicial constraints on the executive, remains relatively stable at a high level throughout the period, with minor fluctuations, indicating that the judiciary has consistently played a significant role in checking executive power. The green line, which tracks compliance with the judiciary, also remains steady but at a slightly lower level, suggesting that while the judiciary has had authority, its decisions have not always been fully adhered to by the government. The yellow line, reflecting the judiciary's ability to control arbitrary power, shows significant variation, with a sharp increase in the early 1990s, due to the several Basic Laws passed in those years, followed by a decline from the 2000s onwards, indicating shifts in judicial effectiveness over time, which is inversely proportional to the red line, which measures government attacks on the judiciary. This remains low for much of the timeline but begins to rise notably from the late 1980s, increasing more sharply after 2010 and peaking in recent years, signalling growing political interference or challenges to judicial independence. The convergence of a rising red line and declining yellow and green lines in recent years suggests increasing pressure on the judiciary, with a potential erosion of its ability to act as a check on government power. This trend is particularly concerning given the broader

context of democratic governance, as it indicates a weakening of judicial independence at a time of heightened political tension. The overall picture suggests that while Israel's judiciary has historically maintained a strong role in governance, recent developments may be undermining its authority and effectiveness.

Indeed, the proposed judicial reform encompasses several interconnected changes that significantly alter the balance of power. Key elements include granting the government greater control over the selection of judges, including the chief justice of the Supreme Court, empowering parliament to override Supreme Court rulings, and curtailing the Court's authority to review laws. Combined with additional measures, these changes would centralize power within the ruling coalition, effectively eroding critical checks and balances designed to limit executive authority (Gidron, 2023; Oren and Waxman, 2022; Roznai, Dixon, and Landau, 2023).

3.1.2. Nation-state Basic Law and discrimination against non-Jewish minorities

Adopted by the Knesset on July 19th, 2018, the Nation-state Basic Law clearly states that Israel is the homeland of the Jewish people, which is the only people exclusively entitled to the right of self-determination in the state.

This law has been much debated, dividing between those who demand that the law be repealed and those who see it as being purely declarative and symbolic, with minimal, if any, practical implications (Waxman and Peleg, 2020). However, as discussed below, this Basic Law does have tangible effects on Israeli society, and in particular on its non-Jewish minorities, namely Arabs and Palestinians (Kamir, 2020).

The effects that this law has derive from the limitation of scope and applicability of another important Basic Law, the 1992 (amended in 1994) Human Dignity and Freedom Basic Law, whose aim is protecting universal human rights. In particular, the Supreme Court's interpretation of this Basic Law enhanced the protection of human rights in Israel, ruling that laws and practices violating equality, including discrimination based on ethnicity or religion, could be deemed unlawful. Equality became a binding constitutional principle in Israel (Waxman and Peleg, 2020).

In the Nation-state law, however, the principle of equality is deliberately missing. During the legislative process, several alternative bills were proposed that explicitly included references to legal equality, but these were rejected due to opposition from the Likud and Jewish

Home parties. Members of these parties argued that the presence of this principle might be interpreted by Israel's Supreme Court as also applying to collective rights, rather than solely to individual rights. The refusal to explicitly enshrine the principle of civic equality in the Nation-state Basic Law is deeply concerning and highlights a significant omission. Without such clarification, declaring the state to be a state "of" the majority population risks fostering an illiberal and ethnocentric interpretation (Kremnitzer and Shany, 2020; Yakobson, 2020), while affecting judicial principles (Waxman and Peleg, 2020).

Indeed, by formally enshrining Israel's Jewish character in a law with constitutional status and establishing it as a guiding judicial principle, the Nation-State Law could compel judges to weigh Israel's Jewish identity in their future rulings. In particular, this law may limit the Supreme Court's ability to review and repeal laws and practices that discriminate against Arab and Palestinian citizens (Kamir, 2020; Waxman and Peleg, 2020).

Regarding the relation with non-Jewish minorities, it is essential to mention the long and ongoing Israeli military occupation of West Bank Palestinian territories. Around 60-65% of West Bank lands have been classified as "Area C" in the Oslo Accords and are under full and exclusive Israeli control. In these territories, Palestinians are systematically discriminated against, living under a highly restrictive and precarious system that limits their basic rights and economic opportunities. The continued expansion of settlements and Israeli control over resources further entrenches their marginalization.

3.1.3. Politicisation of law enforcement forces

The right-wing Minister of National Security Ben-Gvir proposed several laws aiming at reforming the relation between the minister and police forces, increasing executive and political influence on law enforcement.

Two proposed laws (Amendments to the Police Ordinance, n. 37 and n. 39 of 2022) grant the Minister of National Security the authority to dictate police policy, the general principles of its activities, and the general police investigations policy (n. 37, ultimately adopted in December 2022). This includes the ability to intervene in matters such as interrogations, freedom of expression, and protests. In January 2025, the Supreme Court annulled a provision that gave the minister expanded authority over police investigative procedures. It stressed that such a provision could result in a politicized police force, which would weaken professional standards and diminish public trust in law enforcement. However, other parts of the law that enhance political interference in police operations remain unchanged. However, Amendment

n. 39, discussed in the committee ahead of second and third readings, established the subjugation of the Commissioner to the Minister. In other words, this amendment would transfer certain powers previously held by the police commissioner to the Minister of National Security, thereby increasing the minister's control over police operations. This centralization of authority, particularly in Israel's single, nationally controlled police force, extends to critical areas such as the management of anti-government demonstrations. By allowing political and partisan considerations to influence police operations, both amendments undermine the independence and impartiality of the police force, raising significant concerns about its potential for violating the basic rights of Israeli citizens and the erosion of democratic principles (ACRI, 2023).

The two prior amendments must be read with the proposed reform of the Police Investigation Department (PID), which passed a preliminary reading in February 2023. This reform aims to remove the PID from the jurisdiction of the State Attorney's Office (a judicial figure), placing it directly under the authority of the Justice Minister (a political figure). Additionally, the PID would gain the power to investigate staff members within the State Attorney's Office. Such changes undermine the PID's independence, opening the door for political interference in investigations. Furthermore, the reform compromises the autonomy of the criminal prosecution system, potentially deterring its staff from pursuing cases of government corruption, thereby weakening the rule of law.

Another law advanced by Minister of National Security Ben Gvir and the government led by Netanyahu proposes to establish a National Guard under ministerial direct control. The primary objective of this proposed force is to carry out policing activities in mixed cities, focusing on Arab unrest, as minister Ben Gvir said (Imbert, 2023). This initiative would create a distinct, semi-civilian force tasked with addressing issues specifically related to Arab citizens of Israel, effectively dividing policing responsibilities along ethnic and national lines. Such a move risks exacerbating tensions and institutionalizing discrimination within law enforcement. In April 2023, the government approved the formation of the National Guard and tasked officials with finalizing its operational details. According to media reports, a significant budget of NIS 1 billion has been allocated for this force, which is expected to include approximately 2,000 members. The establishment of this force has raised serious concerns about its potential to deepen divisions and undermine democratic values (ACRI, 2023).

3.1.4. Reform on freedom of the media

The current media landscape is captured by the following figure 14.

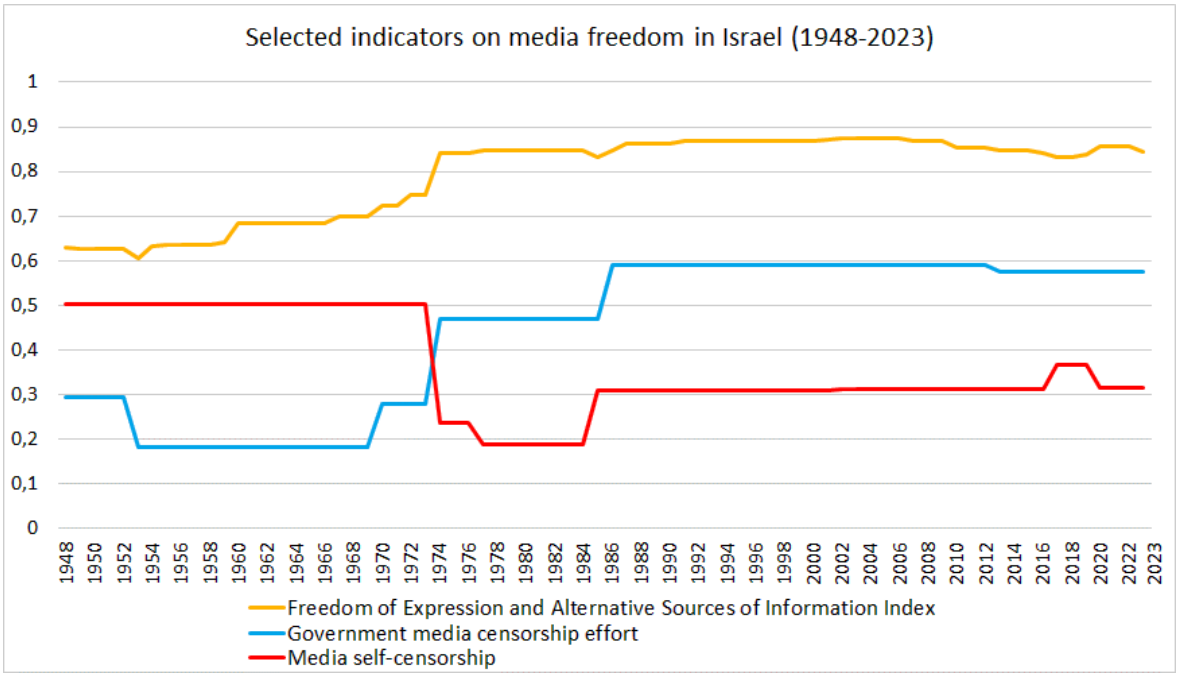

Figure 14. Selected indicators on media freedom in Israel (1948-2023).
Source: author's elaboration from V-Dem dataset.

The figure illustrates selected indicators of media freedom in Israel from 1948 to 2023, highlighting trends in freedom of expression, government media censorship efforts, and media self-censorship. The yellow line, representing the Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index, shows a gradual but consistent increase from the early years of statehood until the late 1980s, where it stabilises at a relatively high level, albeit with minor fluctuations in recent years. This suggests that media freedom has generally strengthened over time, though there are indications of slight declines in the most recent years. The blue line, which measures government media censorship efforts, remains relatively low for much of the timeline but experiences notable increases around the early 1970s and again in the early 1980s, suggesting periods of heightened state intervention in media content. After this peak, government censorship efforts stabilise at a moderate level and remain relatively unchanged through the 2000s. The red line, which tracks media self-censorship, remains stable at a moderate level until the early 1970s, when it drops significantly, likely reflecting a period of reduced internal media restrictions. However, from the 1980s onwards, self-censorship increases again and remains at a steady level, with a slight uptick in the late 2010s, possibly

indicating rising pressures on journalists to limit their reporting. The overall picture suggests that while freedom of expression has generally improved over time, there are ongoing concerns about government intervention and self-censorship, both of which appear to have resurged in recent years. These trends may reflect broader political developments, shifts in media ownership, or increasing state influence over public discourse, raising questions about the future trajectory of press freedom in Israel.

It is important to highlight how the data are not yet affected by the proposed laws that are currently being implemented. Once implemented, these can be captured by the data shown in the figure and may show a decline in the quality of media freedom due to the scope and objective of laws currently under scrutiny in the Knesset.

In particular, immediately after his appointment in late 2022, Communications Minister Karhi introduced a bill aimed at shutting down the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation, known as "Kan". Although the government later decided to freeze the proposal, Kan remained under persistent threat. In July 2023, Karhi unveiled a legislative memorandum outlining a broader media reform, which included dismantling the Cable and Satellite Council and the Second Authority Council, two independent bodies responsible for regulating commercial broadcasts in Israel. These institutions would be replaced by a new regulatory council whose members would be appointed by the government (ACRI, 2023). In June 2024, the Ministerial Committee for Legislation approved this bill, setting the stage for greater governmental control over Israel's media landscape. The new council would have the authority to promote specific content, impose heavy fines on broadcasters that fail to comply with its directives, and, in effect, exert control over broadcast content.

Two major steps toward tightening media control followed in November 2024 and January 2025. On November 3rd, 2024, the Ministerial Committee for Legislation approved a law expanding the communications minister's authority over the media. Under the existing system, any changes to Kan's budget, which is financed through public funding and advertising revenue, required parliamentary approval. However, the new law enables the Ministry of Communications to modify Kan's budget directly, bypassing parliamentary oversight. On January 27th, 2025, the government further consolidated its influence over public broadcasting by approving a measure granting it full control over appointments to Kan's governing council. Upon the recommendation of the communications minister, the government will now appoint all 12 council members. This council, in turn, will have the power to appoint Kan's senior officials, set editorial policies, approve the broadcaster's annual work plan, and oversee its general operations (Sokol, 2025).

In parallel, the government tightened its grip on foreign media with the so-called "Al Jazeera Law", a measure widely criticized by press freedom advocates. Initially adopted in April 2024 for four months, the law granted Israeli authorities the power to ban foreign media outlets deemed a threat to national security. In July, the government renewed the measure, and on November 20th, 2024, the Knesset extended its duration to six months while expanding its key provision: the broadcasting ban period was increased from 45 days to 60.

These legislative moves, cumulatively reshaping Israel's media landscape, represent a growing encroachment on press freedom, access to information, and freedom of expression. By consolidating government control over public broadcasting and imposing tighter restrictions on foreign media, these reforms erode fundamental democratic principles and weaken Israel's long-standing commitment to media independence.

4. Comparative analysis of autocratisation episodes in Türkiye, Tunisia, and Israel

Autocratisation is a complex and multifaceted process that is unfolding in different ways and paces across countries. This analysis compares the modes of autocratisation between Türkiye, Tunisia, and Israel, highlighting their similarities, differences, and underlying mechanisms. By focusing on patterns, outcomes, and implications it is possible to better understand how autocratisation occurs in different contexts.

These three countries in effect differ in their historical background and institutional order and this reflects also in the unfolding of their autocratisation episodes and modes.

Historically, since its foundation, Türkiye has been affected by the Sèvres syndrome, the underlying fear for its own safety and identity due to the siege by hostile entities, perceived as capable of and willing to annihilate the existence of the country itself. All this led to a strong Turkish national sense of unity, which was supported by a security narrative, which gave to the military a primary role in protecting the constitutional principles and the country.

The Israeli case shares with Türkiye the effects of a similar syndrome. Israel in fact has also always been surrounded by Arab states that since its very first day of independence constituted a concrete military threat, reiterated in the Arab-Israeli wars and tense relations of the following decades. However, if, in the history of Turkish politics, the military intervened four times to protect the country's unity and Kemalist principles, the Israeli case does not offer examples of military interventions in the political life. The Tunisian case diverges from the other two cases in regard to the presence of a syndrome like the Sèvres one and of military

coups, but similarly to Türkiye, its political landscape, and in particular its political leaders, has been somehow supported by military, as shown by the following Figure 15 that represents the military support to political leaders.

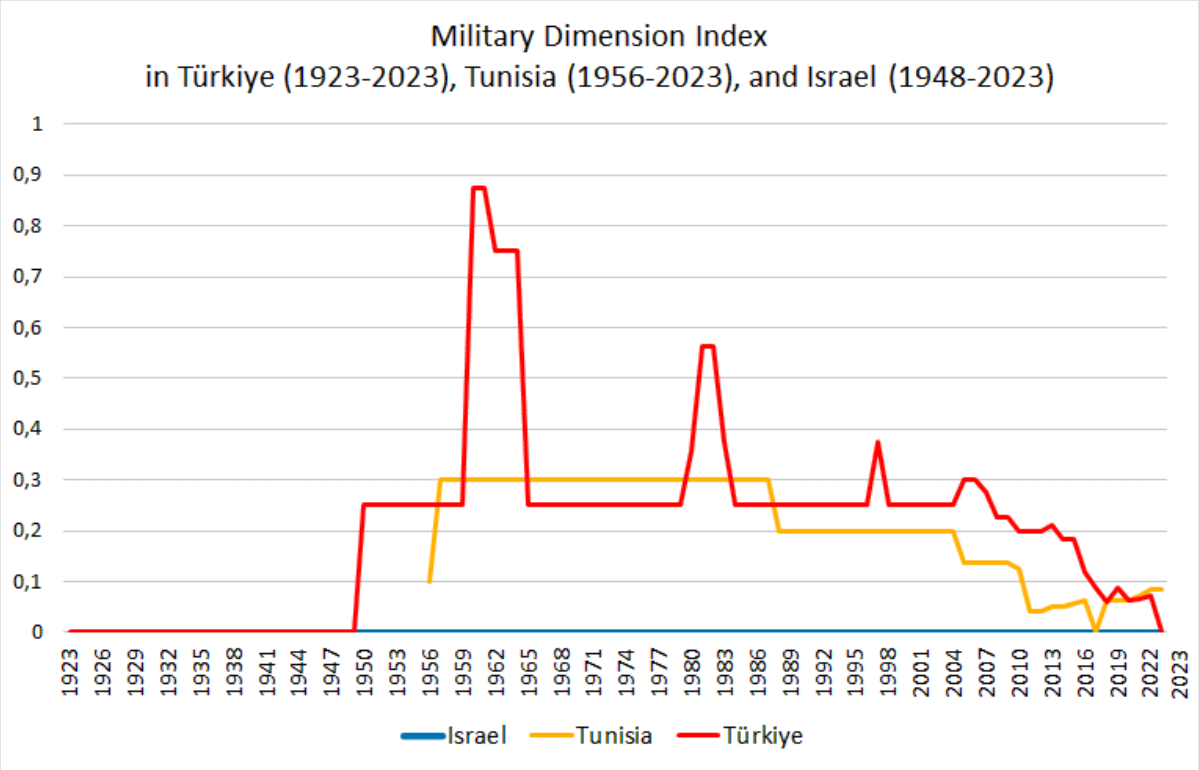

Figure 15. Military Dimension Index in Türkiye (1923-2023), Tunisia (1956-2023), and Israel (1948-2023). Source: author's elaboration from V-Dem dataset.

Türkiye, represented by the red line, shows a significant presence of military influence across the 20th century, reaching peaks in coincidence of the military coups. After the 1980 coup, the military support to the government and its influence in politics gradually declines, reflecting Türkiye's transition towards civilian governance, with a more pronounced decline after 2010, aligning with reforms that curtailed military power in politics. In Tunisia, shown in yellow, military support and influence have been present and relatively stable, without any major interference nor military coup. After 2011, Tunisia's index drops significantly, likely reflecting democratic reforms following the Arab Spring, although some fluctuations in recent years suggest a certain resurgence in military involvement under Saied. The blue line representing Israel consistently indicates that the military has not played a decisive role in shaping the power base of its Prime Minister, despite the country sharing a security-oriented syndrome as in Türkiye. Indeed, as discussed, Türkiye's military interventions amounted to

effective military coups, which served as a primary mode of autocratic episodes. However, in the 21st century, the trajectory of autocratisation in Türkiye has diverged significantly from its past patterns and, instead, finds points of convergence with the broader trends observed in all three case studies.

One striking convergence among the selected cases lies in the primary agents driving democratic erosion. Unlike the traditional mode of autocratisation in which external actors, theoretically neutral, such as the military, impose their rule from outside the political sphere, democratic erosion in these cases has been orchestrated from within the highest levels of politics. In each instance, it is the head of government or head of state, thus figures central to the polity, who have actively dismantled democratic norms and institutions. This marks a critical shift in the modes of autocratisation, emphasizing internal political agency over external coercion.

However, while these cases share similarities in agency and some of the modes of autocratisation, they diverge significantly in terms of the pace and timeframe of democratic decline. Tunisia's autocratic episode was rapid, marked by an abrupt suspension of democratic institutions and procedures within a short period. In contrast, Türkiye's democratic decline has been a gradual and systematic process, characterized by the incremental erosion over the past two decades. Israel, on the other hand, presents an ongoing case of autocratisation that appears to be developing in a similarly incremental manner, primarily through government-led reforms. However, currently, Israel's trajectory has been partially stalled by resistance within parliament and Israeli society, as well as by delays resulting from the ongoing conflict in Gaza.

Although differing in terms of timeframe, institutional and historical background, there are many convergences in terms of modes. In particular, first and foremost is the executive aggrandizement.

In these three cases, at various degrees, the elected head of government or head of state has been the primary driver of democratic decline, systematically expanding executive authority at the expense of legislative and judicial independence. The most extreme case of executive overreach is represented by Tunisia under Saied. The President bypassed democratic procedures altogether directly suspending the parliament and ruling by decrees. Saied thus eliminating any legislative constraints on his executive power. Similarly, in Türkiye, Erdoğan has implemented measures that centralise power within the presidency. While the Turkish parliament is still in office, Erdoğan effectively suppressed parliamentary prerogatives and relied to a great extent on legislating through presidential decrees, circumventing legislative autonomy and oversight. A different story is the Israeli case where Prime Minister Netanyahu's

announced reforms do not envisage an impairing of parliamentary powers. This may be explained by the atomised party system, which currently sees twelve parties in the Knesset. The very high number of parties and coalition detaining a relatively low number of seats (120) in the parliament makes it difficult for a potential autocrat to influence, interfere, and override parliamentary prerogatives. The fragmented party system acts as a barrier, which forced Prime Minister Netanyahu to aim for a different strategy: the judicial reform.

The judiciary appears to be a common "object of desire" among these cases of autocratisation, because of its dual role as both an obstacle to and an enabler of autocratic consolidation. One of the primary motivations for undermining judicial independence is to prevent legal challenges that could obstruct the autocratisation process while preserving a façade of democratic legitimacy. Unlike military coups, which abruptly dismantle legal and institutional frameworks, contemporary autocrats operate within the existing legal order, gradually reshaping it through legal means (autocratic legalism). Through this approach, executive aggrandizement and the erosion of checks and balances are framed as lawful processes, implemented via legislative procedures, judicial rulings, or executive decrees issued by democratically elected leaders. By presenting these changes as expressions of the democratic mandate, autocrats maintain a façade of legitimacy while systematically weakening democratic institutions.

Beyond neutralizing judicial oversight, reforming the judiciary also transforms it into a tool of autocratic governance. Once subordinated, the courts can be instrumentalized to support government actions, provide legal justification for further power consolidation, and suppress political opposition under the guise of legality. This dual function, shielding the regime from accountability while legitimizing repressive measures, makes judicial control a critical pillar in the autocratisation process, allowing leaders to consolidate their authority while maintaining the illusion of democratic rule.

In Israel, the judicial reform is still in the process of being implemented, which means its impact is not yet fully reflected in the available data. However, emerging trends indicate a clear trajectory toward restricting the judiciary's ability to constrain arbitrary power. As illustrated below in Figure 16, the blue line gradually declining below 0.5 signals an ongoing erosion of judicial independence. This suggests that, while the reform is not yet fully realized, its effects are already measurable, pointing to a systematic effort to weaken judicial oversight and enhance executive dominance.

More evident are the Tunisian and Turkish cases, where judicial independence and autonomy have been much restricted in recent years. In both cases, judges have been purged

for political reasons, new appointment procedures have been implemented, giving the executive control over judges' nominations.

Figure 16 shows judicial and legislative oversight over the executive in the three cases.

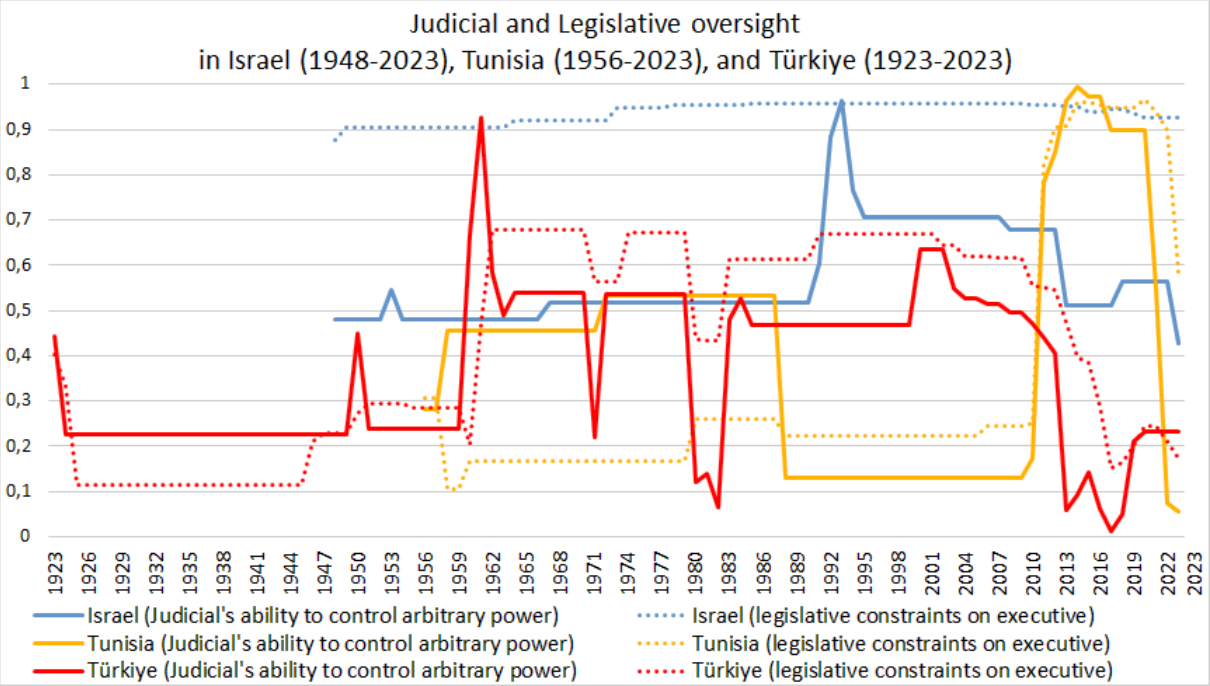

Figure 16. Judicial and legislative oversight in Israel (1948-2023), Tunisia (1956-2023), and Türkiye (1923-2023). Source: author's elaboration from V-Dem dataset.

From this figure emerges the situation discussed above. Israel, represented by the blue lines, maintained relatively high levels of judicial and legislative oversight throughout the observed period. However, while legislative constraints on the executive are still high, the judiciary's ability to control arbitrary power is starting to decline, due to the mentioned proposed judicial reform. Tunisia, depicted by the yellow lines, exhibits fluctuating trends, with judicial and legislative oversight strengthening after the 2011 revolution but experiencing a sharp decline in 2021, reflecting the erosion of democratic institutions under the state of emergency proclaimed by President Saied. Türkiye, shown in red, presents a more turbulent pattern, with an incremental decline in both judicial and legislative oversight under Erdoğan and the AKP.

This pattern of executive aggrandizement is thus a synonym for the erosion of horizontal accountability. However, these autocratisation episodes have not only targeted institutional checks and balances but have also systematically weakened vertical accountability.

Controlling vertical accountability has been essential in sustaining autocratisation, with particular focus on restricting press freedom, media independence, and freedom of expression. A common feature across all three cases has been the restructuring of the media landscape to consolidate government control, severely undermining journalistic independence, and silencing dissent. In Türkiye, most mainstream media outlets are owned or controlled by government-aligned entities, while independent journalists face legal persecution, financial pressure, censorship, as well as pre-emptive self-censorship. Government-backed media consolidation has ensured that opposition voices struggle to reach a mass audience. In Tunisia, increasing restrictions on the press, combined with the weaponization of defamation laws, have curtailed critical journalism. Press and media outlets are subject to government intimidation, while legal measures reinforce state control over public discourse. In Israel, although media suppression has not yet reached the same level of severity, government interference in public broadcasting and new legislation, implemented and proposed, restricting media freedom signal the will to influence independent journalism. While opposition media still exist, mounting government pressure is leading to a shrinking space for free expression.

Despite variations in intensity and approach, all three cases illustrate a broader trend of diminishing media pluralism and restricting dissent. Through legal, economic, and coercive means, these governments have sought to reshape the media environment in their favour, systematically undermining one of the key pillars of democratic accountability.

The impairing of press and media liberties prepares the ground for another crucial autocratic mode: electoral manipulation.

The most blatant case of impaired electoral competition is Tunisia. As an electoral autocracy, its recent elections have been manipulated through presidential control over the electoral commission and strategic changes to electoral laws, ensuring the consolidation of power. By dominating the electoral process and, most critically, arbitrarily excluding candidates, President Saied has effectively eliminated meaningful competition. This has allowed him to secure electoral outcomes that guarantee both his continued presidential rule and a favourable parliament.

In Türkiye, which is also classified as an electoral autocracy, elections remain formally competitive but are neither free nor fair. Electoral monitoring bodies have been systematically co-opted, while opposition parties face systematic discrimination in campaigning and mobilization. State resources, media control, and legal intimidation overwhelmingly favour the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader, President Erdoğan. These tactics

create an uneven playing field, making electoral victories for the opposition exceedingly difficult, even in the presence of high voter engagement and political opposition.

Israel, classified as electoral democracy, presents a different case. Unlike Tunisia and Türkiye, its electoral process has largely remained intact, primarily due to its highly fragmented party system, which makes it difficult to pass laws that could alter the parliamentary balance. However, the ongoing process of executive aggrandizement poses a growing risk to electoral integrity. While election monitoring bodies have not yet been undermined, future reforms aimed at consolidating executive power could weaken their independence, potentially leading to a more controlled electoral environment, mirroring the patterns observed in Tunisia and Türkiye.

The levels of freedom of expression, information and of electoral fairness are represented below in Figure 17.

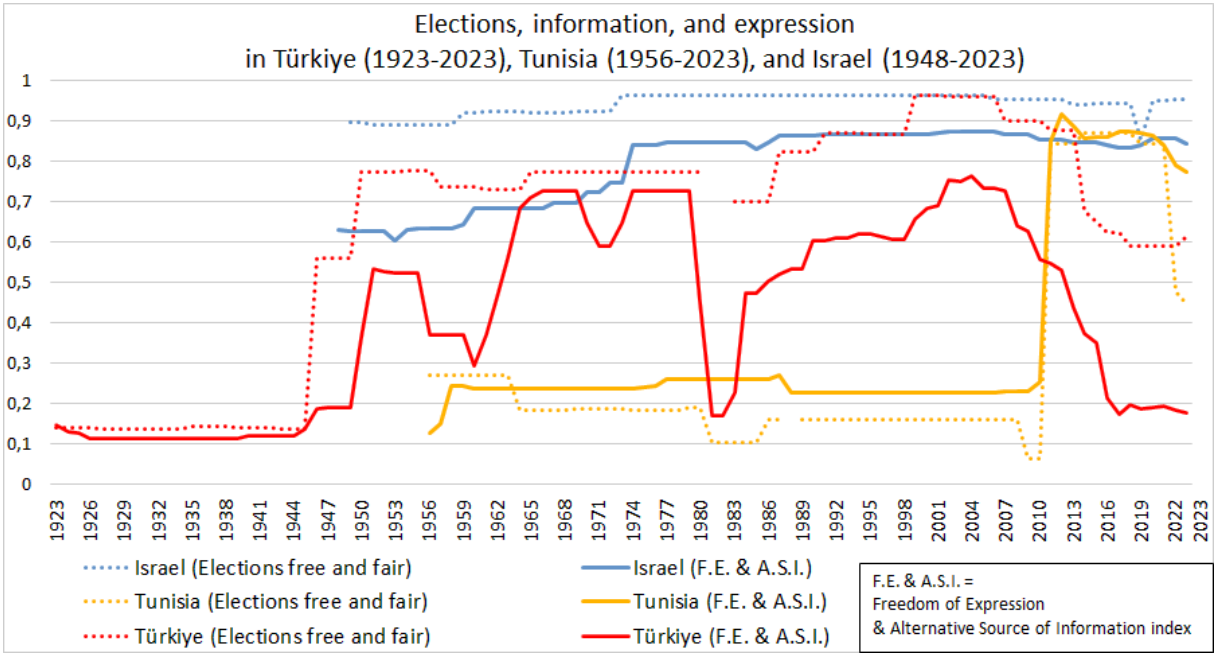

Figure 17. Elections, information, and expression in Türkiye (1923-2023), Tunisia (1956-2023), and Israel (1948-2023). Source: author's elaboration from V-Dem dataset.

The Figure shows how Türkiye levels of electoral fairness and expression and information liberties declined, particularly after the 2010s, indicating increasing restrictions on media and electoral competition. Tunisia, which remained autocratic for much of its history, shows a brief period of democratic gains following the 2011 Arab Spring, but these gains are reversed in recent years, reflecting democratic erosion. Israel, initially strong in both electoral integrity and freedom of expression, maintains relatively high values throughout its history, but

a decline in recent years suggests growing concerns over media restrictions and electoral processes.

Regarding the protection and inclusion of minority groups in political and social life, both Israel and Türkiye exhibit patterns of exclusion, particularly targeting non-Jewish citizens in Israel and the Kurdish population in Türkiye. However, the nature and extent of this discrimination differ between the two cases. In Türkiye, exclusion is largely framed through national security concerns, with Kurdish communities, particularly those in Syria and Iraq near the Turkish border, frequently labelled as extremists or terrorists. This securitization of Kurdish identity has justified systemic repression, including military operations, restrictions on political representation, and the suppression of Kurdish language and cultural expression. While Kurdish political parties exist, they face legal challenges, crackdowns, and, in some cases, outright bans, limiting their ability to influence national policies.

In Israel, minority exclusion appears to be more deeply institutionalized, affecting non-Jewish citizens within the country itself. The controversial Nation-State Basic Law, passed in 2018, has had significant legal consequences for non-Jewish minorities, particularly Arab and Palestinian citizens of Israel. By defining Israel as the exclusive nation-state of the Jewish people, the law effectively enshrines discrimination, undermining the collective and individual rights of non-Jewish communities. This legal framework not only reinforces systemic inequalities in political representation but also legitimizes policies that further marginalize non-Jewish citizens in social, political, and economic life.

While both cases involve the political and social exclusion of minority groups, Türkiye's approach is more security-driven and externally focused, whereas Israel's policies are legally codified and impact the everyday lives of minority citizens residing within its borders.

A critical factor linking the Israeli and Tunisian cases is the role of law enforcement and security forces in shaping political power. In Tunisia, the military has historically played a significant role in supporting the executive and suppressing dissent. This dynamic shifted in 2011 during the democratic transition when the influence of the military in politics noticeably declined. However, under President Saied, there has been a resurgence in the use of military and security forces as instruments of executive authority, reinforcing his consolidation of power and suppressing opposition.

Similarly, in Israel, recent legislative efforts advanced by the Minister of National Security aim to politicize the police force, signalling an authoritarian shift. These proposed reforms seek to centralize control over law enforcement by increasing executive influence over police appointments, operational decisions, and law enforcement priorities. If fully

implemented, such measures would erode the independence of security institutions, enabling the government to use law enforcement as a tool for political ends, mirroring patterns seen in Tunisia. While Tunisia's executive reliance on the military has resurfaced after a decade of decline, Israel's security policies are moving in a similar direction through legal reforms that threaten to undermine the neutrality of the police. In both cases, these developments contribute to a broader trend of executive overreach, where security forces become extensions of political authority rather than neutral enforcers of the rule of law.

The resistance to these processes has varied significantly: Israel has seen the strongest pushback from civil society and legal institutions, Tunisia's opposition has struggled against the rapidity of Saied's consolidation, and Türkiye's long-term autocratisation has left its opposition significantly weakened. Understanding these trends is essential for developing effective strategies to counteract democratic erosion and bolster institutional resilience in fragile democracies.

The international response to the autocratisation processes in Türkiye, Tunisia, and Israel has varied significantly depending on geopolitical interests, diplomatic relations, and the broader strategic importance of each country. In Türkiye, Western democracies, particularly the European Union and the United States, have expressed concerns over the erosion of democratic institutions. However, these criticisms have been largely rhetorical, as Türkiye remains a crucial NATO ally and a key player in regional security, migration management, and economic partnerships. Sanctions or strong punitive measures have been largely absent, reflecting a pragmatic approach to maintaining strategic ties. In Tunisia, as the constitutional overhaul and consolidation of power became more evident, international donors, including the European Union and the United States, began reducing financial assistance, warning of democratic backsliding. Nevertheless, Tunisia's role in migration control and counterterrorism efforts has led to a cautious and inconsistent approach from international actors. Israel, in contrast, has faced significant domestic and international pushback over its judicial reform proposals, particularly from the United States and European allies. The perception that these reforms could undermine democratic checks and balances has led to diplomatic pressure, public criticism from U.S. officials, and warnings about potential economic repercussions. However, Israel's strategic importance as a regional ally has tempered the severity of international measures, with most responses remaining within the realm of diplomatic persuasion rather than tangible consequences. In all three cases, geopolitical considerations have influenced the extent and nature of the international response, demonstrating that strategic interests often outweigh concerns over democratic erosion.

The following Table 1 broadly summarises key modes of autocratisation and their declination in the three cases.

Category	Türkiye	Tunisia	Israel
Regime Classification	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Democracy (with signs of erosion)
Agent of Autocratisation	Prime Minister (then President)	President	Prime Minister
Pace of Autocratisation	Incremental (over two decades)	Rapid (since 2021 self-coup)	Ongoing (accelerated since late 2022)
Primary Mode	Executive aggrandisement (gradual erosion of checks and balances)	Self-coup & constitutional overhaul	Judicial reform
Executive Aggrandisement	Yes, strong consolidation of power under the President	Yes, full concentration of power in the President	Limited but increasing (attempts to expand executive influence)
Judicial Independence	Politicised and weakened (removal of judges, reshaping of judicial bodies)	Politicised and weakened (removal of judges, reshaping of judicial bodies, executive direct control)	Targeted for reform, declining oversight (increasing executive influence)
Legislative Independence	Low (parliament weakened, opposition marginalised)	Low (parliament dissolved and then reinstated with reduced power)	High
Military Role	Historically strong, now limited	Historically medium, now resurgence	No direct role, but increasing politicisation of security forces
Horizontal Accountability	Low (executive dominance over other branches of government)	Low (executive controls most institutions)	Moderate to high (parliament and civil society still active but under pressure)
Vertical Accountability	Low (media control, electoral manipulation, suppression of dissent)	Low (elections and opposition parties severely weakened)	High (public mobilisation still active, but government attempting to restrict protests)
Media Control	Extensive (government dominance over media, crackdown on independent journalism)	Increasing (media outlets shut down, opposition voices restricted)	Targeted for reform, increasing executive control (attempts to limit press freedom)
Electoral Manipulation	High and indirect (unfair competition, media bias, restrictions on opposition)	High and direct (electoral commission under executive control, crackdown on opposition parties)	Low
Civil Liberties and Protests	Severely restricted (harsh crackdowns on protests, opposition persecution)	Severely restricted (criminalisation of dissent, repression of opposition movements)	Still robust, but increasing interventions against protests and civil movements
International Response	Criticism from Western allies, limited consequences due to geopolitical importance	Strong international condemnation, partial diplomatic isolation	Criticism from Western allies, limited consequences due to geopolitical importance

Table 1. Summary of the main data, factors, and modes of autocratisation in Türkiye, Tunisia, and Israel.
Source: author's elaboration.

While the modes of autocratisation in Türkiye, Tunisia, and Israel differ in approach and speed, they share some common modes: executive overreach, media control, judicial interference, and electoral manipulation. Türkiye exemplifies a slow and systematic erosion of democracy, Tunisia highlights a sudden autocratic shift, and Israel illustrates an ongoing incremental degradation of democratic institutions through legal reforms.

Each country offers unique lessons in the execution of autocratisation, providing crucial insights into the global struggle for democracy.

Together, these cases illustrate the evolving nature of autocratisation in the modern era, where democratic backsliding is no longer solely driven by external actors like the military but is increasingly orchestrated from within the political establishment itself. The differing timelines and intensities of these episodes highlight the diverse pathways through which contemporary autocrats consolidate power, adapting their strategies to the specific political and institutional contexts of their countries.

Conclusions

This thesis has examined the phenomenon of autocratisation, assessing its key drivers, mechanisms, and consequences across different political and institutional contexts. The year 2024, marked by the largest global election cycle in history, initially appeared to reaffirm the strength of democratic institutions worldwide. However, a closer analysis of contemporary political trends reveals a more complex reality, one in which democracy is not steadily expanding but, in many cases, is actively regressing. The findings of this research confirm that the democratic progress predicted by scholars in the context of the "third wave of democratisation" and of the "end of history" has not been absolute or irreversible. Instead, a growing number of states have undergone democratic erosion, leading to what scholars have termed a "global crisis of democracy" (Diamond, 2019) and a "third wave of autocratisation" (Lührmann and Lindberg; 2019).

This thesis has demonstrated that autocratisation is not an isolated or incidental occurrence but a systematic and global process. Unlike traditional autocratic takeovers through military coups or abrupt regime collapses, modern autocratisation tends to unfold gradually, often under the guise of legal and democratic procedures. Through the progressive weakening of institutional checks and balances, the voiding of the separation of the three powers, the suppression of opposition, the restriction of civil and political liberties, and the concentration of power in the executive, autocratisation can occur even in long-established democracies. This incremental nature of autocratisation makes it particularly difficult to detect and counteract, as it frequently exploits existing institutional frameworks and political narratives, such as national security concerns or appeals to popular sovereignty.

Despite the growing prevalence of autocratisation, it has historically received less scholarly attention than democratisation and regime transitions. Much of the literature in comparative politics has traditionally focused on the emergence and consolidation of democracies, often assuming that once established, democratic institutions would remain resilient. However, the widespread decline of democratic quality associated with the erosion of democratic norms and procedures over the past two decades has necessitated a reassessment of these theoretical frameworks. This research has sought to address key gaps in the literature by developing a comprehensive and balanced theoretical model for understanding autocratisation, examining both its structural and agency-driven dimensions.

A key contribution of this thesis has been its comparative analysis of autocratisation in Türkiye, Tunisia, and Israel. The selection of these cases was based on their relevance to the broader third wave of autocratisation, their positioning within the MENA region, historically one of the most autocratic areas in the world, and their different past democratic and autocratic trajectories. The findings reveal that while each case exhibits unique political paths, there are common mechanisms that drive autocratic regression, all put in place by democratically elected leaders.

Türkiye exemplifies a case of gradual autocratisation, where democratic institutions have been systematically eroded while maintaining the appearance of a democratic façade. Over the past two decades, the country has been one of the most prominent cases of autocratisation, eventually stabilising as an electoral autocracy. Indeed, while elections continue to be held regularly in a multiparty system, the political landscape has become increasingly unbalanced, unfair, and tilted in favour of the incumbent. The agency of Prime Minister and later President Erdoğan has played a central role in reshaping the political system, consolidating power, and restricting genuine democratic competition. Opposition parties, while legally permitted, face significant structural disadvantages, including limited access to media, restrictions on campaigning, and legal and extra-legal pressures that hinder their ability to compete on equal footing with the ruling AKP party. The near-total control of the information sphere, through state-aligned media and restrictions on independent journalism, has further curtailed democratic accountability by limiting public access to diverse and critical sources of information. This suppression of vertical accountability has been complemented by the erosion of horizontal accountability. Through extensive centralisation of power, the executive has significantly weakened the legislative and judicial branches, voiding them of their oversight functions and transforming them into tools for political consolidation rather than checks on authority. However, despite this autocratising trajectory, recent political developments suggest potential avenues for democratic resilience. The results of the latest local elections, in which the ruling AKP suffered notable defeats to opposition parties, indicate that electoral competition, though constrained, has not been entirely extinguished. These setbacks for the government may signal a renewed capacity for opposition forces to challenge autocratic and authoritarian consolidation, demonstrating that even in the face of significant democratic erosion, spaces for political contestation and resistance can still emerge.

Tunisia exemplifies the fragility of democratic transitions, illustrating how autocratic regression can occur even after a period of significant democratisation. Between 2011 and 2021, Tunisia lived its only democratic experience. It was also widely regarded as the sole democratic

success story of the Arab Spring, often referred to as the "Arab anomaly" due to its relatively smooth transition and consolidation of democratic governance. However, this democratic experiment proved short-lived, as the country experienced a rapid and abrupt reversal, regressing into electoral autocracy within just a decade. Central to this autocratisation episode has been the agency of President Saied, who effectively exploited the institutional weaknesses and political divisions of Tunisia's young democracy. In a matter of months, Saied dismantled key democratic safeguards by dissolving the parliament, removing judicial independence through the dismissal and replacement of judges, removing presidential candidates, and unilaterally rewriting the constitution to consolidate executive power. These moves severely undermined Tunisia's democratic framework and concentrated authority in the presidency. Tunisia's case underscores the particular vulnerability of newly established democracies, especially those emerging from autocratic rule. When democratic institutions remain fragile, political divisions run deep, and economic crises and security concerns persist, the likelihood of democratic erosion increases significantly. Such conditions create an environment where autocratic-leaning leaders can exploit internal weaknesses, using legal and populist mechanisms to dismantle democratic checks and balances. Tunisia serves as a stark reminder that democratic transitions, no matter how promising, are never irreversible and require sustained institutional resilience, functioning oversight mechanisms, and political cohesion to withstand the pressures of autocratisation.

Israel, long regarded as the only strong democracy in the MENA region, offers critical insights into how autocratising tendencies can emerge even within well-established and highly institutionalised democratic systems. While Israel's democratic foundations remain relatively robust, recent years have seen increasing political instability driven by its institutional and party system. This instability, marked by persistent electoral deadlocks, deep societal divisions, and heightened geopolitical and security concerns, has created an environment where democratic erosion is increasingly justified under the pretext of national stability or governance efficiency. One of the most alarming signs of democratic erosion in Israel has been the growing concentration of executive power and efforts to weaken judicial independence. The controversial judicial reform proposed in 2023, which sought to limit the judiciary's ability to review executive decisions and increase government control over judicial appointments, sparked widespread protests and raised serious concerns about the erosion of checks and balances. These developments are further compounded by legislative measures such as the Nation-State Basic Law and other proposed legal reforms that elevate the Jewish character of the state at the expense of democratic principles, effectively marginalising and discriminating

minority groups. Additionally, there have been increasing attempts to exert executive influence over the media and law enforcement institutions, further threatening democratic vertical and horizontal accountability, as well as institutional independence and autonomy. Israel's case underscores the reality that no democracy, no matter how well established, is immune to the risks of autocratisation. The country's experience highlights both the dangers posed by incremental legal and political shifts that erode democratic norms over time and the critical role of civil society, political opposition, and institutional resilience in resisting democratic decline. The mass protests and widespread opposition to the judicial reforms demonstrate that public mobilisation and democratic engagement remain powerful counterforces against autocratic tendencies, underscoring the ongoing struggle to preserve democratic integrity in Israel.

By comparing these cases, this research has confirmed broader trends observed in the third wave of autocratisation, demonstrating that diverse political contexts often share similar modes of democratic decline. The analysis has highlighted the role of legal and institutional mechanisms in facilitating autocratisation, underscoring how elected leaders, rather than external forces or military interventions, increasingly drive autocratisation from within. A primary target of autocratic regression is the judiciary, initially perceived as an obstacle to autocratisation and later transformed into a tool for consolidating autocratic rule. By undermining judicial independence, autocratising leaders weaken institutional checks and balances, reducing the judiciary's ability to act as a counterweight to executive overreach.

Another critical target is the media and information sphere. Controlling the flow of information is essential for disrupting vertical accountability, a fundamental pillar of democracy. By restricting press freedom, consolidating media ownership under government influence, and suppressing dissent, autocratic regimes manipulate public perception, limit political pluralism, and prevent effective opposition mobilisation.

A further key pillar of democracy under attack is free and fair electoral competition. Autocratic projects in the third wave often seek to maintain the appearance of democratic and multiparty elections while ensuring they are structurally impaired and manipulated. By tilting the electoral playing field, through restrictions on and harassment of opposition candidates, media bias, voter suppression, and legal manoeuvres, autocratic leaders manufacture a semblance of democratic legitimacy. This façade serves a dual purpose: it provides legitimacy both domestically, to maintain public compliance, and internationally, to avoid diplomatic isolation and sanctions while sustaining strategic alliances.

While this study emphasises that autocratisation is not a linear or uniform process and it unfolds differently depending on historical legacies, institutional frameworks, and socio-

political conditions, it also highlights how attacks on the abovementioned pillars are common patterns.

The implications of this research extend beyond the three case studies examined. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of how and why democracies erode, offering insights into the warning signs and early indicators of democratic decline. In doing so, this thesis underscores the urgent need for strategies to counteract autocratisation and strengthen democratic resilience. As democratic erosion continues to shape global politics, scholars, policymakers, and civil society actors must engage with this challenge, developing institutional and political safeguards to protect democratic governance.

As the world moves further into the 21st century, democracy can no longer be assumed as the inevitable endpoint of political development. Instead, it is increasingly fragile and contested, subject to both internal and external pressures that threaten its endurance. This research has sought to provide a nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of autocratisation, contributing to the growing body of scholarship aimed at addressing democratic decline. Future research should build upon these findings by further exploring the conditions under which democracies can resist autocratisation and identifying effective countermeasures to reverse autocratisation. Indeed, understanding autocratisation is not merely an intellectual pursuit; it carries profound real-world implications. The erosion of democratic norms and institutions is linked to increased political instability, economic decline, rising human rights violations, and the weakening of international democratic alliances. Moreover, democratic erosion does not only affect countries undergoing autocratisation but has broader implications for the global balance of power, as the resurgence of autocratic and authoritarian-leaning governments that challenge the liberal democratic order.

As the world enters a period of intensified political contestation, marked by rising populism, declining trust in democratic institutions, and the increasing assertiveness of autocratic regimes, understanding the vulnerabilities of democracy becomes more urgent than ever. This research aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on autocratisation by providing a systematic analysis of its causes, mechanisms, and consequences. By doing so, it hopes to offer valuable insights for scholars, policymakers, and civil society actors seeking to develop strategies to counteract democratic decline and strengthen the resilience of democratic institutions worldwide.

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Appendix

The following variables are the ones shown in the figures from previous chapters. Since these variables originally used different scales, the author has standardized them onto a unified scale ranging from 0 (low) to 1 (high) to enhance clarity and visual coherence. Where applicable, the scales within square brackets represent the author's adjusted values, while the others correspond to the original measurements from the V-Dem dataset (version 14).

The detailed and complete description and explanation of these variables and their methodology can be found in the V-Dem dataset (version 14) codebook and the methodology paper.

These are available at:

- Codebook: https://v-dem.net/documents/38/V-Dem_Codebook_v14.pdf
- Methodology: https://v-dem.net/documents/39/v-dem_methodology_v14.pdf

Accountability index (v2x_accountability)

To what extent is the ideal of government accountability achieved?
Clarification: Government accountability is understood as constraints on the government's use of political power through requirements for justification for its actions and potential sanctions. We organize the sub-types of accountability spatially. Vertical accountability refers to the ability of a state's population to hold its government accountable through elections, horizontal accountability refers to checks and balances between institutions; and diagonal accountability captures oversight by civil society organizations and media activity.
Project Manager(s): Kyle L. Marquardt and Valeriya Mechkova
Scale: low to high (0-1).
Source(s): v2x_elecreg v2elembaut v2elembcap v2elrgstry v2elirreg v2elintim v2elmulpar v2elfrfair v2elsuffrage v2expathhs v2ex_legconhos v2expathhg v2exaphogp v2ex_hosw v2psparban v2psbars v2psoppaut v2juhcind v2juncind v2juhccomp v2jucomp v2exrescon v2lginvstp v2lgqstexp v2lgbicam v2lgotovst v2mecenefm v2mecenefi v2meharjrn v2mecrit v2mebias v2merange v2meslfcen v2csprtcpt v2cseeorgs v2csreprss v2cldiscm v2cldiscw v2clacfree v2dlengage v2x_suffr v2xex_elecreg v2xlg_elecreg

Election free and fair (v2elfrfair)
Taking all aspects of the pre-election period, election day, and the post-election process into account, would you consider this national election to be free and fair?
Clarification: The only thing that should not be considered in coding this is the extent of suffrage (by law). Thus, a free and fair election may occur even if the law excludes significant groups (an issue measured separately).
Responses: 0 [0]: No, not at all. The elections were fundamentally flawed and the official results had little if anything to do with the 'will of the people' (i.e., who became president; or who won the legislative majority).

1 [0.25]: Not really. While the elections allowed for some competition, the irregularities in the end affected the outcome of the election (i.e., who became president; or who won the legislative majority).
2 [0.5]: Ambiguous. There was substantial competition and freedom of participation but there were also significant irregularities. It is hard to determine whether the irregularities affected the outcome or not (as defined above).
3 [0.75]: Yes, somewhat. There were deficiencies and some degree of fraud and irregularities but these did not in the end affect the outcome (as defined above).
4 [1]: Yes. There was some amount of human error and logistical restrictions but these were largely unintentional and without significant consequences.

Elections multiparty (v2elmulpar)
Was this national election multiparty?
Responses: 0 [0]: No. No-party or single-party and there is no meaningful competition (includes situations where a few parties are legal but they are all de facto controlled by the dominant party).
1 [0.25]: Not really. No-party or single-party (defined as above) but multiple candidates from the same party and/or independents contest legislative seats or the presidency.
2 [0.5]: Constrained. At least one real opposition party is allowed to contest but competition is highly constrained --- legally or informally.
3 [0.75]: Almost. Elections are multiparty in principle but either one main opposition party is prevented (de jure or de facto) from contesting, or conditions such as civil unrest (excluding natural disasters) prevent competition in a portion of the territory.
4 [1]: Yes. Elections are multiparty, even though a few marginal parties may not be permitted to contest (e.g. far-right/left extremist parties, anti-democratic religious or ethnic parties).

Electoral democracy index (v2x_polyarchy)
To what extent is the ideal of electoral democracy in its fullest sense achieved?
Clarification: The electoral principle of democracy seeks to embody the core value of making rulers responsive to citizens, achieved through electoral competition for the electorate's approval under circumstances when suffrage is extensive; political and civil society organizations can operate freely; elections are clean and not marred by fraud or systematic irregularities; and elections affect the composition of the chief executive of the country. In between elections, there is freedom of expression and an independent media capable of presenting alternative views on matters of political relevance. In the V-Dem conceptual scheme, electoral democracy is understood as an essential element of any other conception of representative democracy --- liberal, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian, or some other.
Scale: Interval, from low to high (0-1).
Source(s): v2x_freexp_altinf v2x_frassoc_thick v2x_suffr v2xel_frefair v2x_elecoff

Electoral Monitoring Body autonomy (original: EMB autonomy) (v2elembaut)
Does the Election Management Body (EMB) have autonomy from government to apply election laws and administrative rules impartially in national elections?
Clarification: The EMB refers to whatever body (or bodies) is charged with administering national elections.
Responses: 0 [0]: No. The EMB is controlled by the incumbent government, the military, or other de facto ruling body.
1 [0.25]: Somewhat. The EMB has some autonomy on some issues but on critical issues that influence the outcome of elections, the EMB is partial to the de facto ruling body.
2 [0.5]: Ambiguous. The EMB has some autonomy but is also partial, and it is unclear to what extent this influences the outcome of the election.

3 [0.75]: Almost. The EMB has autonomy and acts impartially almost all the time. It may be influenced by the de facto ruling body in some minor ways that do not influence the outcome of elections.
4 [1]: Yes. The EMB is autonomous and impartially applies elections laws and administrative rules.

Executive oversight (v2lgotovst)
If executive branch officials were engaged in unconstitutional, illegal, or unethical activity, how likely is it that a body other than the legislature, such as a comptroller general, general prosecutor, or ombudsman, would question or investigate them and issue an unfavourable decision or report?
Responses: 0 [0]: Extremely unlikely.
1 [0.25]: Unlikely.
2 [0.5]: Very uncertain.
3 [0.75]: Likely.
4 [1]: Certain or nearly certain.

Executive respects constitution (v2exrescon)
Do members of the executive (the head of state, the head of government, and cabinet ministers) respect the constitution?
Responses: 0 [0]: Members of the executive violate the constitution whenever they want to, without legal consequences.
1 [0.25]: Members of the executive violate most provisions of the constitution without legal consequences, but still must respect certain provisions.
2 [0.5]: Somewhere in between (1) and (3). Members of the executive would face legal consequences for violating most provisions of the constitution, but can disregard some provisions without any legal consequences.
3 [0.75]: Members of the executive rarely violate the constitution, and when it happens they face legal charges.
4 [1]: Members of the executive never violate the constitution.

Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information index (v2x_freexp_altinf)
To what extent does government respect press and media freedom, the freedom of ordinary people to discuss political matters at home and in the public sphere, as well as the freedom of academic and cultural expression?
Clarification: This index includes all variables in the two indices v2x_freexp and v2xme_altinf.
Scale: Interval, from low to high (0-1).
Source(s): v2mecenefm v2meharjrn v2meslfcen v2xcl_disc v2clacfree v2mebias v2mecrit v2merange

Government attacks on judiciary (v2jupoatck)
How often did the government attack the judiciary's integrity in public?
Clarification: Attacks on the judiciary's integrity can include claims that it is corrupt, incompetent or that decisions were politically motivated. These attacks can manifest in various ways including, but not limited to prepared statements reported by the media, press conferences, interviews, and stump speeches.
Responses: 0 [1]: Attacks were carried out on a daily or weekly basis.
1 [0.75]: Attacks were common and carried out in nearly every month of the year.
2 [0.5]: Attacks occurred more than once.
3 [0.25]: There were attacks, but they were rare.
4 [0]: There were no attacks on the judiciary's integrity.

Government compliance with judiciary (original: compliance with judiciary) (v2jucomp)

How often would you say the government complies with important decisions by other courts with which it disagrees?
Clarification: We are looking for a summary judgment for the entire judiciary, excluding the high court. You should consider judges on both ordinary courts and specialized courts.
Responses: 0 [0]: Never.
1 [0.25]: Seldom.
2 [0.5]: About half of the time.
3 [0.75]: Usually.
4 [1]: Always.

Government dissemination of false information domestic (v2smgovdom)
How often do the government and its agents use social media to disseminate misleading viewpoints or false information to influence its own population?
Responses:
0 [1]: Extremely often. The government disseminates false information on all key political issues.
1 [0.75]: Often. The government disseminates false information on many key political issues.
2 [0.5]: About half the time. The government disseminates false information on some key political issues, but not others.
3 [0.25]: Rarely. The government disseminates false information on only a few key political issues.
4 [0]: Never, or almost never. The government never disseminates false information on key political issues.

Government intimidation on opposition (original: Election government intimidation) (v2elintim)
In this national election, were opposition candidates/parties/campaign workers subjected to repression, intimidation, violence, or harassment by the government, the ruling party, or their agents?
Clarification: Other types of clearly distinguishable civil violence, even if politically motivated, during the election period should not be factored in when scoring this indicator (it is dealt with separately).
Responses: 0 [1]: Yes. The repression and intimidation by the government or its agents was so strong that the entire period was quiet.
1 [0.75]: Yes, frequent: There was systematic, frequent and violent harassment and intimidation of the opposition by the government or its agents during the election period.
2 [0.5]: Yes, some. There was periodic, not systematic, but possibly centrally coordinated --- harassment and intimidation of the opposition by the government or its agents.
3 [0.25]: Restrained. There were sporadic instances of violent harassment and intimidation by the government or its agents, in at least one part of the country, and directed at only one or two local branches of opposition groups.
4 [0]: None. There was no harassment or intimidation of opposition by the government or its agents, during the election campaign period and polling day.

Government Media censorship effort (v2mecenefm)
Does the government directly or indirectly attempt to censor the print or broadcast media?
Clarification: Indirect forms of censorship might include politically motivated awarding of broadcast frequencies, withdrawal of financial support, influence over printing facilities and distribution networks, selected distribution of advertising, onerous registration requirements, prohibitive tariffs, and bribery.
We are not concerned with censorship of non-political topics such as child pornography, statements offensive to a particular religion, or defamatory speech unless this sort of censorship is used as a pretext for censoring political speech.
Responses: 0 [1]: Attempts to censor are direct and routine.

1 [0.75]: Attempts to censor are indirect but nevertheless routine.
2 [0.5]: Attempts to censor are direct but limited to especially sensitive issues.
3 [0.25]: Attempts to censor are indirect and limited to especially sensitive issues.
4 [0]: The government rarely attempts to censor major media in any way, and when such exceptional attempts are discovered, the responsible officials are usually punished.

Government social media censorship in practice (v2smgovsmcenprc)
To what degree does the government censor political content (i.e., deleting or filtering specific posts for political reasons) on social media in practice?
Responses: 0 [1]: The government simply blocks all social media platforms.
1 [0.75]: The government successfully censors all social media with political content.
2 [0.5]: The government successfully censors a significant portion of political content on social media, though not all of it.
3 [0.25]: The government only censors social media with political content that deals with especially sensitive issues.
4 [0]: The government does not censor political social media content, with the exceptions mentioned in the clarifications section.

High court independence (v2juhcind)
When the high court in the judicial system is ruling in cases that are salient to the government, how often would you say that it makes decisions that merely reflect government wishes regardless of its sincere view of the legal record?
Clarification: We are seeking to identify autonomous judicial decision-making and its absence. Decisions certainly can reflect government wishes without ~merely reflecting~ those wishes, i.e., a court can be autonomous when its decisions support the government's position. This is because a court can be fairly persuaded that the government's position is meritorious. By ~merely reflect the wishes of the government~ we mean that the court's own view of the record, its sincere evaluation of the record, is irrelevant to the outcome. The court simply adopts the government's position regardless of its sincere view of the record.
Responses: 0 [0]: Always.
1 [0.25]: Usually.
2 [0.5]: About half of the time.
3 [0.75]: Seldom.
4 [1]: Never.

Horizontal accountability index (v2x_horacc)
To what extent is the ideal of horizontal government accountability achieved?
Clarification: Horizontal accountability concerns the power of state institutions to oversee the government by demanding information, questioning officials and punishing improper behavior. This form of accountability ensures checks between institutions and prevents the abuse of power. The key agents in horizontal government accountability are: the legislature; the judiciary; and specific oversight agencies such as ombudsmen, prosecutor and comptroller generals.
Scale: low to high (0-1).
Source(s): v2juhcind v2juncind v2juhccomp v2jucomp v2exrescon v2lgotovst v2lginvstp v2lgbicam v2lgqstexp

HOS veto power in practice (v2exdfvths)
If the head of state took actions to veto a piece of legislation, would he/she be likely to succeed?

Clarification: By ‘‘veto’’, we mean either a partial veto (concerning any parts of a bill) or package vetoes (concerning whole bills) of bills that have already been passed by the legislature. The question refers to whether the head of state is considered to hold this power in practice, regardless of whether this is regulated by law and whether this power has been exercised or not.
Responses: 0 [0]: No.
1 [0.25]: Yes, but the legislature can override the veto by a simple majority vote (a vote of more than half of those voting).
2 [0.5]: Yes, but the legislature can override the veto by an absolute majority vote (a vote of more than half of the members of the legislature).
3 [0.75]: Yes, but the legislature can override the veto by a qualified/extraordinary majority vote (a super-majority --- e.g., 2/3 or 3/4 --- of those voting).
4 [1]: Yes, with no possibility of override.

Judicial constraints on the executive index (v2x_jucon)
To what extent does the executive respect the constitution and comply with court rulings, and to what extent is the judiciary able to act in an independent fashion?
Scale: Interval, from low to high (0-1).
Source(s): v2exrescon v2jucomp v2juhccomp v2juhcind v2juncind

Judicial purges (v2jupurge)
Judges are sometimes removed from their posts for cause, as when there is strong evidence of corruption; however, some judges are removed arbitrarily, typically for political reasons. With this distinction in mind, please describe the removal of judges that occurred this calendar year.
Clarification: The second and third response categories permit you to distinguish among limited arbitrary removals (i.e., when only a few judges are targeted) by the political importance of the removal. For example, you may consider the arbitrary removal of a few high court judges as more important than the arbitrary removal of a few lower court judges.
Responses: 0 [1]: There was a massive, arbitrary purge of the judiciary.
1 [0.75]: There were limited but very important arbitrary removals.
2 [0.5]: There were limited arbitrary removals.
3 [0.25]: Judges were removed from office, but there is no evidence that the removals were arbitrary.
4 [0]: Judges were not removed from their posts.

Judiciary’s ability to control arbitrary power (original: Judicial reform) (v2jureform)
Were the judiciary’s formal powers altered this year in ways that affect its ability to control the arbitrary use of state authority?
Clarification: Evidence of this kind of reform could include the creation or removal of various forms of constitutional review, new rules increasing or decreasing access to the judiciary, changes in available judicial remedies, and any other formal institution (procedural or otherwise) that influences the ability of courts to control the arbitrary use of power.
Responses: 0 [0]: The judiciary’s ability to control arbitrary power was reduced via institutional reform.
1 [0.5]: There was no change to the judiciary’s ability to control arbitrary power via institutional review.
2 [1]: The judiciary’s ability to control arbitrary power was enhanced via institutional reform.

Legislative constraints on the executive index (v2xlg_legcon)
To what extent are the legislature and government agencies e.g., comptroller general, general prosecutor, or ombudsman capable of questioning, investigating, and exercising oversight over the executive?
Scale: Interval, from low to high (0-1).

Source(s): v2lgqstexp v2lgotovst v2lginvstp v2lgoppart

Liberal democracy index (v2x_libdem)
To what extent is the ideal of liberal democracy achieved?
Clarification: The liberal principle of democracy emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority. The liberal model takes a ~negative~ view of political power insofar as it judges the quality of democracy by the limits placed on government. This is achieved by constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances that, together, limit the exercise of executive power. To make this a measure of liberal democracy, the index also takes the level of electoral democracy into account.
Scale: Interval, from low to high (0-1).
Source(s): v2x_liberal v2x_polyarchy

Lower chamber legislates in practice (v2lglegplo)
In practice, is the approval of the lower (or unicameral) chamber of the legislature required to pass legislation?
Responses: 0 [0]: No. Legislation is routinely passed without the approval of the lower (or unicameral) chamber of the legislature.
1 [0.5]: Yes, usually. Legislation is usually passed with the approval of the lower (or unicameral) chamber of the legislature, but occasionally the legislature is by-passed.
2 [1]: Yes, always. Legislation of any consequence is always approved by the lower (or unicameral) chamber of the legislature.

Media self-censorship (v2meslfcen)
Is there self-censorship among journalists when reporting on issues that the government considers politically sensitive?
Responses: 0 [1]: Self-censorship is complete and thorough.
1 [0.66]: Self-censorship is common but incomplete.
2 [0.33]: There is self-censorship on a few highly sensitive political issues but not on moderately sensitive issues.
3 [0]: There is little or no self-censorship among journalists.

Military dimension index (v2x_ex_military)
To what extent is the power base of the chief executive determined by the military?
Clarification: Representing one of five regime dimensions, each of which may be more or less present in any given case, this index taps into the extent to which the appointment and dismissal of the chief executive is based on the threat or actual use of military force.
Scale: Interval, from low to high (0-1).
Aggregation: The index is based on whether the “chief executive” was (a) appointed through a coup, rebellion or by the military, and (b) can be dismissed by the military. Both condition (a) and (b) are coded as present (1) or not (0); we then average across the two. In nominally dual systems, where the head of state (HOS) and the head of government (HOG) are not the same individual, we determine who is the “chief executive” by comparing HOS and HOG powers over the appointment and dismissal of cabinet ministers. We aggregate across the two executives by taking the average weighted by their relative powers over cabinet formation and dismissal.

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