Resisting Autocratization In Polarized Societies: A Strategic Relational Approach And Social Identity Theory Perspective

[1] **AKINMADE, Oyinkansola Henrietta**
[2] **ADESANYA, Olusegun Paul**

[1] *Department of media and communication studies, Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti*
[2] *Department of International Relations and Diplomacy, Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti*

Abstract

Autocratization, the progressive degradation of democratic structures and norms, poses a significant threat to democracies characterized by pronounced division and persistent polarization. This paper aims to enrich the contemporary discourse by examining the interplay between polarization and autocratization strategies within diverse societal contexts. Employing a comparative case study methodology with examples drawn from Turkey, the United States, Hungary, and Zimbabwe, among others, the article elucidates the multifaceted factors that facilitate autocratization and identifies potential avenues for resistance. Strategies proposed encompass dialogue and consensus formation, fortifying democratic institutions, enhancing civic education and media literacy, fostering cross-ideological alliances, and capitalizing on international resources. The paper concludes that while resisting autocratization in polarized societies is undeniably challenging, it remains feasible through collective efforts aimed at bolstering democratic resilience and curbing authoritarian expansion.

Keywords: Autocratization, democratic institutions, polarization, authoritarianism, International resources

Introduction

Autocratization, marked by the gradual diminishment of civil liberties and democratic governance, presents a multifaceted challenge to contemporary societies, particularly those grappling with profound polarization (Cassani and Tomini). Polarized societies, characterized by stark political, ideological, ethnic, or religious

divisions, exhibit increased distrust and fractured discourse, creating a conducive environment for autocratic leaders to gain and solidify power.

Autocracy has historically been a dominant form of governance, evolving from Neolithic tribal chiefdoms to centralized states like the Mesopotamian city-states and empires such as the Akkadian Empire and Ancient Egypt, where rulers combined political and religious authority. This trend often begins with democratic backsliding, involving the erosion of core institutions (Müller, 2016), rising polarization (Linz, 1978), manipulation of democratic processes (Carey, 2009), and power consolidation by leaders who exploit identity politics to undermine institutional checks like the media and judiciary (Pepinsky, 2014; Schedler, 2021). These dynamics deepen societal divides and fuel authoritarianism (Krastev, 2020). For instance, during the interwar period, political polarization, economic turbulence, and social unrest in Italy and Germany enabled leaders like Mussolini and Hitler to exploit divisions, suppress opposition, and dismantle democracy. The resurgence of autocratic tendencies in the past decade has triggered a fundamental rethink among researchers and policymakers regarding their implications for global democracy (Murillo, 2022). Democratic backsliding poses complex questions for governance in countries like Turkey, Hungary, Venezuela, and notably the United States, where polarization continues to deepen.

This paper explores the intricate relationship between polarization and autocratization, focusing on strategies to resist democratic erosion.

Conceptual Framework

1. Understanding Polarization

Polarization is a multidimensional phenomenon manifesting along political, ideological, cultural, and ethnic lines. It involves widening gaps between opposing groups, permeating all aspects of social interaction (Schedler, 2023). In polarized societies, individuals often label those with differing views as foes, fostering suspicion and animosity (Gramsci, 1971). This dynamic undermines democratic norms by reframing adversaries as enemies rather than collaborators in shared governance, weakening the foundations of democracy.

2. Autocratization Mechanisms

Autocratization unfolds through incremental strategies that erode democratic institutions and norms. Key mechanisms include electoral manipulation, suppression of press freedom, judiciary weakening, and curtailment of civil liberties (Levitsky & Way). Electoral fraud or suppression is often justified by appeals to national unity or security (Mounk, 2018). Legal and extralegal measures stifle dissent, with violence rationalized as protecting dominant groups from perceived threats. Autocrats also exploit state institutions,

compromising judicial independence and media integrity. These tactics are especially potent in polarized societies, where divisions are used to justify authoritarian measures.

3. Polarization–Autocratization Nexus

The relationship between polarization and autocratization operates within a dynamic feedback loop. Initially, polarization enables autocratization by eroding democratic norms and institutions (Müller, 2016). In turn, autocratization deepens polarization, entrenching societal divisions and creating a self-sustaining cycle. This vicious cycle poses significant challenges to democratic institutions attempting to counteract authoritarianism.

Theoretical Framework

1. Strategic Relational Approach (SRA)

The Strategic Relational Approach (SRA), introduced by Bob Jessop (2005), offers a lens to analyze the interplay between autocrats and societal structures. It emphasizes the capacity of actors to strategically navigate their environments to achieve objectives, such as consolidating power by exploiting societal divisions. SRA identifies several mechanisms relevant to autocratization:

a) **Strategic Manipulation of Group Identities:** Political elites exploit group identities to mobilize support, vilify opponents, and consolidate power. This can involve exacerbating existing divisions, using propaganda, and targeting minority groups (Billig, 1995).
b) **Relational Power Dynamics:** Power imbalances between groups are instrumentalized to marginalize or suppress opposition, fostering fear and insecurity to entrench authoritarian rule (Foucault, 1977).
c) **Network Formation and Alliance Building:** Alliances and networks based on group identities mobilize support for authoritarian regimes, ensuring power and legitimacy (Gamson, 1992).
d) **Strategic Communication and Framing:** Political elites employ strategic framing to create an "us vs. them" narrative, deepening divides and obstructing compromise (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).

SRA also highlights how democracy advocates can reclaim ceded ground by strategically positioning themselves to form alliances, access resources, and counteract autocratization (McCoy & Somer, 2020).

2. Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains the psychological mechanisms of group loyalty, in-group favoritism, and out-group hostility. Autocrats leverage social identities to polarize societies, justify repressive policies against perceived threats, and strengthen in-group support. This theory underscores

the role of identity in fostering societal divisions that underpin authoritarian strategies. Social Identity Theory (SIT) elucidates the psychological dynamics that facilitate autocratization through the following mechanisms:

1. **Increased Susceptibility to Authoritarian Appeals:**

   Individuals with strong group identities are more likely to respond to authoritarian leaders who promise to protect their in-group's interests or restore order amidst intergroup conflict (Reicher et al., 1995). Perceived threats to the in-group's identity often overshadow concerns about democratic norms and individual rights.

2. **Reduced Tolerance for Dissent**:

   Strong in-group identification fosters intolerance toward dissenting voices within the group and hostility toward out-group members. This dynamic narrows the space for critical debate, creating a conducive climate for authoritarian rule.

3. **Erosion of Trust in Institutions**

   Polarization fueled by strong group identities undermines trust in neutral institutions like the judiciary, media, and electoral systems. Citizens may perceive these bodies as biased, disengaging from democratic processes and favoring authoritarian leadership (Putnam, 2000).

SIT and SRA complement each other, offering a holistic understanding of autocratization. SIT outlines the psychological mechanisms underlying group-based conflicts and authoritarian acceptance, while SRA highlights how political elites exploit these dynamics strategically. Together, they illuminate the interplay of individual psychology and elite strategies in enabling autocratic consolidation within polarized societies.

Case Studies

1. Turkey

Turkey's trajectory under President Erdoğan illustrates autocratization in a polarized society. Initially rising through democratic means, Erdoğan employed strategies that eroded democratic structures, including electoral reforms, legal pressures on opposition, and institutional manipulation.

Through the SRA framework, Erdoğan's strategic use of nationalist rhetoric and a vision of a strong Turkey on the global stage cultivated a powerful sense of collective identity and loyalty. This "us versus them" narrative framed opponents as threats to national unity and traditional values, consolidating a broad and enduring political base (Güçlü, 2019; Somer et al., 2021).

2. United States

The United States case illustrates that even established democracies can succumb to autocratization under intense polarization. The presidency of Donald Trump revealed vulnerabilities in democratic institutions, including challenges to electoral integrity, undermining institutional independence, and the erosion of civil liberties.

Using the **SRA framework**, Trump's strategic actions included developing a vast network of political allies, influential media figures, and business leaders who amplified his narrative. These networks, often operating beyond formal political structures, played a pivotal role in mobilizing support and shaping public opinion against traditional accountability mechanisms (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Trump's rhetoric and actions created an "us versus them" dynamic, intensifying polarization and fostering distrust in democratic processes. His framing of media outlets and political opponents as enemies of the people further destabilized trust in institutions.

3. Hungary

Under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Hungary has undergone a significant shift towards autocracy, marked by weakened checks and balances, curtailed judicial independence, and restricted media freedoms. The **SRA framework** highlights how Orbán strategically consolidated control over media institutions, enabling the dominance of pro-government narratives and suppressing opposition voices.

Orbán's government employed several tactics: acquiring key media outlets through allies, enacting legislation to stifle dissent, and influencing public discourse through state-controlled narratives (Horváth, 2019). This media control shifted relational power dynamics, with the government reshaping the balance of power between itself, the media, and the public. By manipulating the flow of information, Orbán's administration systematically eroded opposition credibility, discouraged dissent, and fortified its authoritarian grip. This method transcends propaganda, fundamentally altering the dynamics of governance and public engagement to favour the ruling party.

4. Zimbabwe

Robert Mugabe's autocratic rule in Zimbabwe exemplifies the strategic manipulation of societal structures to maintain power. Through the use of political violence, patronage networks, and institutional control, Mugabe ensured his prolonged dominance despite growing international criticism. A pivotal tool was his extensive patronage network, which rewarded loyalists with resources and opportunities while marginalizing dissenters (Van de Walle, 2001).

This dependency on state resources created a system where individuals and groups within the state apparatus were incentivized to support the regime, aligning with the **SRA's focus on relational power dynamics.** Mugabe's control over these resources fortified his power, suppressing opposition and consolidating authority. Post-Mugabe developments, including ongoing polarization and institutional weaknesses, highlight the challenges of dismantling entrenched autocratic practices.

5. Nigeria

Nigeria's democratic trajectory demonstrates the vulnerabilities of polarized societies to autocratization. Under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration (2015–2023), significant steps were taken that weakened democratic institutions. This included curbing media freedoms, suppressing dissent, and creating electoral imbalances, which diminished the credibility and functionality of democratic systems.

The current administration under President Bola Ahmed Tinubu (2023–present) exhibits early indications of continuing or intensifying these practices. Using the **SRA framework**, it is evident that Nigeria's democratic backslide involves structural conditions exploited by leaders through repressive measures. These include leveraging ethnic and regional divisions to entrench power. Both the Buhari and Tinubu administrations have been accused of using divisive rhetoric and making overtures to specific ethnic or religious groups to consolidate political support (Adebajo, 2001).Such actions align with **SRA's emphasis on the strategic utilization of prevailing societal structures** to enhance authority. Electoral manipulation and strategic exploitation of Nigeria's vast ethnic and religious diversity deepen structural divides, mirroring global autocratization trends. These dynamics underscore the critical role of Nigeria as a case study in the broader context of global democratic challenges.

Table 1: Case Studies of Polarization and Autocratization

Country	Autocratization Tactics	Polarization Factors	Strategies of Resistance
Turkey	Electoral manipulation, legal pressure on opposition, institutional manipulation	Political and ideological divides leveraged by Erdoğan	Dialogue, judiciary reinforcement, cross-ideological alliances
United States	Challenges to electoral integrity, undermining institutional independence, targeting civil liberties	Political and ideological polarization, deepening divisions	Civic education, coalition-building across ideological lines
Hungary	Suppression of judicial independence, media control, erosion of checks and balances	Nationalistic rhetoric and media consolidation under Orbán	Institutional fortification, media literacy initiative
Zimbabwe	Political violence, patronage networks, control over institutional resources	Ethnic and political divisions under Mugabe	Promoting dialogue, reinforcing rule of law, international support

Nigeria	Media restrictions, suppression of dissent, ethnic manipulation in electoral processes	Ethnic and regional polarization exploited for political gain	Enhancing civic education, strengthening independent institutions

These cases shows how polarization functions as a conducive environment for authoritarian consolidation. In each instances, political leaders have adeptly harnessed societal divisions to extend their influence and entrench their authority, resulting in the progressive erosion of democratic institutions.

Strategies of Resistance

In their analysis, **Stokke and Kyaw (2023)** suggest a range of solutions to reverse autocratization in divided societies. These strategies aim to rebuild democratic structures, foster unity, and resist authoritarian consolidation.

1. **Promoting Dialogue and Consensus:**

   Fostering dialogue across ideological divides is crucial for rebuilding trust and democratic cohesion. Successful community engagement, conflict resolution, and national dialogues have proven effective in mitigating polarization. Successful examples from history, like **truth and reconciliation commissions** (e.g., South Africa) and community peacebuilding initiatives, show that inclusive and open dialogue is critical. Such conversations, however, require careful facilitation and long-term commitment from all stakeholders to bridge divides (Fisher et al., 1991). This approach has been seen as an effective way to address societal divisions and reduce animosity.

2. **Institutional Reinforcement:**

   Strengthening democratic institutions, such as the judiciary, helps resist autocratization by upholding transparency and rule of law. Reinforcing institutional integrity can safeguard against authoritarian encroachment. The creation of checks and balances is vital to protect against authoritarian overreach (Schedler, 2002). However, institutional reinforcement is often met with resistance from vested interests, and change in this domain is usually gradual and requires persistent efforts.

3. **Enhancing Civic Education and Media Literacy**

   Equipping citizens with critical thinking tools helps combat propaganda. Civic education and media literacy initiatives foster informed societies capable of upholding democratic

principles. Media literacy programmes can empower citizens to distinguish between fact and propaganda, fostering informed participation in democratic processes (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). This strategy is ongoing and requires adaptability to new media systems and tactics of manipulation. Engaging in media literacy helps ensure resilience against fraud and fosters a more informed electorate.

4. **Cross-Ideological Coalition Building:**

Coalition-building across divides is essential for resisting autocratization. Shared objectives among diverse groups offer a united front against authoritarianism. Successful coalitions focus on shared goals while embracing compromise (Powell, 2000). However, building such alliances can be challenging, as it requires adept leadership and negotiation skills to reconcile significant differences. Coalition-building is a delicate process, but when done successfully, it can present a unified front against the consolidation of autocratic power.

5. **International Engagement**
International support, through diplomatic pressure and technical assistance, reinforces domestic resistance. Economic incentives can strengthen democratic forces and deter authoritarian actions. This engagement often takes the form of **diplomatic pressure, economic incentives**, and **technical assistance** (Carothers, 2002). These forms of support can help bolster civil society, strengthen institutions, and push governments toward upholding democratic principles. However, the effectiveness of international support is not guaranteed. Its success is contingent on several factors, such as the geopolitical context, the political will of international actors, and the nature of the internal resistance. The alignment of international pressure with domestic efforts can significantly enhance the resilience of democratic institutions.

These strategies provide a multifaceted approach to preserving democracy in polarized societies. They highlight the need for both systemic and grassroots efforts to resist the erosion of democratic norms and values.

Conclusion

Resisting autocratization in polarized societies is undeniably challenging, but it is not insurmountable. A strategic mix of **dialogue, institutional reinforcement, civic education**, **coalition-building**, and **international engagement** offers a comprehensive framework for safeguarding democracy. These approaches, informed by an understanding of polarization dynamics, serve as the foundation for building **inclusive** and **resilient** political futures. By addressing the root causes of polarization and strategically

countering authoritarian pressures, societies can preserve democratic values and chart a path towards sustainable democratic consolidation in the face of rising authoritarian challenges.

By integrating these strategies into both domestic and international frameworks, the preservation of democratic principles remains achievable, despite the growing challenges posed by autocratization.

Reference

1. Cassani, A., & Tomini, L. (2019). Introduction: From democratization to autocratization. In Autocratization in post-Cold War political regimes: Challenges to democracy in the 21st century (pp. 1–17). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-03125-1_1

2. Murillo, M. V. (2022). Latin America: Not as polarized as you think. Americas Quarterly. Retrieved June 4, 2023, from https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/latin-america-not-as-polarized-as-you-think/

3. Carey, J. M. (2009). Competing principles: The periodic shifting of accountability in democratic constitutions. Politics and Society, 37(3), 357–377.

4. Linz, J. J. (1978). Crises, breakdowns, and reequilibrations. In J. J. Linz & A. Stepan (Eds.), The breakdown of democratic regimes (pp. 59–88). Johns Hopkins University Press.

5. Pepinsky, T. (2014). The end of the fixed effect. World Politics, 66(1), 227–241. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887113000357

6. Schedler, A. (2021). Populism and the democratic deficit. International Journal of Public Administration, 44(1–2), 29–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2020.1839488

7. Krastev, I. (2020). The light that failed: A reckoning. Penguin, Vol. 40, Iss. 3, (Fall 2020): 819-823.

8. Müller, J.W. (2016). *What Is Populism? Markets, Globalization & Development Review*, 2(2), Article 7. https://doi.org/10.23860/MGDR-2017-02-02-07

9. Schedler, A. (2002). The menu of manipulation. Journal of Democracy, 13(2), 36–50.

10. Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell-Smith, Eds. & Trans.). International Publishers, 16(1), 72–73

11. Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511781353

12. Mounk, Y. (2018). People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save It. Politologický časopis - Czech Journal of Political Science, 27(1), 94–97. https://doi.org/10.5817/PC2020-1-94

13. Jessop, B. (2005). The strategic relational approach: An analytical framework for the study of strategic-relational dynamics. Political Studies Review, 13(3), 259–278. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-9302.2005.00114.x

14. McCoy, J., & Somer, M. (2020). Toward a theory of democratic resilience: The role of civic and political organizations in resisting autocratization. Political Studies, 68(3), 432–450. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719877397

15. Billig, M. (1995). Flagging the Homeland Daily. In *Banal Nationalism* (Chapter 5). https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221648.n5

16. Tarbet, D. W. (1978). [Review of the book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, by M. Foucault & A. Sheridan (1977)]. *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 11(4), 509–514. https://doi.org/10.2307/2737970

17. Gamson, W. A. (1992). *Talking politics*. Cambridge University Press. (Reprinted 1994, 1995). https://assets.cambridge.org/97805214/30623/sample/9780521430623ws.pdf

18. Iyengar, S., & Hahn, K. S. (2009). Red media, blue media: Evidence of ideological selectivity in media use. Journal of Communication, 59(1), 19–39. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01402.x

19. Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), The social psychology of intergroup relations (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.

20. Reicher, S. D., Spears, R., & Postmes, T. (1995). A social identity model of collective behavior. In D. Abrams & M. A. Hogg (Eds.), Social identity and social cognition (pp. 161–181). Blackwell.

21. Putnam, R. D. (2000). Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community. Simon and Schuster. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-13213-2_95

22. Güçlü, R. (2019). The rise of the AKP: Identity politics and the transformation of Turkish society. Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 55(1), 75–92.

23. Somer, M., McCoy, J. L., & Russell, L. (2021). Pernicious polarization, autocratization, and opposition strategies. Democratization, 28(4), 620–636. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1865316

24. Horváth, Á. (2019). Media capture and polarization in Hungary: Viktor Orbán's strategy of power consolidation. Eastern European Politics, 35(3), 261–278.

25. Van de Walle, N. (2001) African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, 1979-1999. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511800344

26. Adebajo, A. (2002). *Building peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau*. Lynne Rienner Publishers. https://dokumen.pub/building-peace-in-west-africa-liberia-sierra-leone-and-guinea-bissau-9781685850326.html

27. Stokke, K., & Kyaw, N. N. (2023). Revolutionary resistance against full autocratization: Actors and strategies of resistance after the 2021 military coup in Myanmar. Political Geography, 103, 103011. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.103011

28. Fisher, R., Ury, W. L., & Patton, B. (1991). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. https://www.rhetoricinstitute.edu.gr/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/fisher-getting-to-yes.pdf

29. Powell, G.B (2000) Elections as Instruments of Democracy: Majoritarian and Proportional Visions. New Haven: Yale University Press. Google Scholar

30. Carothers, T. (2002). The end of the transition paradigm. Journal of Democracy, 13(1), 5–21. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0003