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Democratic Backsliding (2010–2024): Analysing the Erosion of Democratic Institutions in Turkey, Hungary and Brazil

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Abstract: The 21st century saw a significant concern about the backsliding of democratic institutions. Democratic backsliding refers to the erosion of the democratic institutions and systems of nations. This research paper deals with the phenomenon of the democratic backsliding of nations between 2010 and 2024, mainly focusing on the case studies of Turkey, Hungary, and Brazil in those years. This research paper studies and identifies the pattern and processes resulting in the weakening of these institutions by analyzing the political, economic, and social dynamics. It focuses on the factors that result in the deterioration of democracies, such as inclinations towards autocracy, despotism, dictatorship, and totalitarianism; weakening of checks and balances; judicial interference; and the role of disinformation. The conclusions of the study show that the course of democratic backsliding in countries like Turkey, Hungary, and Brazil share some correspondence, but at the same time they also exhibit some distinct features that are influenced by cultural, historical, and institutional milieus. The comparative analysis in this research paper also brings light upon the processes through which the leaders consolidate power and the outcomes for political freedom, civic space, and governance. This research paper also underlines the significance of addressing the issue of democratic backsliding to protect the democratic institutions and values worldwide and concludes by providing the methods and strategies to counter the acts of democratic backsliding and encourage strengthening the democratic systems.

Key Words: *Democratic backsliding, Turkey, Hungary, Brazil, democratic institutions, authoritarianism.*

Introduction

Democratic backsliding refers to the gradual decline in the quality of democracy, marked by the weakening of democratic institutions, erosion of civil liberties, and encroachment on checks and balances. Unlike abrupt breakdowns of democratic regimes, backsliding is often subtle and incremental, making it harder to detect and counteract. It is characterized by actions such as judicial manipulation, curtailment of media freedoms, and undermining of opposition parties, often under the guise of legal or popular mandates.

Understanding the decline of democracy is important today. A thorough comprehension of the causes and effects of democratic backsliding is important for many policymakers, many scholars and a meaningful number of civil society actors, considering the global challenges to democracy. Turkey, Hungary and Brazil offer compelling case studies showing diverse geopolitical and cultural settings but sharing common patterns of democratic decline. These case studies show how backsliding is a global issue affecting governance, human rights and international relations.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of democratic backsliding has gained scholarly attention over the past decade. This section reviews key academic works, government reports,

and policy analyses that examine the decline of democratic norms in Turkey, Hungary, and Brazil. While existing literature focuses on individual country trajectories, this research seeks to provide a comparative analysis of democratic backsliding in Turkey, Hungary, and Brazil between 2010 and 2024.

Overview of Selected Case Studies

1. Turkey: Over the past decade, Turkey has witnessed significant democratic erosion, marked by the centralization of executive power, suppression of media and opposition, and weakening of judicial independence under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.
2. Hungary: Under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Hungary has been at the forefront of democratic backsliding in Europe, characterized by the consolidation of power, restrictions on press freedom, and systematic undermining of civil society and the judiciary.
3. Brazil: Brazil's democratic institutions have faced challenges under successive administrations, including the politicization of institutions, disinformation campaigns, and erosion of trust in electoral processes, especially during the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro.

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this research are to analyze the patterns and processes of democratic erosion in Turkey, Hungary,

and Brazil, comparing their experiences to identify both commonalities and unique features. It seeks to examine the key drivers and consequences of democratic backsliding in these contexts while contributing to the broader understanding of how democracies can safeguard against such decline and maintain institutional resilience.

Research Questions

This study seeks to address the following questions:

1. What are the primary mechanisms and strategies used by political leaders in Turkey, Hungary, and Brazil to consolidate power and weaken democratic institutions?
2. How do historical, cultural, and institutional factors shape the trajectory of democratic backsliding in each country?
3. What are the implications of democratic backsliding for governance, civil liberties, and international relations?
4. What measures can be taken to counteract democratic backsliding and strengthen democratic institutions?

By addressing these questions, this research aims to contribute to the academic discourse on democratic governance and provide actionable insights for mitigating the risks of backsliding in democracies worldwide.

Democratic Backsliding In Turkey

Democratic backsliding in Turkey refers to the gradual erosion of democratic norms, institutions, and freedoms over the past two decades, particularly under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). This process has involved the weakening of checks and balances, the erosion of judicial independence, restrictions on media freedom, and the suppression of political opposition and civil society. While Turkey was once seen as a model of democratic governance in the Muslim world, recent years have witnessed a significant decline in democratic standards, as reflected in global democracy indices.

One of the primary indicators of democratic backsliding in Turkey has been the increasing concentration of power in the executive branch. Constitutional changes, particularly the 2017 referendum, transformed Turkey from a parliamentary system into a presidential one, significantly reducing the role of the legislature and judiciary in checking executive authority. This shift granted the president extensive powers, including the ability to rule by decree, appoint judges, and dissolve parliament, undermining the principles of separation of powers and accountability. Critics argue that these changes have enabled an authoritarian

style of governance, reducing the space for democratic debate and participation.

Judicial independence has also been severely compromised, as seen in politically motivated trials and the dismissal of judges perceived as critical of the government. The purges following the failed coup attempt in 2016 further weakened democratic institutions, with thousands of judges, prosecutors, academics, and civil servants dismissed or imprisoned. The government justified these actions as necessary for national security, but observers, including international organizations, viewed them as a means to consolidate power and silence dissent. The judiciary has increasingly been used as a tool to punish opposition figures, journalists, and activists, further eroding trust in democratic governance.

Media freedom has suffered significantly, with Turkey ranking among the worst countries for press freedom. Numerous independent newspapers and television channels have been shut down, and journalists have been imprisoned on charges of terrorism, defamation, or spreading false information. The government has also tightened control over social media, passing laws that compel platforms to remove content deemed offensive or critical of the state. This suppression of free speech has curtailed

public debate and limited citizens' access to diverse viewpoints, a crucial element of a functioning democracy.

Political opposition has faced increasing repression, with opposition leaders, particularly from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), being arrested or removed from office. The government has also interfered in local elections, overturning results in key cities and replacing elected mayors with government-appointed trustees. These actions have raised concerns about the fairness and integrity of the electoral process, which is a fundamental pillar of democracy. While elections continue to be held, the lack of a level playing field due to media restrictions, judicial harassment, and state resources being used to benefit the ruling party has made it difficult for the opposition to compete fairly.

Despite these challenges, Turkey has an active civil society and a resilient opposition that continues to advocate for democratic values. Large protests, social movements, and electoral victories in major cities like Istanbul and Ankara demonstrate that there is still strong support for democracy among the Turkish population. However, the continued erosion of democratic norms, coupled with increasing authoritarian tendencies, raises concerns about the future of democracy in Turkey. Whether the country can reverse

this backsliding will depend on domestic and international pressures, as well as the ability of opposition forces to challenge the growing centralization of power.

Democratic Backsliding in Hungary

Before 2010, Hungary was considered one of the most promising democracies in post-communist Europe. Following the fall of communism in 1989, the country transitioned into a multi-party democracy with strong democratic institutions, including an independent judiciary, a vibrant media landscape, and a parliamentary system that ensured checks and balances. Hungary joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, which further encouraged democratic reforms, transparency, and rule of law. Although political competition was often intense, governance remained within democratic norms, with alternation of power between different political parties, including the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the conservative Fidesz.

In 2010, Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party won a landslide victory, securing a two-thirds majority in parliament. This supermajority enabled Orbán to introduce sweeping constitutional and legal changes without significant opposition. Over the years, Orbán has systematically expanded his control over state institutions, weakened opposition parties, and reshaped Hungary's political

landscape to ensure Fidesz's long-term dominance. His government rebranded itself as an "illiberal democracy," advocating for a nationalist and populist approach that rejects liberal democratic values in favor of centralized control.

One of the most significant elements of Hungary's democratic decline has been the erosion of checks and balances. Fidesz rewrote the constitution in 2011, limiting the power of independent institutions and strengthening executive authority. The new constitution weakened the Constitutional Court by restricting its ability to review certain laws, while court-packing tactics ensured that the judiciary aligned with the ruling party's interests. The independence of state bodies, such as the election commission and ombudsman offices, was also compromised, turning them into tools of the government rather than impartial institutions.

Under Orbán's rule, media pluralism has significantly declined. Independent media outlets have been bought by pro-government businessmen, turned into propaganda tools, or forced to shut down. Public broadcasting services have become mouthpieces for the government, while critical outlets face financial pressure, legal harassment, and government interference. In 2020, the last major independent news site, Index.hu, was effectively dismantled, further

narrowing the space for independent journalism.

Judicial independence has also been undermined through political appointments and structural changes that limit courts' ability to rule against government interests. The government introduced new administrative courts to handle politically sensitive cases, placing them under the influence of the executive branch. The European Union has repeatedly criticized Hungary for these judicial reforms, warning that they threaten the rule of law.

Despite being an EU member, Hungary has actively defied European democratic norms. Orbán has used EU funds to consolidate his rule while rejecting EU oversight and criticism. Although the European Parliament triggered Article 7 proceedings against Hungary in 2018 for violating democratic principles, Fidesz has remained largely unchallenged due to support from other right-wing European parties and Hungary's strategic economic ties with EU nations. The slow response of EU institutions has allowed Orbán to continue his authoritarian tactics with little consequence.

Orbán has built his support base around nationalist rhetoric, portraying himself as a defender of Hungarian sovereignty against foreign influences,

including the EU, George Soros, and liberal Western elites. His government has pushed anti-immigration policies, anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, and laws restricting academic freedom, framing these moves as efforts to preserve Hungarian identity and traditions. This nationalist-populist narrative has resonated with many voters, helping Fidesz maintain its grip on power despite growing opposition.

Hungary's economic policies have played a key role in sustaining Fidesz's rule. While Orbán's government has maintained economic growth through foreign investment and EU funds, corruption and crony capitalism have increased. Oligarchs close to the government have benefited from lucrative state contracts, strengthening the party's economic influence. Additionally, government policies such as tax cuts and social benefits targeted at Fidesz's core voter base have helped maintain electoral support, even as democratic institutions have eroded.

Hungary's democratic backsliding has been one of the most concerning cases in Europe. Viktor Orbán and Fidesz have systematically dismantled democratic checks and balances, restricted media freedom, and undermined judicial independence, all while maintaining a nationalist and populist political strategy. Despite EU criticism, Hungary has

continued on an authoritarian trajectory, raising concerns about the future of democracy in the region. Reversing this trend would require strong internal opposition, greater EU pressure, and a shift in public sentiment against the ruling party's control.

Democratic Backsliding in Brazil

Before 2010, Brazil had a relatively stable democratic system following its transition from military dictatorship (1964–1985) to democracy in 1988. The country's new constitution established strong democratic institutions, including an independent judiciary, a multi-party system, and free and fair elections. While corruption scandals and political instability were challenges, Brazil maintained a functioning democracy with periodic elections, a free press, and an active civil society. Economic growth, social programs, and increased international recognition helped reinforce democratic governance. However, political polarization and corruption concerns gradually eroded public trust in institutions, setting the stage for democratic backsliding.

The election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 marked a turning point in Brazil's democratic trajectory. A former military officer and right-wing populist, Bolsonaro ran on an anti-establishment platform, capitalizing on widespread frustration with

corruption scandals, particularly the fallout from the "Operation Car Wash" investigation. Once in power, he adopted an authoritarian style, frequently attacking democratic institutions, the judiciary, and the press. His government prioritized nationalist rhetoric, anti-leftist policies, and a strong alignment with conservative social values. His leadership style drew comparisons to other populist figures who challenged democratic norms while consolidating executive power.

Throughout his presidency, Bolsonaro repeatedly cast doubt on Brazil's electronic voting system, without evidence, alleging that it was vulnerable to fraud. This rhetoric undermined public confidence in electoral integrity and set the stage for a direct challenge to democratic norms. His refusal to accept the legitimacy of the 2022 presidential election results, in which he lost to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, led to widespread political instability. The most alarming moment came on January 8, 2023, when Bolsonaro supporters stormed government buildings in Brasília in an attack reminiscent of the U.S. Capitol riot on January 6, 2021. This event demonstrated how democratic institutions in Brazil faced severe stress under Bolsonaro's influence.

The rise of misinformation played a crucial role in Brazil's democratic backsliding. Social media platforms were

flooded with conspiracy theories, fake news, and extremist rhetoric, often amplified by Bolsonaro and his allies. This deepened social and political divisions, turning democratic debates into ideological battles. The polarization between Bolsonaro's supporters and opponents became increasingly intense, weakening democratic discourse and fostering a climate where political violence and threats against journalists and judges became more common.

Brazil's democratic decline was fueled by growing dissatisfaction with traditional political elites and institutions. The corruption scandals of the 2010s eroded public trust, making populist rhetoric appealing to voters seeking radical change. Bolsonaro's support base was largely built on conservative, religious, and nationalist groups that viewed him as a defender of traditional values against perceived threats from progressive movements.

Brazil's economic struggles also contributed to its political instability. The country faced a severe recession between 2014 and 2016, leading to job losses, inflation, and declining living standards. Economic hardships made voters more receptive to Bolsonaro's promises of economic reform and strong leadership. However, his economic policies, particularly during the COVID-19

pandemic, deepened inequalities and further polarized the population.

Brazil's democratic backsliding occurred within a broader regional trend of populist movements in Latin America. Bolsonaro aligned himself with other right-wing leaders, adopting nationalist and anti-globalist rhetoric. His rejection of international organizations, criticism of environmental regulations in the Amazon, and strained relations with democratic allies further isolated Brazil on the global stage. Additionally, his admiration for authoritarian figures raised concerns about the weakening of democratic norms in the region.

Brazil's democratic backsliding between 2010 and 2024 was driven by a combination of populist leadership, institutional erosion, misinformation, and political polarization. While democratic institutions have resisted complete authoritarian shifts, the Bolsonaro era revealed vulnerabilities in Brazil's political system that will require significant efforts to repair. The ability of Brazil's democracy to recover will depend on restoring trust in electoral processes, reducing polarization, and strengthening democratic institutions against future threats.

Comparative Analysis of Democratic Backsliding: Turkey, Hungary, and Brazil

Common Patterns and Differences in Democratic Backsliding-

Democratic backsliding in Turkey, Hungary, and Brazil shares several common patterns, including the centralization of executive power, the erosion of checks and balances, the weakening of judicial independence, attacks on the media, and increased political polarization. However, each country exhibits distinct characteristics based on its historical, institutional, and geopolitical context.

In Turkey, democratic decline has been driven by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's gradual consolidation of power, transforming the country from a parliamentary to a presidential system while cracking down on opposition and media freedoms. Hungary's backsliding under Viktor Orbán has been subtler, using legal and constitutional changes to entrench Fidesz's dominance while maintaining an electoral facade. Brazil's democratic erosion, under Jair Bolsonaro, was more volatile, marked by attacks on electoral integrity, political violence, and the spread of misinformation. While Hungary and Turkey have undergone long-term institutional changes favoring authoritarian governance, Brazil's democratic instability was more centered around a single leader's populist rule and his contested departure from office.

Role of Leaders, Institutions, and Civil Society in Shaping Outcomes-

In all three countries, strong leaders have played a crucial role in democratic erosion. Erdoğan, Orbán, and Bolsonaro employed nationalist and populist rhetoric to weaken opposition, justify their policies, and consolidate their power. However, the institutional responses to their actions varied. In Turkey and Hungary, institutions were gradually co-opted by the ruling party, allowing authoritarian governance to take root. In Brazil, institutions—including the judiciary, media, and electoral system—proved more resilient, successfully preventing Bolsonaro from overturning the 2022 election results.

Civil society and the media have faced repression in all three countries, though to different degrees. In Hungary and Turkey, independent media outlets have largely been neutralized through legal and financial means, while in Brazil, independent journalism remains more robust despite intimidation. Civil society in Turkey has been weakened due to mass arrests and restrictions following the 2016 coup attempt, whereas Hungarian NGOs have faced government crackdowns but continue to operate. In Brazil, civil society organizations played a crucial role in countering misinformation and defending democratic institutions.

The Impact of International Factors -

International influences have shaped democratic backsliding in these countries differently. Hungary, as an EU member, has faced legal challenges and financial pressure from Brussels, but the EU's inability to effectively curb Orbán's authoritarian policies has revealed the bloc's weaknesses in defending democracy. Turkey, as a NATO member with EU aspirations, has seen declining influence from Western actors due to its strategic geopolitical position and shifting alliances toward Russia and the Middle East. Brazil's backsliding was influenced by global populist trends, particularly the rise of right-wing movements and the influence of misinformation spread through social media. Unlike Hungary, Brazil did not face significant external pressure to maintain democratic norms, relying instead on internal institutional checks.

Implications of Democratic Backsliding

Democratic decline in these countries has led to significant human rights violations, including restrictions on freedom of speech, suppression of political opposition, and persecution of journalists and activists. In Turkey, mass arrests following the 2016 coup attempt targeted political dissidents, while in Hungary, laws restricting asylum seekers and LGBTQ+ rights have drawn criticism. In Brazil, Bolsonaro's policies

weakened environmental protections and indigenous rights, contributing to human rights concerns.

Backsliding has eroded judicial independence and the rule of law, undermining governance structures. Turkey and Hungary have seen their judicial systems become tools of the ruling parties, while in Brazil, the judiciary remained independent but faced significant political

attacks. Corruption has increased in all three countries as political elites consolidated economic control.

The decline of democracy in these countries has had regional and global consequences. Hungary's defiance of EU democratic norms has weakened the bloc's credibility in promoting democracy. Turkey's shift toward authoritarianism has strained relations with Western allies, affecting NATO cohesion. Brazil's instability, particularly after Bolsonaro's refusal to concede the 2022 election, raised concerns about political violence and democratic fragility in Latin America.

Lessons Learned for Strengthening Democratic Institutions-

- Countries with stronger institutional safeguards (e.g., Brazil's judiciary and electoral system) are better equipped to resist authoritarian tendencies.

- Independent journalism and active civil society groups help counter misinformation and hold leaders accountable.
- The EU's failure to restrain Orbán shows that legal mechanisms alone are insufficient without stronger enforcement measures.
- Addressing economic inequality and political polarization can reduce the appeal of populist leaders.

Policy Recommendations

1. Addressing Democratic Backsliding

- Strengthen judicial independence by implementing safeguards against political interference.
- Reinforce electoral integrity by countering misinformation and ensuring transparency in voting processes.
- Implement legal protections for media freedom to prevent government control over press institutions.

2. Strategies for Civil Society and International Organizations

- Increase funding for independent media and investigative journalism to counter government propaganda.

- Support grassroots organizations that promote democratic engagement and civic education.
- Use economic and diplomatic tools (e.g., targeted sanctions, funding conditionality) to hold authoritarian leaders accountable.

3. Role of Education, Technology, and International Partnerships

- Promote digital literacy programs to combat misinformation and media manipulation.
- Encourage technology platforms to regulate disinformation campaigns that threaten democratic stability.
- Strengthen global alliances to promote democratic resilience, including partnerships between democratic nations and international organizations.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of democratic backsliding in Turkey, Hungary, and Brazil between 2010 and 2024 illustrates the vulnerabilities of democratic institutions in the face of authoritarian tendencies, populism, and weakened checks and balances. While each country followed a distinct path, common patterns

emerged, including the centralization of power, erosion of judicial independence, restrictions on media freedom, and the use of nationalism to justify undemocratic measures.

In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's consolidation of power and constitutional reforms marked a shift from a parliamentary to a presidential system, weakening institutional safeguards. Hungary witnessed Viktor Orbán's systematic dismantling of democratic norms through legal and constitutional changes that undermined pluralism. Brazil's democratic decline, particularly under Jair Bolsonaro, was driven by attacks on electoral integrity, the judiciary, and the media, exacerbating political polarization.

International influences played varying roles in these countries. The European Union struggled to counteract Hungary's democratic decline, while global democratic norms provided limited resistance to Turkey and Brazil's shifts toward illiberal governance. Civil society and opposition movements, while resilient, faced significant obstacles, highlighting the need for stronger institutional protections.

The consequences of democratic backsliding are profound, affecting human rights, governance, and regional stability. Weakening the rule of law and democratic

institutions diminishes public trust in governance, increases authoritarian tendencies, and threatens global democratic norms. These case studies demonstrate the urgent need for robust institutional frameworks, vigilant civil society engagement, and international cooperation to counteract democratic erosion.

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