



Fracturing Authoritarian Coalitions

Introduction

On November 20, 2025, Perry World House, with the support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, held a workshop that convened leading democracy scholars and researchers to identify the key elements of a “democratic playbook.” How do resilient democracies push back against authoritarian and non-democratic populist movements?

Democratic backsliding in the 21st century is characterized by gradual, ambiguous shifts that often confound early detection and stymie coordinated opposition. Countering backsliding requires a highly contextual, multi-pronged, and sequenced approach.

Given this context, workshop experts highlighted that for pro-democracy opposition movements to succeed, they must find ways to break apart authoritarian coalitions. Their recommendations for doing so are the basis of this brief.

What Should Pro-Democracy Forces Do?

Facing democratic breakdown, what can pro-democratic movements and actors do to halt backsliding? As democratic breakdown occurs, pro-democracy forces must identify the pathways of autocratization (i.e. executive aggrandizement,

legislative takeover, etc.) and determine the urgency of the threat. Is there an imminent challenge to the democratic system or are democracy-eroding actions occurring in isolation? Are extraordinary and extra-institutional tactics justified, or should opposition parties and activists continue business as usual?

The answers to these questions determine what approaches are likely to be most effective. For instance, the case of Brazil shows that empowering institutions—the judiciary, media, and electoral authorities—was part of an effective strategy to resist executive aggrandizement. In Poland, by contrast, building electoral coalitions and organizing protests based on galvanizing issues (i.e. reproductive rights) were key to pushing back on an autocratizing regime rooted in legislative power.

General Tactics

Two decades of opposition to democratic backsliding have revealed tactics and approaches that can be used generally to pressure authoritarian coalitions and encourage defections. They include:

Contest elections

Even in cases where the playing field is tilted, in situations of democratic breakdown (not full authoritarian consolidation) opposition movements should contest

Recommendations

Measures to divide an authoritarian coalition during times of democratic backsliding:

- Contest elections
- Incentivize and support regime “defectors”
- Pursue “constructive polarization”
- Organize and protest strategically around a common policy
- Influence institutional actors

elections. In some cases—like Guatemala in 2023—opposition coalitions can earn surprising victories. In other cases, like Venezuela in 2024, contestation laid bare the regime’s true intentions of blatantly falsifying ballots, which exposed its authoritarian nature. In each case, the efforts to crack down on legitimate democratic expression caused fissures or pressure on the autocratic camp.

Incentivize defectors

Elite signaling—like tech company CEOs in Israel¹ opposing the judicial reform bills, or military resignations in Brazil² in response to Bolsonaro’s politicization of the military—can legitimize protest and encourage further authoritarian coalition members to defect. Offering political support to defecting members of the authoritarian coalition is critical.

Identify New Axes for “Constructive Polarization”

Opposition coalitions can leverage political cleavages to advance constructive polarization. Such cleavages are temporary and principle-based and organized around issues like anti-corruption or democracy. They can alter dynamics and reorient political coalitions.³

Engage in Strategic Protest

Researchers have observed that while non-violent protest is becoming more common, it is also less effective.⁴ Protests organized around specific policy objectives, and linked to political parties, lead to more sustained movements and outcomes.

Influence Institutional Actors

In Brazil, Bolsonaro was inhibited by his lack of congressional support. Strong institutions, like the courts and military,⁵ further obstructed his attempts to put forward illiberal policies. Democratic forces can clearly signal and back institutional actors that stand up against authoritarians.

Conclusion

Democratic backsliding can only be met by coordinated and strategic opposition action, including actions to break apart anti-democratic coalitions. While each case is different, the general principles outlined in this policy brief are relevant for pro-democratic forces seeking to build resilience against authoritarianism.



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