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Rise of Authoritarianism and The Crisis of Democracy

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Abstract—The world is witnessing the rise of Authoritarianism, posing grave threats to democracy and human rights on a global scale. Nearly every day, reports on erosion of democracy have surfaced on the various media and institutional platforms. Countries with long-established democracies are facing challenges from internal/external forces who exploit the shortcomings in their systems, promoting hatred, violence, and sectarianism. They are also witnessing policies being implemented which is tilting it towards 'Authoritarianism.'

Many factors such as Globalisation, Migration, Poverty, increasing Inequalities etc. are being identified as factors contributing to the rise of 'Authoritarianism'. As it is considered to be a grave threat to democracy, the forces need to be overcome. Efforts need to be taken to help restore/guarantee democracy so that the authoritarian model does not prevail or gets established. The research paper therefore focusses on understanding 'Authoritarianism' as experienced in a political system, the factors which have given rise to it and its impact.

Keywords: Authoritarianism, Democracy, Human Rights, Globalisation, Capitalism, Inequalities.

I. INTRODUCTION

"For a decade, the democratic recession was sufficiently subtle, incremental, and mixed that it was reasonable to debate whether it was happening at all. But as the years have passed, the authoritarian trend has become harder to miss."[1]

- Larry Diamond

Freedom House project's 'Freedom in the World 2021' report, highlights that the year 2020 saw a sharp increase in the global decline of democracy. According to their analysis, "fewer than a fifth of the world's population now live in fully free countries."[2] Further, since 2006, democratic recession is deepening as the world is experiencing deterioration of democracy in many countries compared to those with improvements. The world is thus witnessing the rise of 'Authoritarianism.'

According to Britannica dictionary, Authoritarianism, 'in politics and government is the blind submission to authority and the repression of individual freedom of thought and action'. In Authoritarian regimes there is no established system for the transfer

[1] Grzegorz Ekiert, Democracy and Authoritarianism in the 21st Century: A sketch, Ash Center Policy Briefs Series, Harvard University, Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, December 2023, p.4
[2] Repucci Sarah, Slipowitz Amy, Freedom in the World 2021, Democracy under Siege, https://freedomhouse.org/report/

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of executive power as power is concentrated in the hands of a leader or a small elite and who is/are not responsible or accountable to the people. Individuals also do not enjoy any rights in this system.[3]

Authoritarianism is seen to use political parties and mass organizations to mobilize people around their goals. The justification given is to maintain the social order, prevent harm and protect the interest of the nation as well of the people. The authoritarianism, seen within today's democracies also exhibits a style of government that promotes individual leadership with conservative nationalism. It is viewed that many people trust such leaders as it gives them a sense of security against all the challenges they are facing.

Freedom House's (2024) report highlights that flawed elections and armed conflicts have been responsible for decline in the global freedom for the last 18 consecutive years. 52 countries who experienced a decline in their political rights and civil liberties also have three times the population in comparison to 21countries who registered improvements during 2023.[4] Further, according to the report, in the majority of the world's 195 nation-states and territories, 42 percent lives in partly free countries, 38 percent in not free countries, and only 20 percent live in countries which are considered as free countries.[5]

Human Rights Foundation's (2026) current assessments built on 45 indicators grouped under three pillars: electoral competition, freedom of dissent, and institutional accountability also highlight that 75 percent of the world's population lives under authoritarianism. Some of the world's largest populations are located in countries classified as authoritarian, such as the hybrid authoritarian regimes of India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and the Philippines, as well as the fully authoritarian regimes of China, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Russia, and Vietnam.[6] According to a newspaper report, democracy backsliding is a matter of concern for Brazil, India, the United States, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia who are have also seen concerning democratic declines.[7]

According to the Economist's Democracy Index (2024), the democratic system has been steadily declining. In 2023, the average score was 5.17 compared to 5.23 in 2006. 45% people are living under democracy, 39% under authoritarian rule, and 15% in "hybrid regimes" that combine electoral democracy with authoritarian tendencies. According to the Economist, democratic forms of government are gradually transforming into authoritarian or totalitarian regimes.[8]

Though the world has not witnessed a spectacular collapse of democracy in different countries, however, gradual democratic backsliding is being experienced. According to Samuel Huntington (1993) it is the "reverse wave," wherein every year, more countries are moving towards authoritarianism than towards liberal democracy.[9] This holds true today.

II. CAUSES

"In most cases, authoritarian populism bears the mark of personalistic and charismatic leaders that manipulate the fears, the needs, and the desires of the population, often promising simple and mistaken solutions for complex problems,"[10]

- Justice Barroso

Various factors have been attributed for the rise of 'Authoritarianism' across the globe. Crespo (2026) views that the rise of authoritarian leaders worldwide is the result of the social anxiety that has been created by *neoliberal economic and political*

[3] Authoritarianism, https://www.britannica.com/
[4] Freedom House, The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict, Freedom in the World 2024, https://freedomhouse.org/report/
[5] ibid.
[6] New "Tyranny Tracker" maps the world's authoritarian regimes, Democracy Without Borders, 03. Mar 2026, https://www.democracywithoutborders.org/
[7] Number of Countries veering towards authoritarianism is on the rise: Report, November 22, 2021, https://www.thehindu.com/
[8] EIU report, Democracy Index 2024, https://www.eiu.com/
[9] Grzegorz Ekiert, Op. Cit., p.4
[10] Gilliard Alexandra, Democracy in the Shadow of the Global Rise in Authoritarian Populism, Havard Kennedy School, Carr-Ryan Center for Human Rights, February 6, 2025, https://www.hks.harvard.edu/

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system which is unable to tackle the crises of inequality, uncertainty and climate change. According to him, neoliberalism has taken an authoritarian turn so as to continue to serve the interests of the dominant classes. Further, the structural crisis created by capitalism has worsened as it has pushed aside more progressive neoliberalism and the various colourful waves of globalisation. It has strengthened to the dynamics of coercion.[11] It is believed that a section of the capitalist class has seized direct control of the state apparatus with the aim of using public resources for its own enrichment.

Dylan Riley and Robert Brenner viewed that under political capitalism, control over raw political power rather than productive investment brings more returns. The process includes giving tax-brakes, privatization of public assets at very low prices, low interest rates for stock-market speculation and a large amount of state expenditure in favour of private industry based on the belief of trickledown effect in the society.[12]

The 'work on demand' culture employed by many private sector companies today, increases job insecurity, eliminates social benefits, weakens trade unions, and fragments the workforce. This further creates insecurities in the society. According to Nancy Fraser, the state is also no longer seen to act as a mediator to promote social and economic interests, but rather as a facilitator of corporate capital by repressing resistance and not taking responsibility for environmental and societal issues.[13] Francisco Louça also viewed "If globalisation goes unchecked, sovereignty and democracy will be limited … One of the effects of this crisis of democracy is the rise of the far right. But the destruction of the state's economic capacity also undermines democracy. The financial economy destroys the possibility of people defining their future."[14]

The *relative power theory* also suggests that one of the reasons for rise of authoritarianism in societies is higher levels of economic inequality. This inequality creates a hierarchy in the society which reinforces vertical notions of authority. Poor individuals are more often in positions of subservience. The threat of unemployment often makes them increasingly submit to the demands of their employers. Access to goods and services is also limited. For richer individuals, on the other hand, greater inequality means that there are people available to immediately fulfil their demands. Thus, greater economic inequalities create a society characterized by obedience and deference. The direct exposure to hierarchical experiences affects people's attitudes toward authority in general in all other areas of the society as well.[15]

Today Fareed Zakaria's concept of 'illiberalism,' seems to be getting ingrained as the far right in various liberal democracies, are seen to be attacking the independence of judiciary, the media, violating minority rights, and ignoring the principle of separation of powers. Zakaria viewed it as a form of government somewhere which mixes a substantial degree of democracy with a substantial degree of illiberalism.[16]

According to Zakaria, over the last decade, elected governments who claim to represent the people, have slowly encroached on the powers and rights of people. Horizontally, the governments have encroached over the powers of the other branches of the government and vertically, over regional, local governments as well as over private businesses and other non-governmental organisations.[17]

Rise of authoritarianism is also the result of *the 'rise of Populism'* in the world. The recent rise of populism is said to a large extent, the rise of authoritarian populism. One of the reasons cited for the growth of authoritarianism populism is the impact of the policy of globalisation. Those who have benefitted in political, economic, and cultural areas from globalisation are now seen

[11] Crespo U. Miguel, The Rise of Global Reactionary Authoritarianism, State of Power 2026, Chapter 2, p.12
[12] ibid. p.13
[13] ibid. p.15
[14] ibid.
[15] Solt Frederick, The Social Origins of Authoritarianism, Political Research Quarterly, 65(4) 703-713, 2012 University of Uta, p.704, http://prq.sagepub.co
[16] Zakaria Fareed, The Rise of Illiberal Democracy, Foreign Affairs, Council of Foreign Relations, Vol. 76, No. 6, Nov. - Dec., 1997, p. 24
[17] ibid., p. 30

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against those who have suffered the negative economic consequences of a globalised world. It is viewed that the minority-controlled institutions such as central banks are biased towards liberal cosmopolitanism and the needs/challenges of the working class, ordinary citizens are being sacrificed and neglected.[18] Populist leaders thus tend to grow on the fears of the people existing in socio-political-economic spheres such as widening gap between rich and poor, increasing regional disparities, economic uncertainty, shocks, issues arising due to immigrants, cultural imperialism etc.

It is viewed that the populists claim that they are the true representatives of the people. Further, for populism "the people" does not mean all the people. It excludes people considered as enemies, such as the foreigners, the press, minorities, financiers, and the others seen as not part of "us."[19]

The populist leaders often adopt an authoritarian style of leadership and reject the norms and values of democratic institutions. They promote division and polarization in society, which can undermine the foundations of democracy.[20]

The threat to Culture and the fear of loss of identity is also viewed as another cause for the rise of authoritarianism. According to Giddens Tony, Globalisation is "shaking up our existing ways of life, no matter where we happen to be." Giddens, further viewed that as the world is experiencing anarchy, instability etc. which is making individuals anxious, scarred due to existence of forces which are beyond the control of individuals."[21] This has also contributed to the rise of authoritarian populism. Authoritarian rulers are said to create an illusion of a threat from the outside to gain support from the people of the country.

As rights of several marginalized communities such as women, Afro-descendants, LGBTQI communities, Indigenous communities, and people with disabilities have gained acceptance and recognition, it has challenged the longstanding power structures in our societies. It is thus facing backlash in various forms. According to Justice Barroso, "These advancements diminished the power of traditional hegemonic sectors, and this is something we've seen in the United States."[22]

Further Justice Barroso viewed that divisions in the society have led to search for someone to blame for the major issues faced today. The blame is then, put on the migrants, the sexual minorities, non-rightist, or any other social groups. One of the characteristics of authoritarian populism is the need for enemies/social groups to put the blame on which helps them to flourish. According to Justice Barroso "…. the blame now is diversity—diversity has become the cause of accidents."[23]

The *role of social media* and the knowledge economy in the rise of authoritarianism also cannot be negated. Various platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, AI etc. control the algorithms that determine which content will be circulated, when and how and thus have a significant impact on the formation of public opinion. It plays an important role in influencing the views of the individuals who mainly rely on social media for gaining information and opinions. It is argued that media platforms are also used to erode or manipulate democratic debates. Cases of electoral manipulation such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal in the UK's 2016 Brexit vote, the disinformation campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic, and X's modification of its algorithm to favour content that Elon Musk wanted are such examples.[24]

Digital platforms are also said to being used by authoritarian leaders not only for the purpose of surveillance, but to keep a track and control their populations. Thus, the digital platforms have become tools in the hands of the authoritarian leaders to promote their interest.

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[18] Armin Schäfer and Michael Zürn, How to understand the rise of authoritarian populism, https://theloop.ecpr.eu/
[19] Palmer Tom G., The Terrifying Rise of Authoritarian Populism, Cato Institute, July 24, 2019, https://www.cato.org/
[20] The Global Rise of Populism and its Impact on Democracy, Juris Centre, April 10, 2023, https://juriscentre.com/
[21] Cox Michael, Understanding the Global Rise of Populism, Strategic Update, LSE Ideas, February 2018, p.9, https://researchonline.lse.ac.uk/
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[23] ibid.
[24] Crespo Miguel, Op. Cit., p.14

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III. THREATS

If the twentieth century was the story of slow, uneven progress toward the victory of liberal democracy over other ideologies – communism, fascism, virulent nationalism – the twenty-first century is, so far, a story of the reverse.[25]

- Anne Applebaum, November 15, 2021

Authoritarian populism becomes a danger to democracy when it seeks to restrict the rights of political, racial, ethnic and other minorities, or simply seeks in general to erode freedom of thought, information, and expression, or the ability of people in society and the media to criticize the elected populist leader.[26] Individuals who are more authoritarian have demonstrated intolerance of ethnic, religious, sexual, and political minorities. Further, it is argued that the illegal and undemocratic behaviour of the government is condoned and even supported by the people if authoritarianism is of a higher level. It is viewed that democratic countries which are backsliding as democracies do not show regard for democratic rules, constitutional norms, and the rule of law. Political opposition and liberal movements and organizations are delegitimized. Violence and hate speech which are directed at minorities, political opposition and other nations are gaining acceptance which thus creates obstacles for the proper functioning of democracy.[27]

According to the Freedom House Report (2026) armed conflict and authoritarian repression have led to major human rights violations in the world's worst-performing countries on democracy parameters.[28] Further, during the last two decades, the authoritarian rulers have not only dismantled institutional checks on their rule but they are also using the structures and resources of the state as weapons to attack their opponents and critics.[29]

The report highlights that the number of countries rated as Not Free have increased to 59 in 2026 from 45 in 2005. These countries witnessed within their borders, policies being implemented to eradicate ethnic and religious minority groups, political opponents, prodemocracy activists being eliminated, control over media, and increasing corruption. They have also increasingly threatened and disregarded the sovereignty of other countries.[30]

IV. CONCLUSION

The rise of authoritarianism in today's world definitely presents a grave challenge to the principles and institutions of democracy. As various factors have been identified which create conditions for authoritarianism to flourish, more sustained efforts will be required to overcome them. Further, the rise of authoritarianism does not mean that democracy has lost its relevance. Democracy provides the mechanisms for political participation, accountability, protection of rights, peaceful transfer of power, and various platforms for the resolution of conflicts. The pro-democratic forces will have to be more active, vigilant and resilient in protecting liberal values and principles.

International organisations must also proactively defend the rule of law, liberal norms and values, and fair democratic practices among its members. They can play a more assertive role in global politics in view of their economic power. It is thus the right time for the supporters of democracy to join hands and overcome the forces of authoritarianism.

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[25] Applebaum, A., The bad guys are wining. The Atlantic, 2021, November 15
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[27] Grzegorz Ekiert, Op. Cit., pp 7-8
[28] The Growing Shadow of Autocracy, Freedom in the World 2026, p.5, https://freedomhouse.org/
[29] ibid., p.15
[30] ibid., p.19

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