Diagnosing And Responding To The Challenges Facing Democracy

CEDAR

Centre for Elections Democracy Accountability & Representation

CEDAR #PolicyBrief 1

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Diagnosing the problems facing democracy

The second decade of this century has ushered in an age of autocratisation. All the major democracy indices show an aggregate picture of declining democracy worldwide: the quality of democracies is eroding, some younger established democracies have broken down, hybrid regimes that previously harboured potential for liberalisation became more authoritarian, and repression has hardened in many authoritarian countries (V-Dem 2023; Freedom House 2023). While attempts at mapping and explaining this global trend abound, there seems to be a growing tension between research on autocratisation that attempts to explain the aggregate picture (Coppedge et al. 2022) and regional and country experts' claims that existing global causal stories do not fit the cases they know best (Cianetti and Hanley 2021; Arriola, Rakner, and van de Walle 2022).

Against this background, it is critical to avoid the "temporal fallacy", i.e. assuming that the same process is taking place everywhere simply because they are happening at the same time. Instead, countries have experienced declines in their democracy scores for different reasons, and some countries have shown little change while others, such as Armenia, Ecuador, Georgia and Zambia have at times moved towards democracy. At the same time, it is important not to simply say that "context matters", because this implies that there are no general lessons than we can learn – and use – when trying to defend democracy.

We therefore advocate for a middle-ground, which highlights certain common pathways and experiences, making it possible to identify viable menus of responses and to tailor them appropriately. This policy brief explains how to do this through a two-step process. Step one involves identifying the existing level of democracy and political trajectory, which is critical because this shapes the speed with which intervention is required and the kinds of strategies likely to be successful. Step two is then required if a given country is moving away from democracy, and involves identifying why this is happening and which actors are driving this process, which is doubly valuable because it provides key insights into the major risks that pathway represents – for example, to women, minorities, and the rule of law – and which interventions are most likely to be effective.

In other words, this policy note presents a new approach to diagnosing autocratisation risks and thinking through how to prioritise democracy-promotion interventions. Below, we describe this two-step approach, define four prominent pathways to autocratisation and their related risks, and suggest the key ways in which each pathway should be approached to promote democratic resilience.

Step 1: Understanding country context

It is important to understand the level of democracy in a given country as well as its recent political trends, because cross-national studies have demonstrated that this can have a significant impact on the kinds of interventions likely to be most effective. The literature review of the recent Independent Commission of Aid Effectiveness (2023: 7) evaluation of the United Kingdom's approach to democracy and human rights, for example, concluded that "developmental assistance appears to exacerbate existing conditions – i.e. it is most likely to have positive effects in countries that are already moving towards democracy, and most likely to have negative effects in countries that are moving towards authoritarianism, effectively exacerbating existing democratisation/autocratisation trends."

Meanwhile, democracy aid – i.e. aid specifically targeted at areas such as elections, civil society, and the media – has been found to be less effective at stopping processes of autocratisation than at enabling countries already moving towards democracy to make further progress. One reason for this is that democracy aid appears to be "most effective when targeted at one-party states or poor quality multiparty systems, and less effective when targeted at liberal democracies and military regimes. This may be because aid is most effective when it is given to a government that is more inclusive and subject to greater accountability, but has less impact on liberal democracies simply because there is less scope for improvement in these systems" (2023: 7).

It is therefore important to take into account the existing political system, level of democracy, and direction of travel in a given country in order to understand what kinds of intervention are likely to be required to defend democracy. According to the same ICAI literature review (2023: 8), in less democratic contexts, and in countries already moving away from democracy, aid "will likely need to be complemented with carefully designed diplomatic interventions". Combining aid and diplomatic pressure in this way can generate three positive consequences:

1. enhancing the impact of other democracy support activities;
2. reducing aid diversion; and,
3. increasing the cost of democratic backsliding to governments, making autocratisation less attractive.

These findings are reflected in Table 1, which provides a simplified way of mapping the conditions in a given country in order to understand the kinds of strategies most and least likely to be effective at sustaining democracy. It is important to note that applying diplomatic pressure, such as aid

conditionality and targeted sanctions against autocratisers "brings with it significant risks and does not work well in all conditions" (ICAI 2023: 8). More specifically, entrenched authoritarian states, and governments committed to democratic erosion, may react negatively to external intervention, for example by depicting pressure to democratise as an attack on national sovereignty.

Table 1. Mapping the level and direction of democracy

Existing level of democracy	V-Dem Liberal democracy index (0-1)	Trend	Suitable strategies
Low quality democracy	0.5-0.7	Towards democracy	Established democracy strengthening strategies are effective and worthwhile investments
		Away from democracy	Established democracy strengthening strategies are likely to require bolstering by diplomatic pressure to work
Competitive authoritarian	0.2-0.5	Towards democracy	Established democracy strengthening strategies can be effective, but at higher levels of intensity, and a broader range of incentives may be required to sustain elite commitment to transition
		Away from democracy	Established democracy strengthening strategies are likely to require bolstering by diplomatic pressure, but with significant risk of backfiring
Closed authoritarian	0-0.2	Towards democracy	Established democracy strengthening strategies can be effective, but at much higher levels of intensity, and a broader range of incentives will be required to sustain elite commitment to transition
		Away from democracy	Donor influence is limited, with established democracy strengthening strategies likely to be ineffective, and high risk of diplomatic pressure backfiring

Research by the Thinking and Working Politically community of practice has demonstrated that, when dealing with entrenched authoritarian regimes and sensitive issue areas, it is critically important to

design interventions in a way that takes account of the incentives of key actors in a flexible approach that allows for adaptive learning and management.[1]

Doing this effectively requires careful political economy analysis of the specific government and sector, but recent experiences suggest that diplomatic pressure is most likely to be effective when: "the international community is united and speaks with one voice; relevant communities are fully consulted before any action is taken; threats of aid withdrawal or sanctions are credible; and, intervention is designed in such a way that the government cannot manipulate it to its own advantage by depicting the intervention as an infringement of sovereignty by malign foreign powers" (ICAI 2023: 8).

Step 2: Identifying pathways – a missing dimension in research on autocratisation

There is a consensus that "differences in autocratisation are a matter of *quality* and not just of *quantity*", and so we need to think about the global trend we are observing as being the aggregate of several different processes (Cianetti & Alderman 2023; cf. Tomini 2021). Yet, despite this recognition, we still do not know what those processes actually are and how they play out over the globe. Our proposed pathways-based framework is a first step towards building a more nuanced map of autocratisation, one that recognises differences in the quality of autocratisation processes, and not only in their quantity.[2] It offers a middle ground between sweeping global trends that are too general to be a guide for action in specific contexts, and granular, country-specific studies that are too detailed to help develop a democracy promotion toolkit.

A **pathway** refers to a particular process through which a country moves away from democracy and includes the key forces and actors driving this trend and the main ways in which it occurs, for example a coup led by a faction of the military, or a process of election rigging driven by the incumbent president. This is a valuable exercise to undertake because by understanding how democracy is being undermined, we can work out how to bolster and protect it.

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[1] TWP – Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice (twpcommunity.org).

[2] Our focus on quality over quantity is in line with growing critiques by scholars of authoritarianism who contest the continuum-based approach to regime studies. This approach defines all regimes in terms of their quantitative distance from democracy and fails to see qualitative differences of and within autocracies. It treats authoritarianism as "a mere residual of whatever is not classified as democracy" (Gerschewski 2023, 29). Also see Hager Ali (2023) and the numerous contributions to her "Autocracies with Adjectives" blog series.

In previous literature, which mainly focussed on processes of democratisation, the idea of pathways was used to demarcate qualitatively different routes through which authoritarian countries could transition to democracy, and the likelihood they would do so (e.g. Hadenius and Teorell 2007). This included, for example, Terry Karl's (1997) influential work on modes of transition, which argued that the process through which a country moved to democracy – elite led, revolution from below, and so on – exerted a powerful effect on the kind of political system likely to result. Elite-led transitions, for example, tended to be more stable, but also more limited and gradual. Revolutions had the potential to generate more far-reaching change, but were also more likely to collapse into new forms of authoritarianism. The core idea of this approach was that no one general theory of transition was true across all cases, but that qualitatively different cases would democratise (or fail to do so) in qualitatively different ways (Geddes 1999).

The same logic, updated and improved, should be brought to our understanding of the current wave of autocratisation. Identifying a pathway to autocratisation means determining:

1. The actors and institutions that are most likely to erode, attack or prevent accountable governance (the **who**);
2. The main ways in which they are likely to do so (the **how**); and,
3. Their key motivations and rationales for doing so (the **why**).

Once we have established this, having a clearer picture of the dominant autocratisation pathway in a given context can, in turn, help us identify the *who*, the *how* and the *why* of democratic resilience and democratisation.

To identify the most relevant pathways for those seeking to defend democracy today, we conducted a systematic review of the existing literature on a) donor engagement with authoritarian regimes, and b) the foundations of democratic resilience, which included over 300 academic and grey literature sources. This review identified four main recurrent processes through which a political regime autocratises – that is, becomes less competitive, less accountable, and erodes the political rights and civil liberties of the citizenry. The initial list of pathways discussed below represents a first step towards producing a new autocratisation map of the world that identifies which pathway is dominant in each country. It will be revised iteratively as our work on global pathways mapping evolves.

The four pathways to autocratisation

Our review of the literature has identified one sudden and three gradual pathways to autocratisation, in line with recent findings that today's democracy is more likely to erode slowly than to go out with a bang (Bermeo 2016).

1. Violent overthrow

Violent overthrow refers to an extreme case of regime change, and typically happens at the lower end of the democratic continuum, in already authoritarian or hybrid regimes. The violent overthrow pathway encompasses cases when a regime is transformed violently either by rebel take-over (rare nowadays, Afghanistan being the only recent case) or by a military coup. The latter is more common, and has seen a recent resurgence, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, with unconstitutional changes of government in Burkina Faso, Gabon, Mali, Niger and Sudan, as well as a number of purported coup attempts (Chacha 2023; Cheeseman 2023). Southeast Asia is another coup-prone region, with recent military overthrows taking place in Thailand and Myanmar.

- **WHO:** The key autocratising actors here are armed rebels or, most often, small factions of an already politicised military.
- **HOW:** Violence, threat of violence, and military occupation of key seats of power and of the media is the usual modus operandi.
- **WHY:** The logic is context-specific, but it typically comes amidst a period of low popularity for the elected government, which serves to delegitimise the existing political system and hence to justify its violent overthrow. While the background conditions for coups include democratic backsliding by the civilian regime, economic difficulties and high levels of insecurity, it is also important to note that coups are often triggered by developments that threaten the power and interests of military leaders, such as plans to replace key figures.

2. Polarisation

Polarisation has been indicated as one of the biggest dangers to democracy today (MacCoy and Somer 2019; Svolik 2019). As it requires a basic level of political contestation, it mostly applies to established and electoral democracies (Schedler 2023). The United States is a prominent case, where Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) have argued that democracy is dying due to falling tolerance on all sides of the political

divide. Turkey is another case of extreme polarisation, but we are seeing this across the board in many democracies.

- **WHO:** While in theory polarisation can be triggered by actors of different political leanings, in its most current form it is typically driven by illiberal and far-right populists (Avramovska et al. 2023) and radicalised mainstream centre-right parties. Politicised media and media ownership concentration also play an important role (Baker 2012). External actors, such as the Russian government, are also known to have contributed to this trend through polarising disinformation campaigns (Resistance Bureau 2023).

- **HOW:** Disinformation; anti-establishment rhetoric; electoral gains of illiberal populists that push their centre-right counterparts to mimic similar intolerant discourses; "us v. them" rhetoric amplified by information and social media bubbles.

- **WHY:** The main logic is electoral. The main motivation of domestic parties pushing polarising discourses is to win elections and to maintain a mobilised base of supporters. Where citizens are concerned, it is not yet completely clear why some population are more vulnerable to this form of radicalisation, but some work suggests this is related to feelings of socio-economic and cultural insecurity among sections of the population (Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre and Utych 2023). There is also often a territorial logic at work, since regional disparities within a country exacerbate the attraction of illiberal populist claims outside of the main urban centres (Rodríguez-Pose 2018).

3. Executive power grab

Also called "executive aggrandisement" (Bermeo 2016; Khaitan 2019), this is the well-known path taken by Hungary under Viktor Orbán. Executive power grab is a gradual but purposeful pathway, whereby an incumbent leader slowly encroaches on democratic institutions, undermines democratic checks and balances, and defangs possible sources of opposition (institutional and societal). This often involves removing presidential term-limits (in presidential systems) or skewing electoral laws in favour of the ruling party, holding increasingly controlled and manipulated elections, and passing laws that severely limit activities of civil society organisations. This pathway often runs together with illiberal polarisation (as in Hungary or India), but this is not always the case, as we have seen executive power grabs from leaders of very different ideological bents, for example in Benin, Senegal, and Venezuela.

- **WHO:** The incumbent leader and their party.

- **HOW:** Multiple, often piecemeal, disconnected and for the most part legal (Scheppele 2013), attacks on democratic institutions (particularly the independence of courts, the oversight power of parliament and parliamentary opposition, the impartiality of the civil service) and the undermining of the capacity of civil society to resist the extension of executive power (particularly through the delegitimation and criminalisation of protest and civil society activities).

- **WHY:** The main logic and motivation are the retention of power. Incumbents want to stay in power – in some cases because they fear prosecution for economic and human rights abuses they have committed should they stand down – and are willing to rewrite and distort the rules of the game in order to do so. They can be supported by economic actors who might follow a different (profit-making) logic, like entrepreneurs who support the incumbents financially and/or by buying up independent media in exchange for favourable treatment, as widely documented in the cases of Hungary (Magyar and Madlovics 2022; Scheiring 2020) and India (Ganguli 2023).

4. State capture

State capture refers to the creation of informal institutions that enable private interests to gain control of state institutions and to use them to their own ends (Cheeseman 2021). Where this pathway is dominant, the main ways democracy is undermined (in already democratic countries) or the potential for democratisation is stunted (in competitive-authoritarian or fully authoritarian countries) is through systemic corruption and patronage. State capture can coexist with vibrant electoral competition and with regular transfers of power, while hollowing out and eroding the basic principles of democratic accountability. It often ultimately leads to the collapse of democratic checks and balances, because the economic value of political power becomes too high, generating incentives for those who hold it to ensure they do not lose elections in the future. It can coexist with seemingly vibrant and competitive elections. Bulgaria (Dimitrova 2018), Ukraine (prior to Zelenski and Russia's full-on invasion, Onuch and Hale 2023), and South Africa are frequently mentioned cases.

- **WHO:** Private interests ("tenderpreneurs", "oligarchs") operating in networks with national and local-level politicians and bureaucrats, often with the complicity or direct support of parts of the judiciary.

- **HOW:** Informal practices and under-the-table deals (e.g. for state procurement) circumvent often weak formal processes; strong private interests that stand to gain from the status quo (often called "oligarchs") can abide a modicum of political pluralism, as long as it does not

impact their access to rents; universal public services are non-existent, inadequate or only nominally universal and are substituted by informal distribution through patronage networks.

▪ **WHY:** The main logic is rent seeking. Corruption and patronage also have a self-reinforcing logic: the existence of strong informal institutions shapes actors' expectations and interactions, undermining the emergence of effective formal institutions (Grzymala-Busse 2010).

It is important to note that any real-life case is unlikely to be entirely explained by one pathway alone, and so **the pathways above often appear in combination**. Executive power grabs often go hand-in-hand with aspects of state capture or serve as preludes to military coups, for example. Similarly, leaders who take power through polarising strategies often seek to entrench their rule through aggrandisement. It is therefore critical to consider the different combinations of processes that may occur within any country. Despite this, there are advantages to identifying the *dominant* pathway in each specific context. Take the example of Hungary. The Orbán regime sustains itself through corruption and patronage (Magyar 2016), and has significantly polarised society. However the main logic at play is one of executive power grab. Both corruption and polarisation are subordinate to the executive power grab's logic of elimination of checks and balances and delegitimisation of the opposition. Thus, identifying the *dominant* pathway allows us to better understand the logic through which different pathways interact in a specific context and to identify the most promising responses.

Tailoring responses by pathway

Identifying the dominant pathway is valuable because it provides critical information about the main risks associated with a process of autocratisation, and possible responses.

Pathway risk profiles

When it comes to risks, the literature suggests that each of the pathways identified above tends to be associated with a distinctive set of threats to political rights, civil liberties, and effective governance. These are summarised below. While each pathway of autocratisation can generate a range of negative externalities, their internal logics, and the ways in which they tend to proceed, mean that each one has specific implications for certain groups and institutions, as follows:

1. **Violent overthrow**. Coups, rebels, uprisings.

> **Major risk**. New authoritarian juntas, splits within the military, and outbreak of fresh conflict/civil war with widespread human rights abuses, as in Sudan.

2. **Polarisation**. Rise of illiberal forces and strategies, fall in tolerance.

> **Major risk**. Attacks on ethnic and sexual minorities, growing violence both online and in person, as in Bangladesh and India.

3. **Executive power grab.** Undermining of checks and balances institutions.

> **Major risk**. Exclusion of opposition and civil society leading to increasingly conflictual politics, gradual slide to dictatorship and "president for life" that precludes political change, as in Hungary and Uganda.

4. **State capture**. Subversion of democratic institutions.

> **Major risk**. Rampant corruption leading to collapse of public services and the hollowing out of the state, making it harder to rebuild viable democratic institutions and trust, as in South Africa.

Understanding these risks is important, because even if it is not possible to defend or revive democracy, it may be possible a) to reduce the impact of these pathways on individual citizens, and b) to ameliorate the damage done to democratic institutions and norms, increasing the prospects for future democratic revival. Locating a country's trajectory within a specific pathway will help prioritise interventions that are feasible in the present, identify the risks and opportunities they carry, and increase preparedness to take advantage of potential openings in the future.

Designing effective interventions to protect democracy

Interviews with donor representatives suggest that they generally feel that they have a clearer set of standard responses to some of these pathways than others. Most notably, donors often respond to violent overthrows by suspending existing aid relations, cancelling budget support (if it is in place), making high profile statements about the situation at the ministerial level and above, and diverting aid to non-state actors such as civil society groups. When it comes to more gradual processes such as polarisation and executive power grabs, however, donor representatives feel that it is generally harder to know exactly how to intervene, in part because there are no comparable "red lines" that make it clear when a certain form of behaviour has reached unacceptable levels (Cheeseman and Desrosiers 2023). A critical first step in designing better strategies to defend democracy is therefore to support donor representatives by providing them with a clear menu of strategies that have been demonstrated to work in the context of a given pathway.

1. Responding to violent overthrow

As noted above donors have standard ways to respond to violent democratic ruptures, such as coups *after the fact*. While this is important, more attention needs to be placed on addressing the conditions that increase the prospects of violent overthrow *before it takes place*:

a) We know that recent coups have often been precipitated by poor quality elections that have triggered/justified military intervention. Donors should therefore rethink their level of tolerance for poor quality elections, and also emphasise to leaders that maintaining higher democratic and developmental standards is likely to insulate them against coups. On this basis, more attention should be placed on what happens before and after elections and not only on election day, in order to respond to manipulation of electoral rules, candidate eligibility requirements, and 'lawfare'.

b) Similarly, donors and international financial institutions should recognise that periods of economic crisis can foster the kinds of public dissatisfaction that can bolster support for coup conditions. It is therefore important to ensure that economic programmes designed by the IMF and World Bank, especially those designed to restructure debt and kick-start economic recovery, do not require governments to suddenly implement measures that may trigger public protest, such as the removal of food and fuel subsidies.

c) Because one of the factors that triggers coups is a fall in popularity and legitimacy of the existing leader, simply reinstating the deposed president may prove to be both unfeasible and potentially destabilising. Donors therefore need to work on an alternative way of resolving such crises that foregrounds swift progress towards civilian rule and fresh elections, rather than simply reinstating a leader who may have committed democratic and human rights abuses.

d) Current juntas have proved adept at prolonging transitions back to democratic rule in order to sustain their access to power and resources, which in turn provides additional incentives for them to block meaningful democratisation. Donors should therefore be clear that the longer a transition process goes on, the lower the prospect of re-democratisation becomes, and that the normalisation of relations with juntas therefore needs to be made conditional on genuine progress towards civilian rule.

e) While moving funding from the government to NGOs is an intuitive response to evidence of government autocratisation, donors should be careful not to set up civil society as a rival for funding and influence in the eyes of the junta, as this can lead to greater levels of repression and anti-NGO legislation.

2. Responding to polarisation

Political polarisation both undermines the possibility for compromise and democratic deliberation and stimulates cleavages between different groups, whether on the basis of ethnicity, religion, sexuality, or partisan identity. Donors may lack the traction to prevent this process from happening, but can try and moderate its effects and build bridges within society:

a) Reducing flows of disinformation while sustaining diverse media can help to address rising distrust, although this is particularly difficult to achieve in contexts in which the government is part of the problem. Attention should go not only to national media but also to local media, whose decline has been associated with a rise in polarisation (Martin and McCrain 2019).

b) Stepping up protection for groups likely to be targeted, such as LGBTQI+ communities and ethnic minorities, is also important – though in some contexts this needs to be done carefully to avoid creating the impression that these are "Western issues" and present an outside agenda. In light of this, it is particularly important for donors to be "leading from behind", that is, to apply pressure behind the scenes to maintain space for organisations on the ground to lead the campaigns for their own survival (Cheeseman and Dodsworth 2023).

c) Donors should focus on projects that create spaces for dialogue and build the social trust that polarisation erodes. This means investing in schemes and tools that promote deliberative democracy and participatory processes, especially those that foster "bridging" activities that bring citizens from different kinds of backgrounds together.

d) Targeted sanctions against individuals committing human rights abuses can be effective but need to be carefully thought through. Blanket sanctions are generally less likely to be effective, not least because they impact on all members of society and can be used to create a "siege" mentality by polarising leaders.

e) These interventions should also learn from the best practice in areas such as peacebuilding, for example that the involvement of women at all levels of peace negotiations and peace processes can generate more stable and inclusive outcomes (Berry and Rana 2019).

f) Donors should insist on promoting reform through democratic processes. Attempts to remove polarising actors by non-democratic means typically result in more polarisation and further backsliding or autocratisation (Slater and Arugay 2018). Overcoming polarisation means strengthening institutions but also ensuring that citizens and political elites believe that how this is done is fair, to ensure that they react in a positive way (Schedler 2023).

3. Responding to executive power grabs

The subversion of the system from within is one of the most challenging forms of autocratisation to respond to because it is often hidden from public view and is perpetrated by the government itself. Nonetheless, there are a number of steps that can be taken, including pre-emptive ones:

a) Pre-emptively, donors should focus on strengthening the key institutional barriers to executive power grabs, namely the de facto independence, capacity, and legitimacy of the judicial process. In a number of cases, including Brazil and the U.S., we have seen that the judiciary has been an important check on irresponsible leadership.

b) Investments in independent and investigative media make sense for similar reasons.

c) Donors should take a stronger stance to push back against some of the key elements of executive aggrandisement that have been identified thus far, including: the removal of presidential term-limits, electoral manipulation, the subversion of legislative institutions, the politicisation of public prosecutors' offices, and anti-NGOs legislation/foreign agents' laws. In presidential systems, the removal of term-limits is perhaps the most important indicator of autocratisation through this pathway: it signals the desire of the incumbent to be the leader for life and hence a fundamental rejection of political pluralism.

d) Especially in this pathway, where the driver of autocratisation is the executive themselves, cross-donor coordination is likely to be necessary to bring sufficient pressure to bear to limit the attack on democracy.

e) Donors should also keep in mind that potential allies may be found in unlikely places – including the ruling party. In countries such as Nigeria and Zambia, for example, efforts to prevent presidents from removing term limits received support from government MPs, in part because these leaders did not want their own pathway to the presidency to be curtailed.

f) Efforts to support civil society groups from being undermined need to be long-term and sustained, so that civil society can respond proactively and is not caught on the back foot. It also needs to take into account the incentives facing Members of Parliament, who ultimately decide the fate of anti-NGOs legislation (Cheeseman and Dodsworth 2023). For example, in Kenya MPs were persuaded to abstain from voting on anti-NGO legislation, effectively defeating it, by appealing to their self-interest, as a reduction in funding for NGOs threatened to undermine the services provided to voters in their constituencies. As noted above, this support should be aimed at amplifying the voices of civil society groups rather than speaking for them, both because they best understand the environment in which they are working, and because this avoids creating the impression that NGOs are a mouthpiece of the West.

4. Responding to state capture

State capture is also often hard to deter from afar, at least in its early stages. Because many of the key processes of state capture involve corruption and illicit behaviour, instigators of state capture go to great lengths to make sure that they are not exposed. Given this, it makes sense for donors to:

a. Invest in efforts to vet and clean the judiciary of corrupt or partisan judges, as well as support the establishment of politically independent anti-corruption commissions and ombudsman positions.

b. Pre-emptively strengthen the legislature, especially in terms of Public Accounts Committees and scrutiny of financial and budgetary legislation and behaviour.

c. Fund independent media and in particular investigative journalists who can expose corrupt practices, because this kind of reporting is often particularly dangerous and hard to resource once state capture has begun.

d. Strengthen programmes designed to expose and prosecute corruption and corrupt networks both nationally and internationally. This can be particularly effective because in many cases the networks that launder money for corrupt political leaders and civil servants extends across borders, including to European capitals, tax havens and, increasingly, Dubai (Grynberg et al 2021). As these networks can also be facilitated by instruments developed by the financial industry, attention should also be placed not only on the corrupt source of the money, but also on the networks and mechanisms through which it circulates.

e. Support the economy, universal welfare provisions, and job creation to undermine public acquiescence for certain aspects of state capture, especially the use of patronage to maintain political support through the distribution of clientelistic goods. In contexts in which public goods are absent, poor quality, or only nominally universal, patronage becomes a key way for citizens to obtain goods and services, thus dampening their willingness to vote out corrupt leaders.

f. Pay particular attention to the risk of aid diversion, which increases in line with state capture, to ensure that donor funds do not end up contributing to the problem.

The advantages of pathway thinking

Thinking about the defence of democracy in terms of pathways is a critical first step towards designing better interventions. While not a silver bullet to all problems, it can give policy-makers a stronger foundation to think about:

- **What** is the menu of possible interventions for each pathway?
- **Which** actions should be prioritised given finite resources?
- **When** should different interventions be rolled out, and how potential bright spots and areas of democratic resilience can be strengthened and built on?
- **Who** is most likely to try and hijack such interventions, why and how?

The final point is particularly important because defending democracy is a long-term and dynamic process. The drivers of autocratisation – whether incumbent leaders, juntas, or "outsider" populists – are consistently looking for new ways to subvert democratic interventions and entrench their hold on power. They are learning and adapting quickly, often quicker than democratic donors do. It is therefore critical to think through how autocratisers are likely to respond to pro-democracy programming in order to best protect it from manipulation.

Precisely because thinking in terms of pathways helps to identify where the most significant risk to democratic interventions comes from, it can both help to design the defence of democracy and insulate it from subversion. It is important to keep in mind, however, that this is only one component of how donors can most effectively defend democracy. Other components include making democracy a more attractive choice for leaders and citizens – for example by demonstrating the economic and social benefits of democracy, and prioritising democratic states in the distribution of aid funds – and ensuring that we do not do harm in our routine engagements with authoritarian governments. This last point is particularly significant, because another policy report authored by CEDAR researchers, *How (not) to engage with authoritarian states* (Cheeseman and Desrosiers 2023), finds that there is a constant risk that democratic states may inadvertently strengthen the hold on power of their authoritarian counterparts while engaging them on areas such as development, trade, and security.

For more information on how to avoid these risks, and for more tailored and specific information about how to identify and respond to the pathways set out above, contact the authors listed below.

About CEDAR

The Centre for Elections, Democracy, Accountability and Representation (CEDAR) was established by the University of Birmingham to bring together researchers, policy makers, civil society groups and activists across borders in a common quest to understand the factors that promote and undermine accountable and representative government. For more information, and to access the latest analysis, blogs, and the People, Power, Politics podcast on the global state of democracy, visit our website.

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