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## **THREE POTENTIAL FACTORS FUELING DEMOCRATIC BREAKDOWN IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

*Masaaki Higashijima*

- While democratic backsliding has been widespread, full-fledged democratic breakdown often hinges on the military's role. When autocratic leaders successfully build strong alliances with the military, they can suppress democratic movements and consolidate power.
- Electoral processes in the Global South are threatened by fraud, disinformation, and manipulation. Covert methods of electoral control enable pseudo-democrats to maintain power without resorting to overt violence, making democratic breakdown more difficult to counter.
- The transformation of the international system, particularly the weakening of Western support for democratization, threatens the stability of democratic institutions in the Global South. Such changes may reduce the cost of authoritarian behavior and could facilitate democratic breakdown in vulnerable states.

*The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.*

The Global South is highly diverse, making it impossible to develop a single approach applicable to all countries in the region. This is especially true for political regime change, which is largely shaped by various domestic conditions and differing relationships with the Global North. Furthermore, current threats to democracies are ubiquitous in both the Global South and the Global North.

That said, political science research offers valuable insights into the conditions under which political regime transformations occur in the Global South. This short essay examines the key drivers of democratic breakdown, focusing on three main factors: *the role of the military, elections, and international support for democratic consolidation.*

Many countries worldwide are currently experiencing a trend of democratic backsliding, a gradual erosion of democratic practices. This process includes the weakening of institutional checks and balances and restrictions on media freedom and civil liberties, all of which often originate in and exacerbate partisan divides among both citizens and political elites. Notable examples of this phenomenon include Hungary, Poland, Serbia, South Korea, and India.

However, for full-fledged democratic breakdown—that is, the transition from democracy to autocracy—to occur, gradual democratic backsliding is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition. Cross-national data indicate that, while democratic backsliding has been widespread since the mid-2000s (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), the proportion of electoral democracies holding free and fair elections has not necessarily declined at a rapid pace during the same period<sup>1</sup>.

The key actor in transforming democratic backsliding into full democratic breakdown is the military. A critical juncture arises when the military must decide whether to side with an autocratic leader and other ruling elites seeking to deliver a final blow to democracy or to resist by refusing to suppress citizens and instead supporting popular protests and liberal opposition groups.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Skaaning et al. (2015), the proportion of autocracies increased by 3 percent between 2006 and 2021, with irregular fluctuations over the period.

As demonstrated by Yoon Suk Yeol's declaration of martial law in South Korea, democratic breakdown does not necessarily occur if the military refuses to comply with the president's orders, even in the presence of deep partisan divisions and political polarization. Conversely, when autocratic leaders successfully forge and maintain strong alliances with the military, they can effectively deploy military forces to suppress democratic movements, turning a gradual process of democratic backsliding into a decisive democratic breakdown, as seen in recent military coups such as that in Myanmar. In Venezuela, a prominent case where democratic backsliding fully developed into democratic breakdown, one crucial factor enabling Nicolas Maduro to rely on brutal state repression against the opposition is [the military's continued loyalty](#) to him, even amid growing resistance.

Military intervention in politics, which had become far less frequent after the end of the Cold War, has been resurging in the 2020s. The increasing presence of the military has the potential to transform the current tide of democratic backsliding into a "Third Wave" of democratic breakdown, with countries such as Myanmar (2021), Mali (2021), Guinea (2021), and Burkina Faso (2022) exemplifying this trend. My recent article with Adrian Del Rio of the University of Oslo indicates that partisan divisions within the government and subsequent public dissent tend to encourage political liberalization only when autocratic leaders fail to establish stable alliances with the military (Del Rio and Higashijima 2024). To prevent countries experiencing democratic backsliding from descending into full autocracy, it is crucial to closely examine the relationship between the military and autocratic leaders and to develop effective strategies for weakening or severing their ties.

The second key factor is elections. When elections are not free and fair but are instead manipulated through various forms of electoral rigging, they fail to offer a genuine opportunity for selecting political leadership, thereby undermining both the fundamental principle of democracy and public trust in the electoral process (Norris 2014).

In the largest electoral cycle in history last year, high inflation and global economic disruption put many incumbents under pressure, particularly in India

and South Africa. In some countries, incumbent parties were defeated at the ballot box and conceded electoral losses, as occurred in Uruguay, Senegal, Ghana, and Botswana, the last seeing the Democratic Party's 58-year rule come to an end. However, some incumbent rulers in the Global South resorted to blatant electoral manipulation to retain power, fueling public grievances and triggering mass protests, as exemplified by Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina, Mozambique's Frelimo Party, and Georgia's Georgian Dream Party. Even with such overt fraud, narrow electoral margins significantly weaken political legitimacy and erode public confidence in elections. These conditions may not only destabilize the political order but also create openings for authoritarian leaders who, backed by military power, do not hesitate to dismantle democratic elections altogether, as showcased in the case of Venezuela.

In last year's wave of elections, disinformation techniques were actively deployed to distort the information available to voters at the ballot box, further deepening political polarization. In the 2024 Romanian presidential election, the Constitutional Court annulled the results due to allegations of Russian interference, with Russia accused of financially backing a pro-Russian candidate's social media campaign.

Beyond the growing transnational disinformation efforts led by Russia and China, pseudo-democratic leaders in the Global South have frequently employed other covert manipulation techniques to their advantage. These include regulating electoral competition through electoral law, clientelism, and electoral system manipulation. Because these methods do not involve overt fraud or violence, they are less likely to provoke strong popular backlash, yet they effectively inflate electoral margins for those in power and secure their victories. When elections are seriously undermined by such measures, they no longer function as mechanisms that uphold democracy; instead, they become tools for pseudo-democrats to entrench their power and bolster their legitimacy (Higashijima 2022).

The third factor is the ongoing transformation of the international system. Following his reelection last year, Donald Trump has been attempting to drastically reshape the West's approach to international support for democratic

consolidation in the Global South. This shift is exemplified by his commitments to dissolving the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), reducing US military deployments in Europe, and deepening divisions between the US and other Western countries over tariff wars and differing approaches to the Russia-Ukraine War. Extensive evidence suggests that foreign aid, strongly backed by Western countries, has been one of the key drivers in advancing democratization and sustaining newly established democracies in the Global South, particularly after the end of the Cold War (e.g., Dunning 2004, Bermeo 2011).

Complicated by the “America First” agenda, post-Cold War international support for democratization now faces serious threats. In addition to widespread disinformation and propaganda strategies employed by authoritarian states, autocratic powers have actively challenged Western influence by providing foreign aid and meddling on their own terms (Levin 2020), deploying election monitors who willingly endorse fraudulent elections (Bush et al. 2024), and seeking to attract Global South countries with governance models that diverge from liberal democratic principles (Mattingly et al. 2024). The rapidly shifting balance of international norms may significantly alter the rules of the democratic game globally by lowering the costs for autocratic actors to stage coups, engage in blatant electoral fraud and violence, and employ covert electoral manipulation without consequence. These trends could accelerate democratic breakdown and undermine the very principles of democracy that have constrained pseudo-democrats and fostered vibrant pro-democracy movements around the globe over the past three decades.

As a country that has benefited from, and therefore actively promoted, the norms and principles of liberal democracy, Japan must take seriously the ongoing transformation of international politics and seek robust cooperation with countries in both the Global South and Global North to defend liberal democracy. By deepening its cooperation with like-minded partners in Europe, Asia, and Oceania, Japan can help reaffirm shared commitments to democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law. It may also consider establishing a dedicated institution to support democratic governance abroad, providing sustained

assistance to civil society, electoral integrity, and legal reforms in emerging democracies and electoral autocracies. Through such efforts, Japan can position itself as a principled and credible defender of liberal democracy. 

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*Masaaki Higashijima is an associate professor of political science at the Institute of Social Science, The University of Tokyo.*