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When Elections Are Not Enough

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Political Removability

One of the defining assumptions of modern democracy is that citizens can change their government through elections. Governments govern for a period, go back to the electorate, and leave office if they lose. This was central to Karl Popper's understanding of democracy. The crucial question is not who should rule, but how rulers can be removed without violence (Popper 1945). Samuel Huntington likewise treated repeated peaceful turnover as a test of democratic consolidation (Huntington 1991).

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The mere existence of elections does not by itself settle the matter. There are political systems that retain constitutions, courts, opposition parties and the voting process, and yet incumbents become increasingly harder to dislodge. Political scientists describe such conditions through concepts such as electoral authoritarianism, competitive authoritarianism, democratic backsliding and constitutional retrogression. While these concepts throw light on different parts of the problem, it really boils down to is how removable the government is in practice.

Political removability is not the same as alternation of political power. A party can win repeatedly because voters continue to prefer it for long periods. Thus, the Conservatives governed Britain for much of the 20th century; the Liberal Democratic Party dominated post-war Japanese politics; and the Congress Party in India remained in power for several decades after Independence.

Long incumbency therefore is not by itself evidence of democratic decay. The real issue is whether competitors still retain a realistic opportunity of defeating the incumbent, and there is a likelihood that defeat could eventually lead to peaceful transfer of power.

Regime-Protecting Institutions

Such contemporary regimes can be contrasted with revolutionary regimes. The great revolutionary movements of the 20th century differed profoundly in ideology. They nevertheless shared the conviction that the new political order represented a historical or moral mission. Opponents were not treated as competitors but as enemies of the revolution, nation or faith. This had institutional consequences.

Revolutionary regimes create organisations whose loyalty is tied to the ruling project. In Nazi Germany, the SS grew into a virtual state within a state. It combined ideological commitment and personal loyalty to Hitler with sweeping security and coercive powers. Likewise, in post-revolutionary Iran, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was created to defend the Islamic system. It became the guarantor of regime survival. The Basij developed alongside as a subordinate paramilitary force with important internal-security functions.

These regimes were not ideologically similar, but in both instances they were very difficult to dislodge because of the creation of organisations that possessed coercive capacity, ideological loyalty to the regime and a direct stake in its survival. Democracy on the other hand institutionalises the possibility that today's government can become tomorrow's opposition.

Electoral Entrenchment

When a political and ideological movement is elected to power it does not need to abolish elections in order to become difficult to remove. The playing field can be systematically skewed through unequal access to resources, media and the law.

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There can be several forms of asymmetry. First and foremost is organisational. Unlike liberal parties, the activities and mobilization of parties embedded in ideological, religious or social movements continue to be very active between elections, thereby deepening their penetration of civil society. Contemporary India offers an instructive example. The Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) in India has long-standing ties to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the wider Sangh Parivar through networks that extend well beyond the formal electoral party into social, cultural and associational life. This provides organisational depth that conventional electoral parties generally lack. Thus, the reach of the ideology espoused by the BJP kept expanding even during periods it did not have State power.

The RSS is of course no Iranian Revolutionary Guard. It does not command India's armed forces. It is not a parallel state security apparatus. India continues to hold competitive elections. Opposition parties continue to govern major states. Change of government remains constitutionally possible. The comparison therefore concerns organisational entrenchment, not equivalence of regime type.

There are other asymmetries as well that concern institutions, information and finance. Appointment systems become more partisan; investigative or regulatory agencies are used selectively; media access becomes heavily tilted; and prolonged incumbency deepens networks of finance, patronage and influence. None of these developments on their own abolish democracy. Their cumulative effects, however, raise the cost of opposition and reduce the incumbent's vulnerability. The ballot box remains. What changes is the environment surrounding it.

A Stylised Progression

Political entrenchment of elected governments in the contemporary world can arguably be seen as a stylised progression.

The first stage is electoral dominance: a party repeatedly wins elections while competitors still remain capable of defeating it.

The second stage is organisational dominance: the governing party is supported by a wider social or ideological infrastructure that gives it advantages that extend beyond election campaigns. This stage can in some cases precede the first.

The third stage is institutional entrenchment: institutions expected to remain independent become increasingly aligned with the governing party. The electoral system, the courts, investigative agencies, regulatory institutions and the media come readily to mind.

The fourth stage is the delegitimisation of alternation: Opponents cease to be treated as legitimate competitors and are increasingly portrayed as enemies of the nation, faith, people or the constitutional order.

The fifth, and decisive, stage is coercive entrenchment: organisations whose loyalty lies with the ruling order acquire the capacity to intimidate or suppress political opposition. This is the point at which the comparison with revolutionary regimes becomes most illuminating.

All the while the formal constitutional order remains intact and unaltered even as it is rendered increasingly irrelevant in practice.

The IRGC and Basij represent a developed form of such entrenchment because ideological loyalty, coercive capacity and the responsibility for preserving the regime are combined in the same institutional complex. A democratic system may display similar organisational or institutional asymmetries without approaching this threshold.

The Ratchet Problem

The path from competitive democracy to entrenched rule is thus incremental. A number of studies over the last two decades have drawn attention to executive aggrandisement and strategic electoral manipulation as contemporary forms of democratic backsliding involving a gradual erosion of competitive elections, political rights and the rule of law (Bermeo 2016; Schedler 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010; Huq and Ginsburg 2018). Each change may individually appear modest: appointment procedures are altered, regulatory institutions become less independent, public communication becomes more partisan, electoral rules change, and civil-society organisations face greater pressure. Elections however continue throughout.

The crucial question is therefore not simply whether elections continue to be held. It is whether elections remain capable of reversing the creeping accumulation of political power.

Borrowing a metaphor sometimes used by economists to describe one-way cumulative institutional change, this progression can be thought of as a "ratchet". Robert Higgs used the term to describe how expansion of governmental power during crises may recede after such crises have passed without returning fully to the original baseline (Higgs 1987). The ratchet analogy applied to democratic backsliding is both useful and powerful: the incumbent can use one electoral victory to acquire institutional advantages that make the next victory easier. The next victory then creates further opportunities for consolidation. While each movement might not be irreversible, reversal itself becomes progressively more difficult.

At no single point need democracy formally disappear. The crucial question is therefore not simply whether elections continue to be held. It is whether elections remain capable of reversing the creeping accumulation of political power.

Internal Correction

A healthy democracy contains mechanisms of self-correction. Governments can be removed. Courts can reverse executive action. Legislatures can investigate. An independent media can expose wrongdoing. Civil society can organize and protest. And elections can replace unsuccessful leaders. Revolutionary regimes weaken or eliminate precisely these mechanisms because internal correction threatens the permanence of the revolutionary project. The danger in an eroding democracy is that the institutional shells may remain while their functions weaken. This gives it greater legitimacy than revolutionary regimes that are formally authoritarian and make no pretence of being so.

Thus, a court still exists but no longer constrains the executive. An election still occurs but the competitive field is heavily tilted. A legislature still meets but exercises little independent oversight. Opposition parties remain legal but operate under mounting administrative, financial or legal pressure. This is why Huq and Ginsburg's idea of constitutional retrogression is useful: democratic degradation may occur through cumulative changes rather than a single rupture.

The Ultimate Test

Perhaps the simplest test of a political regime is therefore not what it calls itself, nor even whether it periodically holds elections. It is this: can those currently in power actually lose? And if they lose, will they leave?

This question distinguishes electoral popularity from political entrenchment. A party that wins ten consecutive free elections can remain democratic if the eleventh can remove it. A government that retains elections while progressively ensuring that no opposition can realistically defeat it occupies a different political category. A regime possessing ideological coercive institutions whose function includes preventing alternative political authority from emerging has crossed the democratic boundary altogether.

The task of a constitutional democracy is not merely to hold elections. It is to preserve the conditions under which elections remain capable of changing the government.

India remains closer to the democratic end of this continuum than revolutionary Iran or Russia. Their institutions, histories and political cultures are fundamentally different, and facile comparisons with fascist, revolutionary or formally authoritarian regimes obscure those differences. Yet precisely because India remains a democracy, developments that increase the institutional cost of removing incumbents deserve attention before, rather than after, the democratic mechanism ceases to function. The task of a constitutional democracy is not merely to hold elections. It is to preserve the conditions under which elections remain capable of changing the government.

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