# HOW NOT TO ENGAGE WITH AUTHORITARIAN STATES

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## Acknowledgements

## Disclaimer

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# Executive Summary

The world is in a prolonged democratic recession. Every year for almost two decades, more countries have moved towards authoritarianism than towards democracy. Yet despite this – and despite loud calls for western governments to pay greater attention to the strategies and methods they use to strengthen democracy – a recent review of ODA flows concluded that "the regime type does not appear to weigh heavily on ODA allocation decisions". Partly a result, the proportion of aid funds going to autocracies increased from 64% in 2010 to 79% in 2019.

More alarming still, engaging with authoritarian states without a clear plan for how to avoid doing harm may entrench authoritarian rule. It can, for example, legitimise or inadvertently support parts and/or practices of repressive regimes. Exemplifying this pattern, both Ethiopia and Rwanda were "donor darlings" and received long-term development funding and military support before becoming embroiled in destabilizing conflicts – in the Ethiopian case in Tigray, in the Rwandan case in the Democratic Republic of the Congo – and refusing to undertake meaningful democratic reforms. As we move forwards, Ethiopia and Rwanda may prove to be the canary in the coal mine.

This highlights a key point: the democratic initiatives supported by western states are often outweighed by the sum total of all of the other ways that they routinely engage with authoritarian partners – what we call "everyday engagement". This complex web of agreements, negotiations and contacts includes diplomatic relations, trade deals, environmental treaties, joint security programmes, and much more.

Disengaging from authoritarian regimes is not really an option, which means that it is imperative to develop a better understanding of the options available to policymakers, and their deeper political consequences. At present this task is hampered by the fact that policy analysis has tended to discuss a common range of tools across both low-quality democracies and staunch autocracies. Meanwhile, academic studies provide little help to policymakers because there have been few attempts to assess the specific programmes through which pro-democracy doors engage authoritarianism. This paper seeks to fill both gaps by bringing together the latest academic and policy research to address the following four questions:

## How do western states engage with authoritarian states?

## Which aspects of these engagements contribute to authoritarianism and how?

## How can pro-democracy governments better engage with authoritarian regimes to strengthen democracy or at a minimum do no harm?

## How does the political context shape the most effective response?

# HOW NOT TO ENGAGE WITH AUTHORITARIAN STATES

By "pro-democracy" governments we mean those that are officially – i.e., rhetorically – committed to strengthening democracy around the world, although their actions may often undermine this goal in practice. Indeed, drawing on a comprehensive survey of over 250 policy and academic sources in the English literature, case studies of key paradigmatic cases, and decades of research in states with different authoritarian profiles, we identify a number of ways that western governments strengthen authoritarian regimes.

Two main arguments explain why problematic practices persist. The first pertains to the bureaucratic politics of aid delivery, where bureaucratic incentives such as ensuring the effective implementation of programmes, and the need to generate positive outcomes, trump concerns such as the quality of democracy. This bureaucratic rationale is particularly powerful where policymakers and bureaucrats both come to see technical results as being easier to achieve and demonstrate than a political one.

The second explanation focuses on the tendency to prioritise stability and security in foreign policy, which is generally a primary source of inconsistency in the approach of western states. Though pro-democracy governments rhetorically place stability, development, and democracy on equal footing, they are often willing to sacrifice progress towards democracy for other goals, especially with geostrategically important partners.

When it comes to relationships between pro-democracy governments and authoritarian partners, we emphasise the ability of the latter to manipulate both aid budgets and democracy promotion efforts. A combination of authoritarian learning and the growing diversity of international donors has enabled authoritarian governments to present themselves as allies on issues of importance to certain funders that they know will not impact on the key structures that sustain their regime. In some of the worst cases, this has led to democracy strengthening work being fully subverted for authoritarian purposes.

These tendencies have been exacerbated by the increasingly multi-polar nature of the global international system in four main ways:

- **First, authoritarian aid recipients now have a far greater range of donors and international institutions to appeal to for financial assistance, enabling them to select the partnerships that require them to implement the least threatening set of political reforms.**

- **Second, the success of authoritarian development models – for example in China (a one-party state) and Rwanda (a heavily controlled multiparty system) – has led to a growing willingness to question the need for democratic politics when it comes to achieving development.**

- **Third, some pro-democracy governments have become more tolerant of forms of authoritarianism, especially in cases in which it is seen to have reduced the level of corruption.**

- **Fourth, Western states will become increasingly tempted to sacrifice democracy on the altar of security as foreign policy comes to be dictated by the imperative of creating alliances to counteract the perceived threat from China and Russia.**

Taken together, these developments have exacerbated existing challenges, emboldening autocrats around the globe.

Based on this analysis, the report identifies six major pitfalls in the way that pro-democracy governments currently engage with authoritarian states:

### Pitfall 1
Incoherence and inconsistency play into the hands of autocrats. The failure of some pro-democracy governments to either consistently promote democracy abroad, or uphold it at home, undermines their reputations, leading to accusations of hypocrisy.

### Pitfall 2
Technical solutions to political problems do not deliver meaningful change. Donors often adopt a technical approach to development in part because it is more politically feasible, but this overlooks the political roots of democratic and developmental failures.

### Pitfall 3
Prioritising outcomes over processes undermines sustainable improvements. Pro-democracy governments determined to generate clear "successes" have often focused on outcomes rather than processes, overlooking the ways that certain kinds of development and security "wins" are achieved in ways that entrench authoritarian rule and often prove unsustainable.

### Pitfall 4
Focusing on "big bang" authoritarian change ignores the way that most authoritarian governments emerge and entrench themselves. Western states are far less likely to react when authoritarian backsliding is slower and takes place over a longer period – which is problematic because gradual erosion is the most common form of autocratisation.

**Pitfall 5**
Premature celebration of reform can legitimise repressive regimes that do not intend to change substantially. In addition to growing timidity, there has been a tendency for development agencies to rush to celebrate supposedly reformist regimes even though they have made few meaningful changes, conferring unwarranted legitimacy on governments that remain inefficient and repressive.

**Pitfall 6**
Adopting different strategies for state and non-state actors overlooks how they shape one another. Another common pitfall is to imagine that authoritarian rule is solely rooted in formal political institutions, and to pay insufficient attention to how it reshapes informal institutions and the way that society function. This often leads to the flawed assumption that business, civil society, and religious groups are independent actors motivated to check authoritarian excesses, when in fact they may be heavily compromised and serve as part of the foundation of the regime itself.

In order to illustrate how these pitfalls play out in practice, this report provides case studies of four different example of international engagement. In Pakistan, security-driven international assistance strengthened the position of the military within the country's fragile political economy, reducing the prospects for democratisation. In Rwanda, western states focused heavily on stability and effectiveness, prioritising developmental gains and the absence of conflict over democracy – investing in programmes that entrenched the regime's control even though they were framed as enhancing accountability.

This is not always the way things play out, however, and to provide positive examples of how international actors can play a more positive role we look at the cases of North Macedonia and Ecuador. While democratic gains in both countries were predominantly driven from below, the ability of pro-democracy governments to operate flexibly and take advantage of windows of opportunity – most notably when more reform-minded leaders came to power – encouraged and strengthened democratic developments. This included the adoption of a new approach to European Union accession by EU states in North Macedonia and brokering more positive ties between the government and non-state actors in Ecuador – playing a valuable "bridging" role between the state and civil society. The democratic gains secured through this engagement were limited and remain vulnerable to reversal, but nonetheless demonstrate the capacity of western states to help reverse processes of backsliding under the right conditions.

# Recommendations for how pro-democracy governments can engage with authoritarian regimes

Building on these insights, the final part of the report sets out a series of recommendations for how pro-democracy governments can engage with authoritarian regimes in a way that creates the greatest opportunities for democratic strengthening.

## Recommendation 1:
## Engage more consistently and coherently

Faced with the extensive challenges of engaging with authoritarian regimes, some pro-democracy governments may feel that the best course of action would be to simply cease engaging with them – especially when autocratisation accelerates. But in practice this is both unhelpful and unfeasible. Instead, western states need to continue to engage, but to do so in a way that puts their commitment to democracy front and centre. This must not mean "business as usual". Instead, it is critical that international engagement becomes more consistent in two respects. First, pro-democracy governments need to recognise that behaving in very different ways in different countries, especially for geostrategic or economic reasons, undermines their legitimacy and credibility, and hence their influence. Second, they need to act more consistently within individual countries – including their own.

## Recommendation 2:
## Demonstrate belief in, and the benefits of, democracy

It is critical that western states make the case that democratic government is essential for future economic prosperity, peace, and an effective and coherent international community that can respond to global challenges such as climate change. Many of the greatest challenges facing the world are the product of authoritarian rule. Democracies have been shown, for example, to generate less conflict, generate higher levels of economic growth, and do a better job at fighting climate change. Democracy should therefore not just be understood was one aspect of foreign policy among many, but as a central aim that facilitates the achievement of other goals.

## Recommendation 3:
## Understand the limitations of technical programming

Donors must recognise that the challenges of engaging with authoritarian governments cannot be sidestepped by focussing on technical projects or sectors and shift their working practices accordingly. This point is the central thesis of the Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) community. To be successful, projects either need to align with, or manage to change, the interests and incentives of the politicians, bureaucrats, and officials whose support is necessary for effective implementation. Failure to do this means that often otherwise well-planned programmes deliver disappointing results. Yet while there is now widespread acceptance of the need to adopt problem-based approaches there is less evidence that programme design has shifted to reflect this new way of thinking. It is therefore critical that pro-democracy governments train staff in these new techniques and transform how programmes are designed and commissioned to ensure that they consider the need to think and work politically in all forms of engagement with authoritarian states. This may mean, for example, ensuring that new economic or military agreements are subject to widespread public participation, civil society engagement, and legislative scrutiny, bolstering democratic processes rather than adding further levels of secrecy and opacity to key political decisions.

## Recommendation 4:
## Calculate and offset the cost of everyday engagement

Understanding the damage pro-democracy governments do is a critical first step to reducing it. This means that it is critical to calculate the cost of everyday engagement for democracy and human rights, so that trade-offs are explicit, and so that actions can be taken to ensure that everyday engagement does not result in the violation of key principles and undermine the core of democracy strengthening programmes. In other words, western states must ensure they do no harm. One way to do this would be to conduct a democratic risk assessment for all major programmes, identifying the direct and indirect ways they might be used to strengthen authoritarian rule. What mitigating strategies will be most effective will depend on the specific programme and country, but a good example would be recognising the potential for security legislation – for example anti-terror and anti-hate speech measures – to be manipulated and used to target civil society groups and critical voices, and only supporting it if strong safeguards are put into place simultaneously.

## Recommendation 5:
## Anticipate authoritarian efforts to circumvent democratic demands

Pro-democracy governments need to expect that authoritarian leaders will seek to subvert democratic reform process, and design them accordingly. This is likely to require four steps: avoiding the trap of low expectations, undertaking a historical and political economy analysis to understand the areas in which reforms have been most likely to be subverted, breaking out of repeated cycles of failure by looking for new ways to increase influence and leverage, and ensuring that if red lines are stipulated and violated, agreed measures – such as aid suspension – are implemented. Staying engaged is important, but operating in a consistent manner is an important signal that reinforces the value of democracy.

## Recommendation 6:
## Prioritise cases of gradual democratic erosion

It is essential to refocus attention on the dangers posed by gradual democratic erosion, and to find mechanisms to strengthen anti-authoritarian forces in a way that does not expose them to further backlash. This will involve at least three steps. First, developing a clearer and more unified methodology for identifying gradual backsliding – which is partly overlooked precisely because it is less obvious. Second, evolving a set of responses designed to strengthen remaining democratic institutions while reducing the risk of further atrophy. Third, working flexibly with a greater number and type of organisations to build broader support for key goals and offset the risk that any particular institution or group will be targeted with retributive measures.

## Recommendation 7:
## Differentiate democratic strengthening from preventing authoritarian backsliding

Distinctive strategies need to be cultivated to deal with authoritarian backsliding as compared to supporting low quality democracies. Pro-democracy governments are likely to find greater common ground with leaders in a country moving slowly towards democracy, while in autocratising contexts intervention will be more controversial and liable to subversion. A more widespread and careful intervention – including a reconfiguration of everyday engagement with authoritarian counterparts – is likely to be necessary to reconfigure incentive structures and persuade political elites to choose reform.

# INTRODUCTION

The world is in a prolonged democratic recession. Every year for almost two decades, more countries have moved towards authoritarianism than towards democracy. The vast majority of citizens now live in countries that are not "free". Moreover, the global influence of authoritarian powers such as China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey has expanded significantly over the last decade. This most challenging of contexts requires a sophisticated, differentiated, and powerful international response.

As Thomas Carothers was already warning in 2009, there is a pressing need for "greater attention to choices of strategy and method" when it comes to democracy assistance (2009: 6). Pro-democracy governments therefore need to urgently rethink and revisit how they engage their authoritarian partners. Yet more than ten years later there is little evidence that this has happened. A recent review of ODA flows concluded that "the regime type does not appear to weigh heavily on ODA allocation decisions".

Partly as a result, "autocracies consume an increasing proportion of ODA flows" (OECD 2022: 9). The apparent lack of attention to regime type, and of strategies to deal with countries that are backsliding – as opposed to those that are making small incremental improvements – appears to have had a significant effect on the impact of aid. According to one of the most comprehensive reviews of the impact of development and democracy aid on the quality of democracy around the world, while democracy aid has an overall positive impact on a range of democratic outcomes, it is least effective when it comes to countries that are either highly authoritarian or are moving in an authoritarian direction (Gisselquist et al. 2021; ICAI 2022). More alarming still, a large body of research suggests that engaging with authoritarian states without a clear plan for how to avoid doing harm can help to entrench authoritarian rule. It can, for example, legitimise or inadvertently support parts and/or practices of repressive regimes. Exemplifying this pattern, both Ethiopia and Rwanda were "donor darlings" and received long-term development funding and military support before becoming embroiled in destabilizing conflicts – in the Ethiopian case in Tigray, in the Rwandan case in the Democratic Republic of the Congo – and refusing to undertake meaningful democratic reforms.

**A note on terminology**

We use the term pro-democracy to refer to governments that are officially or rhetorically committed to strengthening democracy around the world. It is important to note than in many cases this official position is contradicted by how the country operates in practice – as this report documents at considerable length. To avoid too much repetition, we sometimes use the term "Western states" and, when speaking about aid, "donors". This is not intended to imply that all Western states are pro-democracy, or that only Western states are pro-democracy.

As we move forwards, Ethiopia and Rwanda may prove to be the canary in the coal mine. It is therefore imperative to develop a better understanding of the options available to policy makers. At present this task is hampered by the fact that policy analysis has tended to discuss a common range of tools across both low-quality democracies and staunch autocracies. Consequently, this analysis has rarely sought to identify which set of strategies might have advantages and disadvantages in different contexts, or to factor in the different means these regimes can employ to subvert pro-democracy work. Meanwhile, academic studies provide little help to policy makers because despite the extensive literature on democratisation and conditionalities and on authoritarianism and authoritarian practices, there have been few attempts to assess how pro-democracy states engage authoritarianism. This paper seeks to fill both gaps by bringing together the latest academic and policy research to address the following four questions:

## How do pro-democracy governments engage with authoritarian states?

## Which aspects of these engagements contribute to authoritarianism and how?

## How can pro-democracy governments engage better with authoritarian regimes or at a minimum do no harm, and which international practices are most effective at promoting democracy and protecting human rights in authoritarian contexts?

## How does the political context shape the most effective response?

The discussion that follows draws upon a comprehensive survey of policy and academic sources in the English literature that included over 250 publications, case studies of key paradigmatic cases, and decades of research in states with different authoritarian profiles, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Based on this evidence we identify six major pitfalls in the way that pro-democracy governments currently engage with authoritarian states and set out a series of seven recommendations for how to engage with authoritarian regimes in a way that avoids autocratic entrenchment and creates the greatest opportunities for democratic strengthening.

This is critical because not engaging with authoritarian regimes is not an option. Autocracies are economically and politically powerful, wield considerable influence in international institutions, and in many cases operate as allies to democratic states with regard to key foreign policy goals, from containing terrorism to controlling the flow of valuable resources. What we call "everyday engagement" with authoritarian regimes – the set of routinised interactions with authoritarian partners – is therefore not a choice. It is both unavoidable and a necessity. Yet doing so in a way that "does no harm" by not further entrenching authoritarian norms and institutions is becoming more difficult.

There is a growing consensus that the last ten years has witnessed the rise of an increasingly powerful international authoritarian order. Authoritarian regimes operating in the global political economy have become stronger, more diversified, and more adept at subverting democratic norms and work for authoritarian purposes. From China to Russia and on to Rwanda and Hungary, the way that authoritarian governments seek to entrench themselves in power has changed since the era of the Cold War. Authoritarianism 2.0 features:

- **A growing share of global territory and populations.**

- **The use of multi-party elections – especially their manipulation and/or the control or co-optation of opposition parties – to retain power while retaining international respectability.**

- **A stronger focus on building and sustaining legitimacy on the basis of service delivery.**

- **A stronger economic base globally.**

- **Higher levels of networking, mutual support, and sharing strategies across authoritarian regimes – even when they share no ideological affinity.**

- **Growing evidence of a deliberate strategy of "autocracy promotion" similar to the kinds of "democracy promotion" undertaken by western states in the 1990s.**

Faced with this more complex challenge, pro-democracy sates have struggled to know how to respond. Overall, the international response appears to have been "tamer" (Bush 2015) in the last decade, certainly in comparison to the Cold War, and in some respects it has also been incoherent. One reason for this may be that pro-democracy governments are unsure they can leverage democratic change in firmly authoritarian states.

Another reason may be that emboldened autocratic governments have become more willing to aggressively push back against some of the deeper reforms proposed by western governments, leading them to adopt more timid approaches. As a result, there is growing evidence of "rising hostility to democracy support", as Nicolas Bouchet, Ken Godfrey, and Richard Youngs recently put it (2022: 1). Yet there is considerable evidence that aid and other policy interventions can have a significant effect – for better or worse. The risk of inadvertently reinforcing repressive governments means that developing a more targeted and effective engagement strategy should be an urgent priority.

The report proceeds as follows. The first section sets out the way in which pro-democracy governments currently engage with authoritarian regimes, and the different forms that this engagement may take. We stress the everyday nature of much of the engagement western states have with autocratic partners, and the way in can undermine democratic values. The second section then considers the pitfalls of these strategies, and especially how current strategies may contribute to authoritarian entrenchment and longevity. The third section shows how these pitfalls play out in practice by providing focused case studies of Pakistan and Rwanda. We also highlight the capacity of pro-democracy governments to avoid these pitfalls and play a constructive role in halting and reversing processes of democratic decline with reference to Ecuador and North Macedonia. Finally, the report ends by drawing on the first three sections to identify a series of recommendations for developing more differentiated approaches to resist the global trend of autocratisation.

# HOW DO PRO-DEMOCRACY GOVERNMENTS ENGAGE WITH AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES?

These are challenging days for democracy. "We are currently in the sixteenth year of a global democratic recession, and as of 2021 eight out of ten citizens live in a country that was 'unfree' or only 'partly free'" (ICAI 2022: 3). Yet the international community has been slow to develop effective strategies through which to respond to sustained processes of autocratisation. Indeed, a recent report on how donors distribute aid concluded that it was not clear that these decisions were strongly shaped by whether a country was a democracy or not (OECD 2022: 9). Partly as a result, and partly because there are an increasing number of authoritarian governments in the world, authoritarian states now receive a much greater share of overall OECD aid than in the past, "from 64% in 2010 to 79% in 2019" (Figure 1; OECD 2022: 9).

Despite this, only 10% of total the ODA given by OECD countries is democracy aid (ICAI 2022: 3). The vast majority of aid is therefore not spent on programmes designed to strengthen democracy, but on a range of other areas, from development programmes through to humanitarian assistance and security initiatives (Figure 2). This is an important reminder that although the literature on democratization tends to focus on one specific form of engagement, namely interventions and aid programmes designed to strengthen democracy, the vast majority of the way that pro-democracy governments engage with autocratic regimes have nothing – at least officially – to do with democracy.

This is also true when we move beyond aid to consider the remarkably broad set of activities that routinely bring pro-democracy governments and authoritarian states together – what we call "everyday engagement" – on a regular basis. This includes, but is not limited to:

- **Routine diplomatic relations with partners, whether bilaterally or through international organisations.**

- **Trade deals and economic relations.**

- **Joint programmes to tackle common issues such as transnational crime or health threats.**

- **The provision of development or humanitarian aid.**

- **Joint security projects in the partner country or in third countries, such as anti-terror programmes.**

- **Agreements on visa and immigration processes.**

- **Support for democratic transformation, for example by funding civil society groups, the media, and democratic institutions.**

**Figure 1: Country allocable ODA flows from all official donors according to V-Dem's Regime of the World classification, 2010-19**

Source: OECD, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/57ab4100-en.pdf?expires=1673882183&id=id&accname= guest&checksum=6B808325BC4781513C3474BA581AF8C8



**Figure 2: Bilateral ODA flows to closed autocracies from all official donors by sector, 2010-19**

Source: OECD, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/57ab4100-en.pdf?expires=1673882183&id=id&accname= guest&checksum=6B808325BC4781513C3474BA581AF8C8
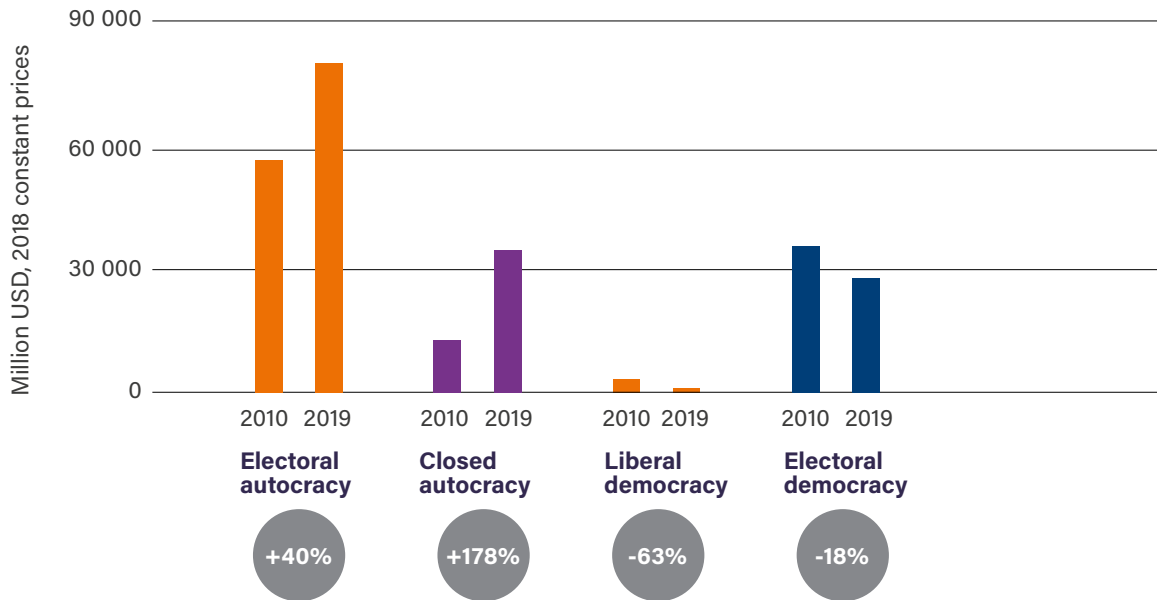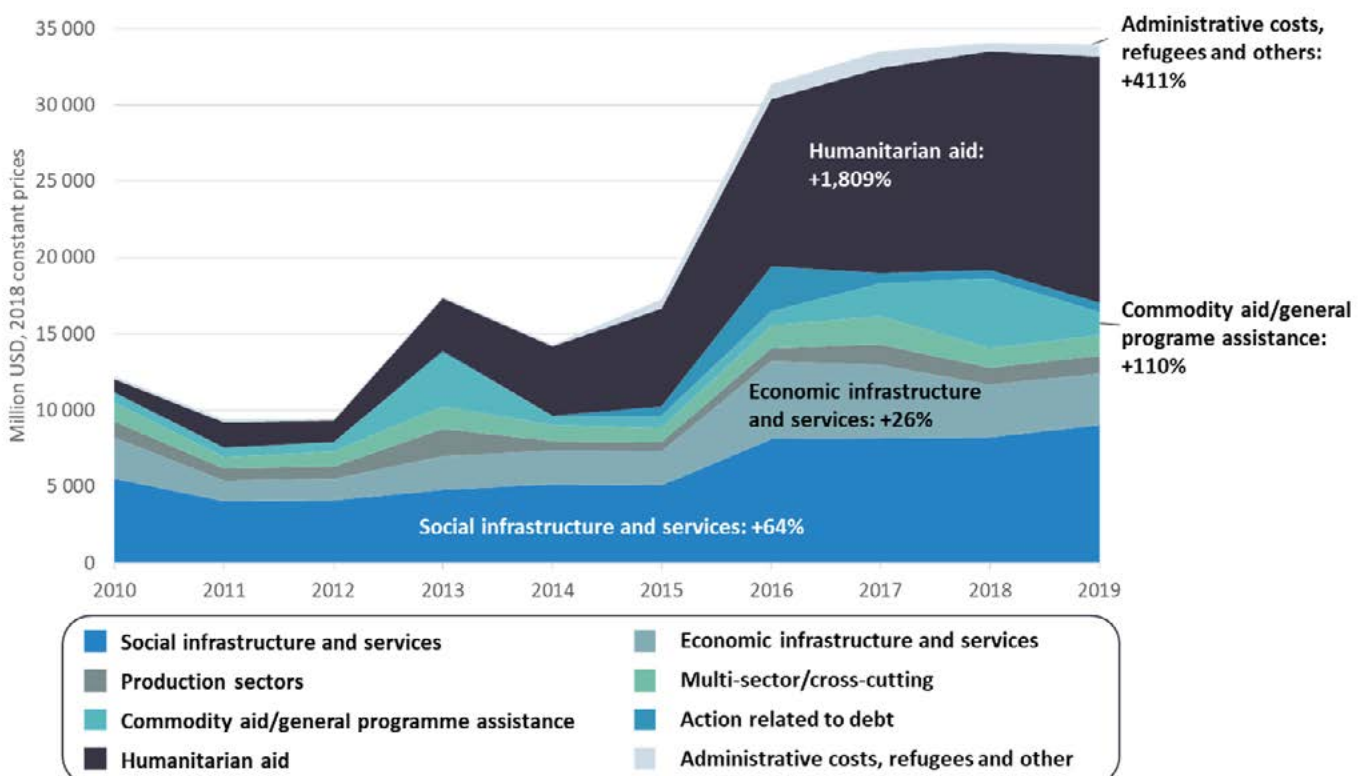
The breadth and depth of this engagement is important. Individual donors rarely have a global vision, or operate according to common principles across these varied sectors. This results in tensions and possible contradictions in terms of how each pro-democracy government and its different internationally focused departments, such as development agencies and foreign ministries, engage with authoritarian partners. In addition, tensions also exist within the aid community itself. While some aid agencies and organisations may prioritize democracy work, others are focused on development broadly defined, resulting in a further kind of incoherence.

These two kinds of contradictions can have profound and problematic consequences. On the one hand, pro-democracy governments may avoid criticizing backsliding so they can maintain good relations with authoritarian governments and secure smooth progress towards key goals in areas such as security and economic cooperation. On the other hand, while many of forms of everyday engagement are framed in a technical way that suggests they are apolitical, they often have profound

political consequences. This can be as true of development practices (Ferguson 1990) as it is of trade deals and programmes designed to strengthen the security forces and the military.

When it comes to democracy work itself, there is growing evidence that the tools that pro-democracy governments use are significantly less effective when it comes to countries that are autocratising than those who are stable or moving slowly towards democracy (ICAI 2022). Given that direct efforts to enhance democracy represent a minority of the ways in which Western states engage with authoritarian states, it is critical to consider the overall impact of their engagement – taking into account the often-contradictory nature of these processes – and how it can be strengthened to foster democracy while minimising the risk of further entrenching authoritarianism.

**Image above: A view of new buildings in Kigali, Rwanda. Rwanda, which has a heavily controlled multiparty system of government, has been cited as an example of a successful authoritarian development model.**

# What do we know about how pro-democracy governments engage with authoritarian states?

Before discussing how pro-democracy governments engage with authoritarian states, it is important to set out how we understand authoritarianism. We are interested in a wide spectrum of political systems, including closed autocracies in which no elections are held, electoral autocracies in which multiparty elections are organised but the other trappings of democracy are not present, and electoral democracies in which reasonable quality elections may be held but political rights and civil liberties are not fully respected. However, given our distinctive focus on authoritarian and autocratising regimes, and the fact that many closed autocracies are small resource-rich monarchies with few if any democratic openings, we are particularly interested in the larger and expanding group of electoral authoritarian states such as Belarus, India, Pakistan, Russia, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, and electoral democracies that are – or are at risk of – sliding into the electoral authoritarian category, such as Brazil, Hungary, Poland, Senegal, and Sri Lanka.

Initial research into efforts to promote democracy among these sets of states since the end of the Cold War has tended to remain high level, taking stock of the impact of democracy aid in general, or looking at broad types of engagement, such as the use of conditionality to force political reforms (Munday 2022). A more recent wave of work has proved more nuanced, focussing on the strengths and weaknesses of specific approaches to democracy strengthening, and on under what conditions particular initiatives are most likely to have the intended impact.

There is also a growing focus on the extent to which aid modalities are susceptible to subversion, and hence reinforce authoritarianism, and on the kinds of projects are most effective in different kinds of contexts. One of the key findings of this literature is that while democracy aid has a positive if modest effect on the quality of democracy (Gisselquist et al 2021: 2), this is not the case when it comes to development aid in general.

## When does democracy aid have the greatest effect?

Where democracy aid is concerned, it appears to have the greatest effect when aimed at one-party states or lower quality multiparty systems, and is less likely to have an impact in liberal democracies and military regimes (Cornell 2013; Geddes 1999). This apparent contradiction can be explained by the fact that aid works best when 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" (ICAI 2022: 4). Unfortunately, one implication of this finding is that democracy aid is likely to be least effective where it is most needed: in those states that are most repressive, closed, and exclusionary, such as juntas or monarchies. A further important finding is that donor engagement is "most likely to be successful when there is general agreement among key international actors on the value of strengthening democracy, and a higher number of donors provide democracy aid, creating

choice for local actors" (ICAI 2022: 4). In turn, this highlights the importance of coherence and consistency for international actors, a point to which we return in the next section.

## What is the impact of development aid on democracy

The situation is rather different when it comes to development aid. Quantitative studies suggest that programmes not explicitly focused on democracy "exacerbate existing conditions" and are "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 or autocratisation trends" (ICAI 2022: 4). Considering the 64 studies that have looked at the impact of developmental assistance, Gisselquist et al. (2021: 14) report that 39 (61%) found aid to have a "modest positive impact on the democracy outcome", while 30 (47%) concluded it had a negative impact.

The potential negative consequences of development aid have also been highlighted by a growing number of country case studies, which illustrate the ways in which it can sustain an authoritarian status quo (Bader and Faust 2014; Cole 2022). More worrying still, other scholars have argued that aid can and has, in some cases, contributed to authoritarian entrenchment (Baissa and Cammett 2022; Bermeo 2016) due to growing authoritarian innovation and the ability of leaders to manipulate aid for their own ends (Abrahamsen 2016; Brownlee 2012; Levitsky and Way 2012). This is most obviously the case when authoritarian regimes can persuade their democratic counterparts to invest in projects that enable them to strengthen surveillance and control of their populations, or the co-optation of useful allies, or when regimes can divert aid

resources to those aims. Baissa and Cammett, for example, argue that economic aid and in particular loans from international financial institutions have contributed to authoritarian stability in the Middle East by subsidising repressive institutions (2022: 2). Similarly, research by Ahmed suggests that foreign aid is often used to support the patronage networks of autocrats (2012).

Less obviously, by providing services and support that should be delivered by the state, the international aid regime has been criticized for insulating failing governments from domestic criticism, while making recipient states more responsive to international demands than those of their own people (Abrahamsen 2016). A number of researchers have therefore suggested that, much like rents from natural resources, aid can insulate authoritarian regimes from domestic pressure and so help ensure their survival (Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2013; Morrison 2007).

## How do donors respond to the risks of development aid reinforcing authoritarianism?

Many of these observations are not new, and pro-democracy governments have developed several strategies designed to deal with these risks. Democratic donors have generally moved away from forms of financing such as general budget support to programmes with clearer targets and more robust mechanisms to track aid expenditure to limit the risk of aid diversion. More broadly, democratic western states have also drawn on a range of strategies to leverage democratic reforms or limit autocratisation, including the use of aid conditionality, targeted sanctions, and the threat of the expulsion from international bodies such as regional organisations for major violations of human rights and governance standards. To date, however, donors have proved to be reluctant to suspend or withdraw development aid, only
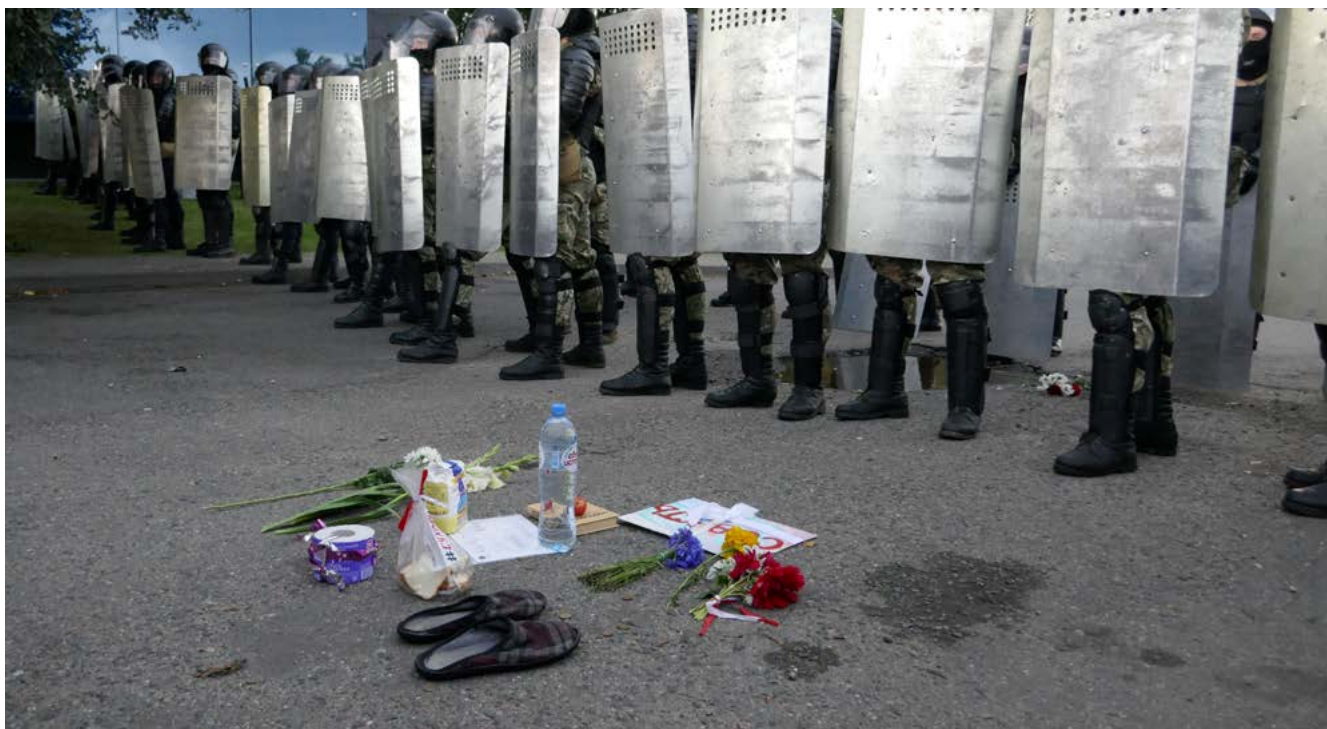
doing so when there is clear evidence of serious corruption or aid diversion, or when there are obvious and high-profile human rights abuses – and even in these cases it is rare (Cheeseman et al. 2021). Moreover, aid suspensions are often short-lived and quickly reversed, including in states that continue to practice authoritarianism (Abrahamsen 2016). One reason for limited and inconsistent suspensions is that aid programmes often involve significant sunk costs – withdrawing them therefore means that large financial investments are likely to be lost. Moreover, it may be very difficult to rebuild relations with the recipient state, with significant implications for aid programmes in the future. In turn, the reluctance to cut aid, combined with the inconsistency with which aid suspensions and withdrawals have been implemented, has been exploited by authoritarian leaders (Hagmann and Reytnjens 2021).

More fine-grained adaptations in programme design are also evident, but in some of these cases it appears that recent changes have fed rather than addressed the problem. This includes, for example, moving into more technical areas that are assumed to be apolitical and so to

have minimal risk of generating negative externalities, or diverting aid away from state institutions and towards non-state actors such as civil society groups who are assumed to inherently have democratic sympathies. Western states often adopt these strategies as political tensions or crises arise for example, such as during a contested election like that in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2018.

While these measures are intuitively appealing, they can also generate further problems. Technical interventions, for example, often have profound political consequences – as we demonstrate in the next section – changing the political economy of the state while signalling international support for the regime. In the absence of regular donor engagement with senior political leaders and institutions on democratic issues, they can also create the impression that pro-democracy governments do not really mean it when they talk about the need to pursue political liberalization.

**Image above: Peaceful protest against the government following a presidential election in Belarus. Minsk, Belarus, 30 August 2020.**

# The causes of problematic outcomes

The causes of these problematic outcomes, even despite changes over the last decade, are best understood in terms of three different levels of analysis: the level of pro-democracy governments, relations between pro-democracy governments and their authoritarian counterparts, and global level explanations.

## The dynamics of pro-democracy governments

Two main arguments have been made to explain why problematic practices – such as overlooking the centrality of politics to developmental outcomes, and the political impact of development processes – persist among pro-democracy governments. The first pertains to the bureaucratic politics of aid delivery, where bureaucratic incentives such as ensuring the effective implementation of programmes, and the need to generate positive outcomes, trump concerns such as the quality of democracy. This bureaucratic rationale is argued to be particularly powerful where policy makers and bureaucrats both come to see technical results as being easier to achieve and demonstrate than political ones (Beswick 2011; Desrosiers and Swedlund 2019; Dodsworth and Cheeseman 2017).

Bureaucratic politics can also take the form of a dedication to seeing programming through to avoid the complicated procedures required to change programming or reallocate funding. For example, in the case of Belarus, one of the more autocratic regimes in the world according to V-Dem (2022: 12), bureaucratic incentives led to a reluctance to end a democracy promotion project, despite the lack of results. At the same time, maintaining aid flows effectively supported the status quo, which in turn contributed to autocratisation (Pikulik and Bedford 2019).

The second explanation focuses on the tendency to prioritise stability and security in foreign policy, which is generally seen to be a primary source of the inconsistency of pro-democracy governments. Though western states rhetorically place stability, development, and democracy on equal footing, numerous studies have found that they are willing to sacrifice progress towards democracy for other goals, especially in geostrategically important partners (Abrahamsen 2016; Börzel 2015; Jourde 2007). The current democratic recession therefore makes pro-democracy governments' efforts to balance democracy strengthening against the need to maintain security partnerships particularly problematic (Carothers and Press 2021).

A similar argument has been made regarding key economic or development partners, with western states reluctant to challenge or embarrass the relatively small number of governments that can credibly be used to make the argument that donor led reforms work if properly implemented. For this set of "donor darlings", continued developmental success

may be prioritised over political change – especially if that change might empower leaders or parties that would adopt different policies (Beswick 2011). One process that is often said to have facilitated these trends is the increasingly siloed and fragmented approach undertaken by pro-democracy governments, which have developed increasingly large and specialised systems to administer what were, until recently, consistently growing aid budgets (Brown and Fisher 2020; Reinsberg et. al. 2021). Due to the tendency of different branches to develop their own ethos and priorities, this has led to the emergence of distinct sub-agency units in which neither staff training nor the units' aims and objectives emphasise democratic concerns. As a result of this combination of factors, although strengthening democracy abroad has been an official priority of pro-democracy governments in recent decades, doing so has not been a consistent practice. This is where everyday engagement undermines the efforts of western states to strengthen democracy.

**Image above: National League for Democracy (NLD) supporters in Bangkok are protesting the outside Myanmar Embassy against the military coup, 1 February 2021.**

## Relations between pro-democracy and authoritarian governments

One of the last decade's most influential strands of research has focused on the ability of autocratic partners to manipulate both aid budgets and democracy promotion efforts for authoritarian purposes. A combination of authoritarian learning and the growing diversity of the pool of international partners has enabled authoritarian governments to present themselves as allies on issues of importance to certain funders that they know will not impact on the key structures that sustain their regime. In some of the worst cases, democracy strengthening work has been fully subverted for authoritarian purposes. Cho's discussion of Chinese engagement with democracy promotion between 1990 and the mid-2010s is telling in this regard: During this period, the Chinese leadership chose to focus on reforms that allowed it to bolster its domestic legitimacy and strengthen its own political systems through "selective openness" (2021: 785), securing financial assistance without sacrificing its authoritarian vision.

It is therefore important to keep in mind that even innocuous or apparently democratic initiatives can be subverted to entrench autocratic regimes (Dodsworth and Cheeseman 2017; Hackenesh 2015). Decentralisation is an excellent example of how this can work. Both international financial institutions and aid donors have promoted decentralization on the basis that it moves power closer to the people, allows for more efficient government, and can give a wider range of elites and citizens a stake in the system (Cheeseman et al 2016). But the very same processes have become notoriously susceptible to authoritarian subversion, as governments prevent the genuine transfer of power and authority and instead use more localised political structures to develop better oversight and control of what happens at the local level (Boone 2014). Decentralization can also be used by repressive governments to shift accountability and blame to lower administrative levels to insulate national authorities from scrutiny, reinforcing autocracy, a phenomenon that has been noted in both China (Cai 2008; Landry 2008), and Rwanda, as discussed in the case study below. By agreeing to implement only those programmes that can be easily subverted, authoritarian governments can create partnerships with pro-democracy governments that bring in valuable resources and entrench their hold on power (Bader and Faust 2014).

How likely this is to happen is heavily shaped by the partner's domestic context. A growing body of research has demonstrated that the extent of stability and the strength of pro-reform constituencies plays an important role in determining how governments respond to international donors (Beazer and Woo 2016; Bermeo 2016; Borzel 2015, Wright 2009). In general, political contexts in which governments have a degree of capacity but also face strong domestic pressure groups and internal checks and balances are more likely to see positive results in terms of democratization than systems that rely on narrower bases of power, such as juntas or very personalised systems

such as monarchies (Wright 2009; on autocratic regime types see Geddes 1999 and Cheibub et al. 2010). Progress is also more likely in more stable political contexts, where governments have the space to plan for the future, as opposed to those suffering from endemic instability, where governments often enter survival mode and become unwilling to undertake any meaningful reforms. Paradoxically, instability has also been shown to heighten the tendency of western states to prioritise order and security over democratization (Borzel 2015), compounding this challenge.

Partly because of these findings, there are growing calls for pro-democracy governments to adapt their engagement to the type of authoritarianism a recipient state practices, and the forms of authoritarian strategies it deploys (Bush 2015). The value of moving in this direction has not been lost on pro-democracy donors. Carothers, for example, has noted that they vary their approach when engaging authoritarian and semi-authoritarian partners (2009). However, Bush (2015) reflects the scepticism of many researchers with regards to the question of how this is done in practice, arguing that at present this adaptation to domestic context is determined more by geostrategic and physical proximity rather than regime characteristics, a limitation to which we return in the next section.

## Global level explanations

The task facing pro-democracy governments has been significantly complicated by changes at the global level, most notably the rise of new authoritarian powers. From an ideological standpoint, the rise of "non-traditional" donors such as Russia and China means the emergence of an alternative development partnership model, with little of the implicit liberal democratic expectations underpinning more traditional forms of aid. This is also true of some supposedly democratic donors, such as Brazil and India, who have eschewed democracy promotion in their foreign policies.

The increasingly multi-polar nature of the global international system has generated several challenges for pro-democracy governments. First, authoritarian aid recipients now have a far greater range of donors and international institutions to appeal to for financial assistance, enabling them to select the partnerships that require them to implement the least threatening set of political reforms (Birchler et al. 2016; Cole 2022). Moreover, because these new donors are less likely to have adopted mechanisms specifically designed to prevent aid diversion, these new partnerships also empower recipient states to divert resources from their intended targets to a greater degree, strengthening their financial position. Second, the success of authoritarian development models, for example in China (a one-party state) and Rwanda (a heavily controlled multiparty system), has led to a growing willingness to question the need for democratic politics when it comes to achieving development. This trend has been compounded by the perception that several prominent western democracy promoting states have been suffering from major political crises and have been led by leaders whose own commitment to democracy has been lacking (Cheeseman and Klaas 2018).

Third, some pro-democracy governments have become more tolerant of forms of authoritarianism, especially in cases in which it is seen to have reduced the level of corruption. The implications of this embrace of "effective authoritarian partners", especially in terms the growing trend of authoritarian ascendance, have rarely been considered, despite the evidence of the spread of illiberal norms internationally (Munday 2022). This includes the fact that authoritarian leaders have demonstrated a willingness and ability to form cross-national networks for the sharing of lessons and resources that enable them to more effectively respond to challenges to their authority, such as social media and civic society groups (Abrahamsen 2022). The cumulative effect of these developments, and the growing timidity of democratic governments when faced with powerful authoritarian states (Bush 2015; Carothers 2008), has been to call into question the value of democracy while reducing the difficulty of sustaining forms of authoritarian rule. This situation may get considerably worse in the future, as rising global tensions, and the perceived threat from China and Russia, encourage governments to sacrifice democracy on the altar of security by courting even the world's most repressive regimes to join their international alliances.

The studies reviewed in this section provide important insight into the reasons that aid does not deliver democratic progress. However, they rarely seek to draw those reasons together into a coherent set of challenges in a way that reveals their true impact, or to provide practical and policy relevant solutions. To this end, the next section highlights the six main pitfalls of how pro-democracy governments engage with authoritarian regimes, while the final section provides seven recommendations for how the international community can best respond.

**Image next page: Construction project by Chinese company CSI (Coastal Steel Industries) in Dar es Salaam. China has been a major investor in Tanzania recently. Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 27 june 2015.**

# THE SIX MAIN PITFALLS OF HOW PRO-DEMOCRACY GOVERNMENTS ENGAGE WITH AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

The literature broadly agrees that while aid can have positive consequences, international engagement has unanticipated and unwanted effects in many authoritarian states. What has yet to be provided is a systematic summary of the different pitfalls that pro-democracy governments often repeat in such contexts. Combining a recent review of the literature (Munday 2022) with our own research into authoritarian subversion (Cheeseman and Klaas 2018; Cheeseman et al 2020; Desrosiers 2023), we identify six main shortcomings that collectively make it easier for authoritarian leaders to blunt the effectiveness of pro-democracy policies.

## Pitfall 1 / Incoherence and inconsistency play into the hands of autocrats

Although policy coherence and coordination have been recognised as key to aid effectiveness, they are rarely present in practice. Instead, incoherence and inconsistency are the norm. Incoherence arises from when different agencies within pro-democracy governments engage in projects in a recipient country that are disconnected, or in the worst-case scenario where they actively undercut one another. It also occurs when different branches of the same government do not agree on common goals and so work against one another. It has been common, for example, for some foreign ministries – and state supported companies – in democratic states to strengthen the ability of authoritarian governments to carry out surveillance, for example, as part of anti-terror operations, while some development agencies simultaneously work to protect civil society from government control (Cheeseman 2015). Inconsistency has also been apparent, most notably with pro-democracy governments failing to apply the same democratic requirements across different contexts. Instead, there has been a tendency to engage most critically in countries that are seen to be less geo-strategically important. In other words, pro-democracy governments are more likely to push for democratic reforms in Zambia than Saudi Arabia.

Even in areas where western states may be thought to have some traction, the desire to achieve other goals can lead them to endorse poor performance. Consider the Balkans, where European governments have been so concerned about maintaining stability that they are willing to overlook the "fake", "partial", or "simulated" adoption of reforms by some governments. The prioritization of stability means that leaders are often lauded even when it is clear that they are only "paying lip service"

to "the language of the West" (Conley and Ruy 2021: 2). For example, European leaders praised the reform record of Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić (Steric 2022: 6; Zweers et al 2022: 15), even though these measures lacked real depth and the country is considered to be one of the fastest "autocratisers" in the world (V-Dem 2022: 25).

A degree of incoherence and inconsistency is inevitable. Global powers are unlikely to fully agree on the value of promoting democracy, and even if they do, they are still likely to favour different ways of achieving this goal. There are also some contexts – such as Saudi Arabia – in which it is unclear what leverage western states could employ that would enable them to push for democratic reforms. But while fully coherent and consistent international engagement is likely to prove elusive, it is worth emphasising just how costly current practice is to efforts to strengthen democracy, and hence just how important it is to minimise these strategic contradictions. Inconsistency – and failing to respect democratic norms and values at home – creates space for autocratic partners to delegitimise pro-democracy governments, or at a minimum to push back against pressures to democratise. Hugo Chavez turned US sanctions against his government in Venezuela into a rallying call ahead of elections in the early 2010s, for example. More subtle forms of pro-democracy work may also give rise to push back from autocratic leaders, who can point to the inconsistency of western states to make the case that they are in no position to offer lessons in this area. Indeed, authoritarian leaders have become increasingly adept at manipulating anti-western sentiment to justify their rule, painting international engagement as being paternalistic and/or a form of self-serving manipulation designed to expand and entrench nefarious western interests. At the same time, lack of coordination and consistency facilitates authoritarian leaders to pick and choose the

governments they wish to work with, and the reforms they wish to implement. In other words, inconsistency enables the "selective openness" discussed above, in which leaders pick and choose which reforms to make on the basis of the ones that will have the least impact on their power base.

Divisions within the international community therefore contribute to the "performative" ability of authoritarian states to appear to be progressive and open to change while in reality they are intent on further extending their political control, as demonstrated by the case study of Rwanda below. The value of this to autocrats is clear from the fact that they actively encourage non-coordination between donors, and the segmentation of donor work, which hinders donors' ability to fully understand patterns of authoritarian entrenchment (Desrosiers and Swedlund 2019). In Ethiopia, for example, the government was instrumental in limiting coordination between donors by encouraging bilateral donor-partner meetings over multi-donor discussions, which in turn allowed the authorities greater control over reforms and the shape of development partnerships (Brown and Fisher 2020: 197).

# Pitfall 2 / Technical solutions to political problems do not deliver meaningful change

The tendency to adopt a technical approach to development means that pro-democracy governments often overlook the political roots of the barriers to democracy and development. This limitation is driven by a need to secure measurable results, and an old-fashioned understanding of development in which a lack of key goods and services is understood to be a technical issue that can simply be resolved by the provision of greater expertise and investment. Working on technical issues has often been an attractive option because it promises to insulate pro-democracy governments from the criticisms that may arise from working with authoritarian leaders on more political projects. Yet the last twenty years has seen a growing consensus that purely technical approaches are neither feasible nor desirable (Dasandi et al. 2019).

There are two main components to this. First, the supposedly "technical" processes that occur as part of everyday engagement with partners are rarely neutral, especially in authoritarian regimes (Ferguson 1990). Given this, the belief that work can be done by bracketing out political issues, whether by working with technical sectors of the state or purportedly apolitical actors, is flawed. On the one hand, international partnerships and support give authoritarian governments legitimacy and credibility. On the other hand, measures that improve the technical capacity of ministries, armed forces, and government agencies often strengthen the capacity of authoritarian leaders to maintain political control. A good example of this is the way that the engagement of pro-democracy governments has often taken the form of elite negotiations with the executive and one or two key ministries – finance for trade and economic assistance, foreign affairs and internal security for issues relating to conflict and peacekeeping – which are then codified in

the form of an international treaty. This can effectively exclude the legislature and civil society actors from participating in critical debates and decisions about national finance and foreign policy (Whitfield 2005), entrenching the tendency towards narrow and exclusive policymaking processes in authoritarian states and introducing them into democracies (Abrahamsen 2000).

Second, an increasing body of policy work and academic research has demonstrated that the pursuit of "apolitical" approaches, whether to the delivery of development or to the delivery of democracy aid, has been one of the main reasons for the failure of international programmes (McCulloch and Piron 2019). Many of the most important barriers to development are not technical but political – and must be treated as such. Similarly, the most significant barrier to building and sustaining democracies is not a lack of technical capacity, but the refusal of key vested interests to cede power over critical institutions and political processes. This criticism has been especially strong when it comes to international efforts to strengthen democracy (Choi and Fukuoka 2015; Gibson et al. 2015; Grimm 2015; Grimm and Leininger 2012). As with development, donors have at times prioritised technical approaches that have focused on certain sectors, issues, and institutions – such as bureaucracies, local political representatives, and in some cases parliaments – that are considered to be less political. In an authoritarian context, this is inherently flawed for at least two reasons. First, such approaches empower autocratic leaders to perform "selective openness", by supporting technical reforms that they know will not actually impact on the deeper political processes on which their power depends. Second, they leave pro-democracy governments disengaged from dialogue on important political issues such as respect of human rights.

One example of these issues is efforts to promote female political representation, which is generally seen to represent a "win" for democracy and human rights that is less sensitive than demanding good quality elections. Such efforts have often been most successful with authoritarian states who have been keen to promote legislative diversity to improve their international reputation, effectively "women-washing" their regimes (Sinpeng and Savirani 2022). In Laos, for example, the ruling party was willing to introduce reforms that advanced gender equality in 2018. The government subsequently used the fact that that these changes had been made to deflect pressure to implement more far-reaching reforms that would have undermined the control enjoyed by the regime, which remains a closed one-party state (Donno and Kreft 2018: 720).

Although these challenges are becoming increasingly well-known thanks to the Thinking and Working Politically community and those promoting Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PIDA), there remains a tendency to assume that technical support to bodies such as the electoral commission and the judiciary can lead to positive gains, even though frequent programming failures have demonstrated that this is unlikely in the absence of wider political change. Put another way, too often pro-democracy governments adopt a segmented, linear, and short-termist outlook on reform (Borchgrevink 2008; Crawford and Kacarska, 2019; Emmanuel, 2010), when we know that it requires consistent and longer-term investments across both technical and political arenas (ICAI 2022).

## Pitfall 3 / Prioritising outcomes over processes undermines sustainable improvements

On a related point, pro-democracy governments working in more "technical" ways and determined to generate clear "successes" have often focused on outcomes rather than processes. In turn, this has led them to overlook the ways that certain kinds of development and security successes can entrench patterns of authoritarian rule, and hence they turn a blind eye to the question of the sustainability of progress. Put another way, all too often positive development outcomes are endorsed without due consideration to whether they have emerged from problematic processes that undermine other goals. There are four main risks to such an approach. First, strengthening certain institutions – such as the police and the military – may deliver short-term "wins" when it comes to anti-terror operations and political stability, but also strengthen and embolden the security forces, with major ramifications for domestic politics. As the case study of Pakistan that follows demonstrates, this can entrench the position of coercive forces within a country's wider political economy, generating stronger barriers to democratic consolidation.

Second, focusing on outcomes such as poverty reduction or the eradication of a particular disease without concern for how they were achieved can lead western states to implicitly endorse strategies that had a negative impact on human rights. This can include, for example, the heavy-handed imposition of lockdowns (which may include physical attacks on citizens and gender-based violence), and policies that force citizens to live in certain areas, or undertake forms of labour, that are contrary to their desires and which they find demeaning. In turn, this can embolden authoritarian regimes to believe that not only do the ends justify the means, but that operating according to this logic will reap rewards when it comes to international legitimacy and financial assistance. More

broadly, endorsing development outcomes achieved through authoritarian means may also lead to the validation of certain authoritarian "success stories", such as Rwanda (see case study), which then come to be seen as models for other countries to follow, undermining global confidence in the value of democracy.

Third, focusing on outcomes rather than processes can encourage pro-democracy governments to overlook the fact that they may be unsustainable. This is especially the case when governments that effectively implement economic reforms use exclusionary strategies to maintain power. In the case of Ethiopia, for example, donors such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UK's Department for International Development (as it was known prior to its merger with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office), provided consistent financial support to the government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia. The fact that Meles appeared to be delivering on poverty reduction and economic transformation at a time when donors had few success stories encouraged aid agencies to emphasise developmental gains while saying little about the fact that his rule was premised on high levels of repression and electoral manipulation. Following the death of Meles and the rise to power of Abiy Ahmed, this model proved to be unsustainable (Opalo and Smith 2021), in part because it did not share political authority or economic opportunities equally between Ethiopia's varied regions and communities. The subsequent outbreak of civil war, and the way in which the conflict has further intensified hostilities between rival groups, has caused immense suffering and the destruction of important infrastructure. Consequently, the last few years have seen decades worth of international investments undermined because economic gains were achieved on the back of a political system that was – in much of the country – deeply unpopular and hence unsustainable.

Fourth, creating indices of government performance can enable authoritarian states to appear as if they have made great gains even if they have made no improvements when it comes to how they treat their citizens. Consider the example of Georgia, where the government embarked on a campaign in the mid-2000s aimed at improving the country's ranking on the Cost of Doing Business Index (Scheuth 2015). By focussing on specific but limited reforms, Georgia jumped from 100th to among the Index's best rated countries. In turn, this helped the government to gain international credibility and increased foreign direct investment. Yet none of the reforms actually improved the rule of law or access to justice, which are critical to both the political and economic environment – and remain an issue to this day, according to Freedom House.

Taken together, these risks demonstrate why it is so dangerous to distinguish between "good" authoritarian states that are seen to perform and "bad" authoritarian states that do not. Development programmes that achieve economic outcomes through repressive means further entrench authoritarian logics within the state. Moreover, while "developmental states" can deliver economic growth, economic reforms in the absence of measures to build more inclusive and hence sustainable political settlements rest on unstable foundations. As Acemoglu and Robinson have argued (2012), long-term prosperity is more likely when economic institutions encourage broad investment in physical capacity, technology, and human capacity. In turn, these kinds of institutions emerge "when political institutions allocate power to groups with interests in broad-based property rights enforcement, when they create effective constraints on power-holders, and when there are relatively few rents to be captured by power-holders" (Acemoglu, Robinson, and Johnson 2005: 385).

## Pitfall 4 / Focusing on "big bang" authoritarian change ignores the way that most authoritarian governments emerge and entrench themselves

International responses to democratic backsliding fall into two main categories. When there is rapid removal of an elected government – for example through a coup – the international response is often, though not always, swift and more powerful. The US government, for example, is legally prohibited from providing assistance to an administration that comes to power through a coup, while a number of countries have been suspended by regional bodies such as the African Union following unconstitutional changes of power. In these cases, democratic backsliding often results in swift economic sanctions and international isolation, increasing the pressure on those who have taken power to swiftly return to constitutional government.

However, when democratic erosion occurs more slowly, with the gradual build-up of repressive measures, increased regime encroachment on civil and personal spaces, and the erosion of democratic norms over a long period of time, the international response is often much more muted. Indeed, there may not even be a response at all. Because there is no clear "moment" to galvanise international attention, and autocratising leaders are good at hiding their intensions, it is common for democratic erosion to trigger no significant changes in the way that foreign aid is distributed (OECD 2022). At the same time, everyday engagement continues as usual, as set out above. In turn, this sends the wrong signal to authoritarian leaders, encouraging further abuses.

This dichotomy is a problem because cases of rapid autocratisation represent a minority of the democratic backsliding that has taken place over the last decade (OECD 2022). Gradual erosion is the most common form of autocratisation – and can have just as profound consequences. The cumulative effect of three or four years of backsliding, for example, can effectively entrench leaders with authoritarian instincts in power and make it difficult to hold credible elections.

## Pitfall 5 / Premature celebration of reform can legitimise repressive regimes that don't intend to change

In parallel with the growing timidity demonstrated by pro-democracy governments, there has been a tendency for some development agencies to rush to celebrate supposedly reformist regimes, conferring legitimacy and in many cases funding on governments that have made few meaningful changes. This pattern has been identified in authoritarian contexts from the Balkans to Africa (Hagmann and Reyntjens 2019; van de Walle 2016). In the worst-case scenario, international presidents and prime ministers heap praise on leaders who rhetorically commit themselves to democratic and developmental reforms without any evidence of real progress. Successive generations of leaders in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, have been lauded for delivering the new kinds of leadership so desired by western states, only for them to repeat many of the same tropes as their predecessors. This includes Yoweri Museveni in Uganda, Abiy Ahmed in Ethiopia, and Paul Kagame in Rwanda.

In some cases, clear evidence of a history of authoritarian abuses or of violent and exclusionary political attitudes has not stopped leaders from receiving support. This can rehabilitate governments whose willingness to respect human rights has not been proven. Recent examples include Narendra Modi in India, Emmerson Mnangagwa in Zimbabwe, and John Magufuli in Tanzania. Reflecting on the case of Magufuli in Tanzania, Nic Cheeseman and colleagues (2021: 87) note that:

"Tanzania was able to gain its unmerited reputation as a "democratic success story" in part because international actors were unwilling to deal with CCM as it was, rather than as they wanted it to be. As in other cases of stunted or stalled democratization (Rwanda and Uganda come to mind), superficial reforms were hailed as landmarks of democratic progress while coercive state structures and clientelism continued to sustain the ruling party's grip on power. … Charismatic individuals can claim the reformer's mantle, but giving them too much credence before serious structural reforms have taken place both sells democracy short and increases the risk of authoritarian relapse when political opposition begins to rise."

The willingness of pro-democracy governments to recognise and celebrate a change of direction is understandable, given that authoritarian leaders face little incentive to undertake more substantive changes if promises of reform fall on deaf ears. But time and time again the international community has rushed to invest (both morally and financially) in leaders whose personal history raised serious concerns before they had proven they were willing to develop their countries democratically. This trend is particularly dangerous given the willingness of authoritarian leaders to instrumentalise the kinds of democratic language and promises that are attractive to democratic governments, civil society groups, and activists. While it is important to offer encouragement and inducements to figures who are embarking on what are often very difficult reform processes, significant support – such as the removal of sanctions, large increases in foreign aid and positive conditionality, and admission to international institutions – should come after meaningful changes have started to take effect, not before.

## Pitfall 6 / Adopting different strategies for state and non-state actors overlooks how they shape one another

The final pitfall common among pro-democracy governments is to imagine that authoritarian rule is solely rooted in formal political institutions, and to pay insufficient attention to how it reshapes informal institutions and the way that society functions. Authoritarian systems are rarely content with simply controlling political and bureaucratic structure and instead seek to penetrate civil society, the media, and in some cases community and family structures. Indeed, the strength of authoritarian systems is a function of the extent to which they can inculcate informal norms and practices that reinforce the formal structures of government (Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Cheeseman 2018). Even critical non-state actors such as trade unions, churches, and human rights organisations may need to make trade-offs with authoritarian leaders in order to avoid the most brutal forms of repression (LeBas 2012). Consequently, while they may operate outside the system, they often do so without enjoying full independence. Understanding these complex relations is essential, because they play a key role in undergirding authoritarian rule: repressive systems are reproduced through overt and tacit forms of allyship and compliance across multiple sectors of society.

Neglecting the varied sources of authoritarian control and legitimization therefore has important implications for pro-democracy governments' understanding of the actors that they are engaging with. For example, western states are often overly optimistic about the extent to which non-state actors represent democratic forces that can potentially be harnessed to promote change. Indeed, many approaches to dealing with authoritarian regimes begin from the starting point that it is essential to bypass the central government, which is seen as the source of authoritarianism, by working with "independent" groups and citizens who lie outside the system and can be inspired to resist it. This helps to explain why partnering with civil society groups has been elevated as one of the most important tools in working with authoritarian partners (SIDA 2018; Swiss Agency, 2020). Such thinking was also behind the push for more "local" interventions and decentralisation, which are sometimes believed to be further removed from authoritarian control.

These assumptions, and the practices they have given rise to, make intuitive sense. Of course, there are many civil society activists worth partnering with, and brave activists who risk their lives in the struggle for human rights and democracy. But there are also significant limitations with this approach if it is uncritically implemented. By assuming that the most problematic aspects of authoritarianism belong to the political system (bad structures), and that those outside of the system are allies for democratisation (good people), it overlooks the risk that large parts of civil society may have been co-opted or subverted by the state (Astapova et al. 2022; Lewis 2013; Lorch and Bunk 2017; Skjeseth 2011).

A wide range of civil actors are susceptible to authoritarian capture. A survey of countries from 1946 to 1996 found that autocracies and especially institutionalised authoritarian regimes used financial incentives and legislative and party structures to pre-empt oppositional behaviour on the part of organised labour (Kim and Gandhi 2010). Autocrats are also moving beyond their standard civil society targets such as trade unions and religious actors, to dovetail with the more recent development and governance interests of pro-democracy governments. In Turkey and Rwanda, for example, the co-optation of specific women's groups – and exclusion of others – has served to help promote and legitimise the governments' agendas (Burnet 2102; Doyle 2018). Meanwhile, donors' consistently heavy emphasis on decentralization and civic organisations has encouraged authoritarian leaders to further encroach on these areas to prevent them from becoming the foundations for future political transformation. In an era in which autocratic partners have proved adept at manipulating seemingly democratic areas so that they reinforce their own rule, it is also not uncommon to see autocratic partners invest in creating their own alternative parties and civil society organisations. In turn, this further increases the risk that donors will find themselves engaging with a "counterfeit" civil society or one that may even favour the status quo for self-interested reasons, and thus inadvertently strengthening the overall system. Unfortunately, there are no indications this process is slowing down; if anything, it has been accelerated by the growing polarisation of civic spaces in many political contexts – including democratic ones – across the world.[1]

Focusing donor engagement on civil society groups may also generate more direct risks. Setting up civil society as the main rival to the state may inspire authoritarian regimes to adopt more repressive strategies to isolate key groups from domestic and international supporters (Bouchet et al. 2022). For example, the framing of civil society as the vehicle for democracy, combined with the large amount of donor funding distributed through non-governmental organisations (NGOs), is one of the main reasons that so many governments – including some that had not previously been seen to be highly authoritarian, such as Hungary – have introduced "anti-NGO" laws designed to constrain pro-democracy and human rights organisations over the past decade (Cheeseman and Dodsworth 2022). According to Richard Youngs, as a result of these changes there may now be as many as "110-120 regimes across the world operat[ing] some form of restriction against civil society".[2]

Meanwhile, focusing pro-democracy interventions on non-state actors can mean that donors put off the hard political work of directly engaging with the government and the most influential leaders on sensitive but critical issues such as human rights abuses. In other words, it plays into and exacerbates the tendency to try to operate technically rather than politically.

As a result of these six pitfalls, the current practices of pro-democracy governments risk bolstering authoritarian regimes and so facilitating the trend of democratic regression by misunderstanding how authoritarian rule is sustained and conferring international legitimacy on repressive regimes. In the next section, we go into greater depth on how some of these trends have played out in a set of paradigmatic cases to both flesh out our argument, demonstrate the impact of these failings, and provide examples of where they have been better managed.

# HOW
# THE PITFALLS
# PLAY OUT
# IN PRACTICE

The following four case studies demonstrate differently some of the ways in which the pitfalls that have been identified play out in concrete ways in Pakistan and Rwanda. They also highlight the cases of Ecuador and North Macedonia, where pro-democracy governments helped reverse processes of backsliding and reinforce democratic developments by responding quickly to windows of opportunity and innovating new approaches where existing strategies had stalled.

## CASE STUDY 1 – PAKISTAN
### Security driven international assistance

Pakistan is currently rated as "Partly Free" by Freedom House and a "hybrid regime" by the Democracy Index. This places it around 100 of 170 on the list of the world's most democratic states. Multiparty elections are held, but they are rarely fully free and fair. One reason for this is that the military continues to exert a great deal of influence over a range of policy issues and has at times been able to carry out repression and censorship with impunity. Key aims for those seeking to strengthen democracy therefore include reducing the influence of the military, protect minority rights, and improving the quality of elections.

To this end, the UK's FCDO is currently running a £27 million Consolidating Democracy in Pakistan (CDIP) Programme, while the United States Agency for International Development is committed to a Democracy, Rights and Governance programme, that aims to enhance "democratic, citizen-centred governance and respect for human rights." However, everyday engagement has consistently undermined these goals. Pakistan represents a classic case of "security driven international assistance" (International Crisis Group 2012), in which security concerns have dominated and often crowded out other concerns, such as respect for civil liberties and political rights.

One symptom of this is that from 2002 to 2010, military aid represented more than two-thirds of all US aid to Pakistan. Another is that although Pakistan has received a vast amount of aid since 1951, totalling almost $100 billion, its distribution has been remarkably volatile (Figure 3). The United States, for example, gave almost $3 billion in 1963 as part of a mutual defence agreement, before a dramatic decrease from 1965 onwards when military aid was suspended due to the onset of the Indo-Pakistani conflict. Aid then increased again in the 1980s following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, to just over $1 billion a year, which was followed by another precipitous decline, followed by a massive spike in the 2000s in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the start of the "war on terror".

The fact that economic aid so closely tracked military aid (Figure 3) undermined the idea that western states were interested in Pakistan for altruistic reasons and generated the strong perception that the US cared much more about its military goals than either development or democracy. The fact that for much of this period military aid was greater than other forms of aid also had two other problematic effects. First, it strengthened the position of the military by ensuring that it was one of the best funded parts of the state. Second, it ensured military leaders a seat at the table in domestic and international policymaking. Taken together, this had the effect of "strengthening the hand of the military in Pakistan's political economy" (Zaidi 2011: 108), with negative consequences for democracy and human rights.

**Figure 3: US aid to Pakistan**

Source: Center for Global Development, https://www.cgdev.org/page/aid-pakistan-numbers
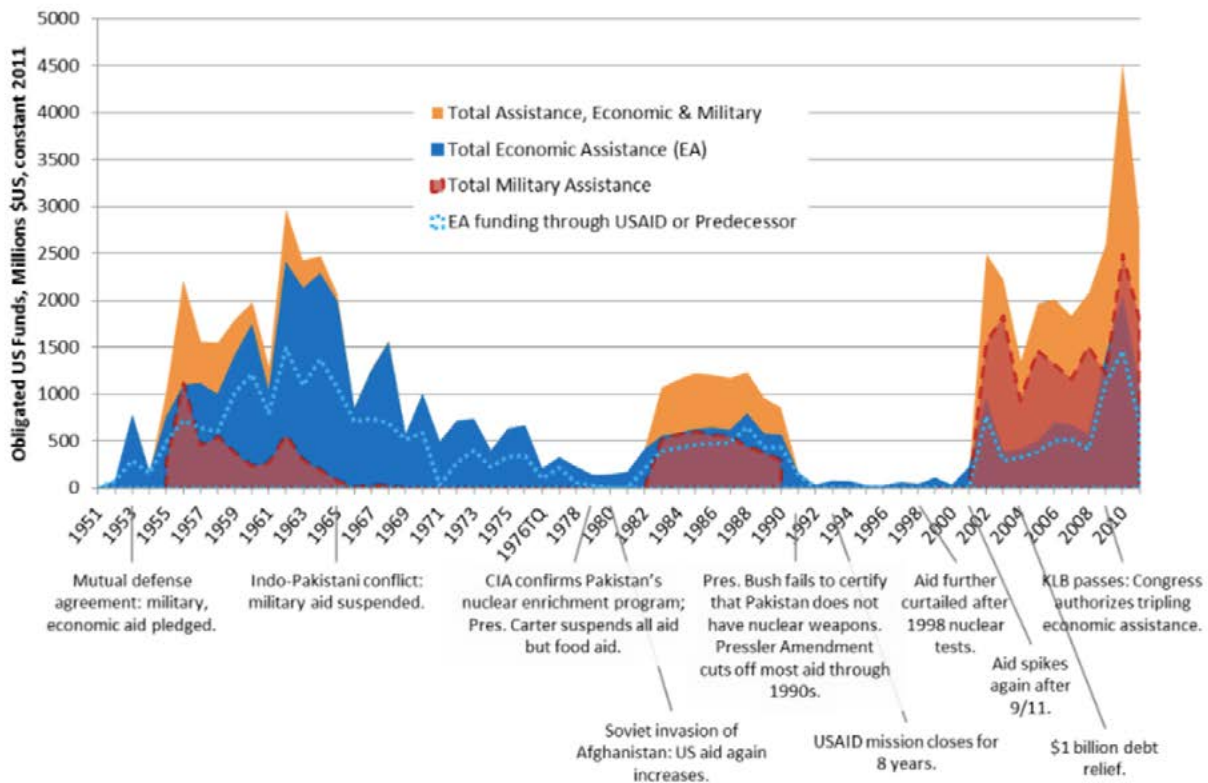


**Case Study 1: CONTINUED**

In partial recognition of the problematic impact of aid volatility, the US Congress approved the Enhanced Partnership for Pakistan Act in 2009, which sought to separate out development spending from military spending, with the aim of ensuring that the development agenda could be insulated from "unpredictable geopolitical and military events" (Centre for Global Development 2013). This proved wise, as the government of Donald Trump cut military aid to Pakistan in September 2018, after Trump tweeted that "the US had received nothing but "lies and deceit" in return for $33 billion (£25 billion) of financial support".[3] However, while the Enhanced Partnership Act anticipated this kind of development, it did not ensure that economic and democracy aid were sustained: by 2019, Pakistan received only 4% of the aid going to the region, ranking behind Jordan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Moreover, Trump's

actions only served to reinforce the idea that military activity matters much more than democratic reform in maintaining healthy relations with western governments.

Indeed, it is striking that the biggest surge in international funding for Pakistan since 1951 has done little to improve the quality of elections or democracy, which are at roughly the same levels today as they were in the 1990s (VDEM 2022). Meanwhile, the extent to which the power base of "the chief executive [is] determined by the military" has actually increased (VDEM 2022), meaning that the appointment and dismissal of the Prime Minister was more dependent on the "threat or actual use of military force" in 2021 than it was in 1990.

Rwanda is considered "not free" by Freedom House and "authoritarian" by the Democracy Index. For Freedom House, this status has applied since the genocide that swept the country in 1994, including under the leadership Paul Kagame, whose Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) overthrew the genocidal regime that year. Although Freedom House recognises some incremental improvements in the decade that followed the genocide, it also charts a reversal of that trend since 2014, especially in terms of civil rights. Indeed, by most accounts, over the last decades the regime has moved to consolidate its authoritarian rule. This has been achieved through the targeting of opponents at home and abroad, increased control of the media, and strict regulations around what can be said about the government, governance in the country, and its history.
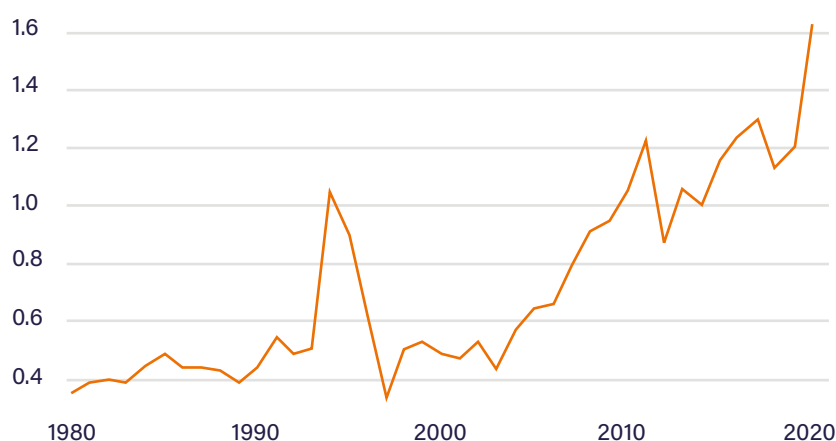
As part of this process, political institutions and processes are tightly controlled, with strict management of civil society as well as parties and politicians at the national level. Recently, a constitutional amendment removed presidential term limits allowing Paul Kagame to remain in office, possibly until 2034.

Yet despite the clear entrenchment of authoritarian practices over the last decades, Rwanda has received high levels of foreign aid since the mid-1990s. Aid began rising dramatically after 2004, around the time the emergency period post-genocide was declared over, though it has fallen in some years due to allegations that the RPF was involved in illegal and destabilising activities in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo (See Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Net official development assistance received (constant 2020 US$ hundreds of millions)**
Source: World Bank, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ODAT.KD

Despite their support, Western states have not been blind to the government's authoritarian practices. At least by the adoption of a new constitution with strict laws against "divisionism" in 2003, many bilateral donors acknowledged the country's authoritarian patterns. Despite this, continued international support was driven by a combination of two factors: fear that without strong leadership the country could fall back into conflict; and the belief that strong investments in economic development would eventually drive political liberalisation (Desrosiers and Swedlund 2019). Rwanda's enduring authoritarian trajectory suggests that hopes for democratic change were wildly optimistic.

Now that genocide guilt and fear of further conflict are beginning to recede, a desire to promote government effectiveness – and to have a success story – has become one of the main factors driving the engagement of pro-democracy governments. Rwanda is seen as a partner that can deliver, giving development agencies such as USAID and DFID a positive example to present to their government and publics. In stark contrast to many other administrations on the continent, the RPF leadership is argued to have a real vision for the country and to have reduced corruption. From a security standpoint, western states have also been keen to promote stability, while Kagame has worked to sell his regime as a key regional player by contributing to United Nations peace missions on the continent (Beswick 2011, US State Department 2022). More recently, Rwanda's intervention in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, has further contributed to this image of Rwanda as an indispensable ally when it comes to security concerns in Africa.

While the authoritarian stance of Kagame's government is rooted in domestic politics, the reluctance of western states to upset the RPF has played into this process. Although international leaders and civil society groups have raised concerns about the government, these have been strongest in relation to Rwanda's support of insurgent groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1997 and 2012 – and now again with renewed allegations of playing a destabilizing role in the DRC. There has been almost no condemnation of what the Kagame government does to its own citizens, despite recent high-profile research that has generated media attention (Wrong 2021). The Rwandan government has played an instrumental role in encouraging this timidity. Early on, this was done by directing donor focus towards technical sectors such as infrastructure, and information technology, pushing donors into non-political sectors. The Rwandan government has also regularly used aggressive shaming tactics towards donors to limit criticism. Thus, by the 2010s, many bilateral donors had learned not to broach democracy and human rights related issues in a direct manner with Rwandan counterparts, preferring to do so in vague or innocuous terms during meetings dedicated to other issues, such as technical matters, to avoid confrontation (Desrosiers and Swedlund 2019).

One reason the silence of western states has been feasible – both in terms of donor staff minimising cognitive dissonance and avoiding greater criticism back home – is that the Rwandan government has been very good at pretending to be progressive. Many initiatives on which the Rwandan government and donors have collaborated take the form of reforms that have been carefully designed to suggest governance progress, without ever threatening the regime. An example is decentralization. Focused on making the sector-level (or Umurenge) a local hub for decentralization and service delivery, decentralization reforms were also sold as ensuring greater local accountability by instituting performance contracts for local administrators (Imihigo contracts). However, while these policies have "allowed the swift implementation of national developmental policies and significant progress in service delivery" (Chemouni 2016), they have also served to strengthen RPF presence and control locally. As part of the drive for "local accountability", the government has insisted on citizens reporting on the failings of local leaders. In turn, this has both enabled national leaders to enforce greater discipline on their local counterparts, while making it easier to deflect criticism for policy failures away from the central government and on to lower-level politicians and bureaucrats. Similarly, Rwanda is globally touted as a leader in terms of women's political empowerment, following the adoption of a gender quota in parliament, but in practice women politicians lack the power to openly criticize the Kagame government. In this way, Kagame provides pro-democracy governments with sufficient evidence – so long as one does not look too carefully – to believe that he is not "just another dictator", while refraining from engaging in meaningful political change.

The flaw in the approach adopted by western states in Rwanda is not simply that it enabled the RPF to further tighten its stranglehold over Rwandan public life, but also that it has entrenched a regime that is both capable and willing to act as a force of regional instability when it is in its interest. Most notably, through its engagement in the DRC, which has included mass killings, human rights abuses, and the theft of the Congo's natural resources, Rwanda's government has contributed to one of the continent's longest-running crises. As a result, the cost of western complacency is not only borne by Rwandan dissidents, but also the citizens of the DRC.

## CASE STUDY 3 – NORTH MACEDONIA
### Moving beyond stabilocracy[4]

Despite finding itself in a neighbourhood of backsliding states, North Macedonia[5] has made progress in recent years in terms of governance. It is one of the few countries to have been upgraded from "electoral autocracy" to the category of "electoral democracy" by V-DEM based on its progress between 2011 and 2021 (2022: 45).[6] Things did not look so promising in the mid-2010s. At that time, a political crisis shook the country, catalysed by a scandal involving then incumbent Prime Minister, Nikola Gruevski, which led to major protests in 2015 and the violent storming of the Parliament in 2017. Despite this challenging context, the country has not fallen victim to the backsliding witnessed in other Western Balkan states. Instead, political leaders have demonstrated a willingness to allow political change and respect the popular will. North Macedonia experienced political alternation, for example, when Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) party formed a government after the 2016 elections, after the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) failed to do so. Moreover, in 2021, Zaev announced his resignation after disappointing results in local mayoral elections.

According to the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, during the period 2016-2020 the country made progress in terms transparency, accountability, and more inclusive decision-making processes, leading to it being promoted to the category of "electoral democracies" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022). Assistance from pro-democracy governments has not been the dominant factor behind these changes, but changes made in recent years have both dovetailed with and supported domestic processes of democratic strengthening (Figure 5). Their ability to exert a positive effect was in part rooted in the lure of European Union accession. It also reflected, however, the willingness of EU states to remain engaged and provide diplomatic assistance to the country, most notably regarding the long-running dispute over its name with Greece and the adoption of a new, firmer approach to evaluating whether countries are suitable for EU membership.

Prior to the recent political crisis, North Macedonia fitted the profile of the region's "stabilocracies" (Bieber 2018). The notion of stabilocracy refers to a form state capture in which figures with connections to organised criminal and corruption networks come to control key institutions, buttressed by entrenched private sector interests that are against political change. It is also a concept that speaks of a problematic relationship with western states, who have contributed to the phenomena in the region by prioritising stability over meaningful political change (Pavlovic 2017). Under Gruevski, the government rhetorically espoused democratic values but in reality "the political elite relied on informal structures, clientelism and control of judicial structures and the media to undermine democracy" (Zweers et al 2022: Ibid: 35).

**Figure 5: Electoral Democracy and Liberal Democracy in North Macedonia, 2012-2021**

Source: V-Dem
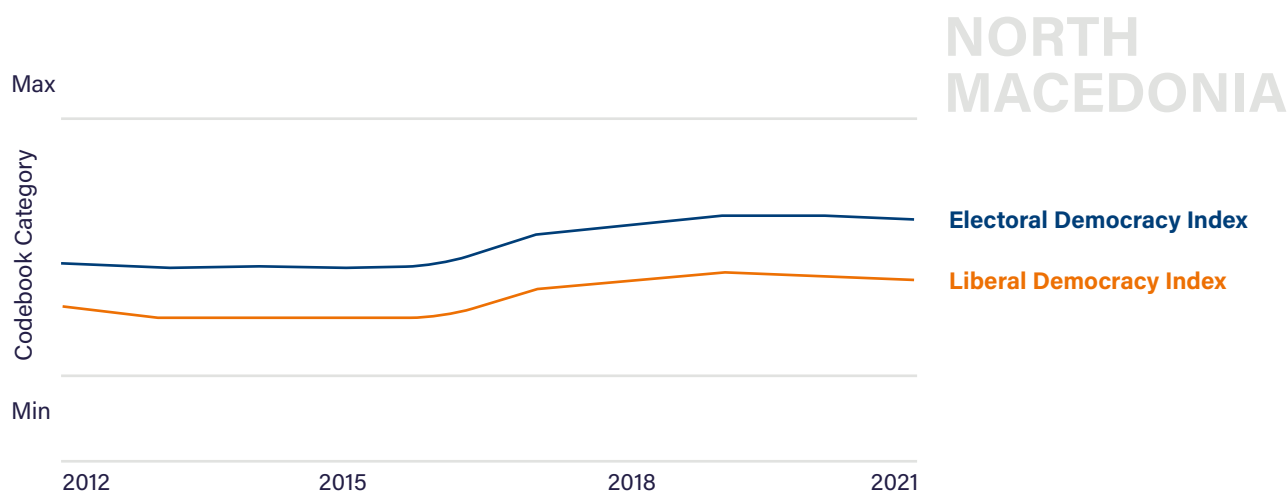


Western donors contributed to this situation by focusing on largely technical support that did little to challenge problematic political behaviours. This was compounded by initiatives such as such sister party support, which continued and legitimised the political class despite the clearly undemocratic behaviour of a number of partners in North Macedonia (Milosevic and Muk 2016:12; Zweers et al 2022).

Yet after the crisis things began to change. The emergence of Zaev as a reformist Prime Minister created a window of opportunity for progressive change. Western states responded by adopting a different form of engagement, promoted by several European countries most notably France. The success of this strategy owed much to the desire of North Macedonia's leaders for accession to the European Union, highlighting the significance of geography and economic linkages for international influence (Levitsky and Way 2006). Back in 2004,

Macedonia had been the first country in the region to apply for EU membership. EU member states responded by applying "positive" conditionality, i.e., setting out standards that the country would need to meet in order to be admitted. While this provided an incentive to reform, the fact that it promised to be a long, drawn-out process – as demonstrated by the decision of the French and Dutch governments to block membership for Albania and North Macedonia in 2019 – meant that this had little impact on the Gruevski government.

In response to the lack of progress, and the 2019 decision, the French government called for a new "methodology" to be applied to breathe life into a process that had grown stale. This led to the introduction of a revised framework that continues to apply positive conditionality, but also includes "negative" conditionality in the form of setting out clear measures that will be enforced if there is evidence of backsliding. As described by the European Commission, the new methodology is designed to enhance the credibility of the accession process by giving real attention to fundamental reforms "starting with the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration as well as the economy of the candidate countries". Perhaps most significantly, the new approach included the possibility of stalling or reversing negotiations on assession if there was evidence of backsliding or little progress being achieved (Zweers et al. 2022). Along with the greater willingness of the Zaev government to enact reforms, this led to a significant shift towards more democratic government, as reflected in Figure 3.

It remains too early to tell if the changes are durable, and further "bumps" in the accession process may well derail the progress made so far. Some more sceptical voices have also raised questions about how innovative the new "methodology" adopted by European states really is (Steric 2022), not least because the accession process has been a constant source of frustration for North Macedonia, which is still some way off becoming an EU member state. Yet despite these challenges there is evidence that renewed diplomatic engagement, along with tighter oversight over key democratisation goals (Kmezic 2020: 196), and the pressure generated by the accession process, strengthened the position of pro-reform leaders within the country. In turn, this increased the likelihood that the country would reverse the authoritarian trend observed under the Gruevski government, and plot a way back to democratic government. The lesson for pro-democracy governments is that the "carrot" of positive conditionality is most effective at turning around cases of democratic backsliding when it goes together with the right "stick".

CASE STUDY 4 – ECUADOR
Making good on a window of opportunity
for re-engagement

Like North Macedonia, Ecuador is often hailed as a country that reversed a worrying trend of democratic backsliding. Under former President Rafael Correa, the government exhibited many of the populist and authoritarian tendencies that have characterised some Latin American states over the last decade. Although pro-democracy governments were critical of this trend, they had few levers through which to reverse it, and focused their activities on sustaining partnerships with civil society actors in a period in which access to the government was often challenging (European Union 2020: 3; USAID 2020). One reason for this was that Correa sought to rally anti-imperialist sentiment to bolster support for his regime. As part of this, he "shut down US counterdrug operations at Manta Air Force Base in 2009 and expelled the US ambassador in 2011", while USAID closed its office in Quito in 2014. When Correa was replaced by Lenin Moreno in 2017, however, the change of leadership created a window of opportunity for a different kind of international engagement.

Although Moreno had been identified by Correa as his potential successor while serving as his Vice Present, he proved to be willing to challenge the authoritarian inheritance he received from his predecessor. While many challenges remain – including the political polarisation that characterised the 2021 polls, high corruption, and authoritarian legacies – it is clear that the country has made important institutional strides. Most notably, after Moreno decided to step down ahead of the 2021 elections, they were won by an opposition candidate, Guillermo Lasso, who defeated Correa ally Andres Arauz. This led Freedom House to upgrade the country from "partly free" to "free" in 2022 – a year when 60 other countries saw democratic decline.

As in North Macedonia, this process was mainly driven by domestic forces, but international actors have played a valuable supporting role. Most notably, western states were quick to step-up their engagement when a more reform-minded leader took office, recognisng that this represented a new opportunity to secure genuine movement on issues that could not be addressed under Correa. This renewed engagement took two main forms. First, pro-democracy governments sought to broker more positive relations between civil society partners and President Moreno's administration in support of reforms, avoiding taking sides and instead playing an important "bridging" role. Second, there was a significant increase in foreign aid, which provided the Ecuadorian government with a financial incentive to sustain democratic progress (Figure 4).

During his time in office, President Correa worked to extend the powers of the executive, targeted judicial independence, undermined independent civil society while promoting those who backed his regime, and sought to gag the media, most obviously through the 2013 Organic Law on Communications (Conaghan 2021; Stuenkel 2019). After replacing his mentor in 2017, President Moreno revised the gag law and worked to curb executive power, including reinstating president term limits that Correa had previously persuaded the legislature to remove. Donors responded quickly to this opportunity to "redefine" engagement with the Ecuadorian Government (USAID 2020: 7). In addition to fostering stronger ties between civil society groups and the Moreno government, pro-democracy governments sought to reach out to a wider range of actors, also bringing in the private sector. In turn, this bridging function helped to heal what had been in some cases fraught relationships, amplifying a greater diversity of voices while strengthening social cohesion and accountability.

**Figure 6: Net official development assistance and official aid to Ecuador (constant 2020 US$ of millions)**
Source: World Bank, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ALLD.KD?end=2020&locations=EC&start=1990
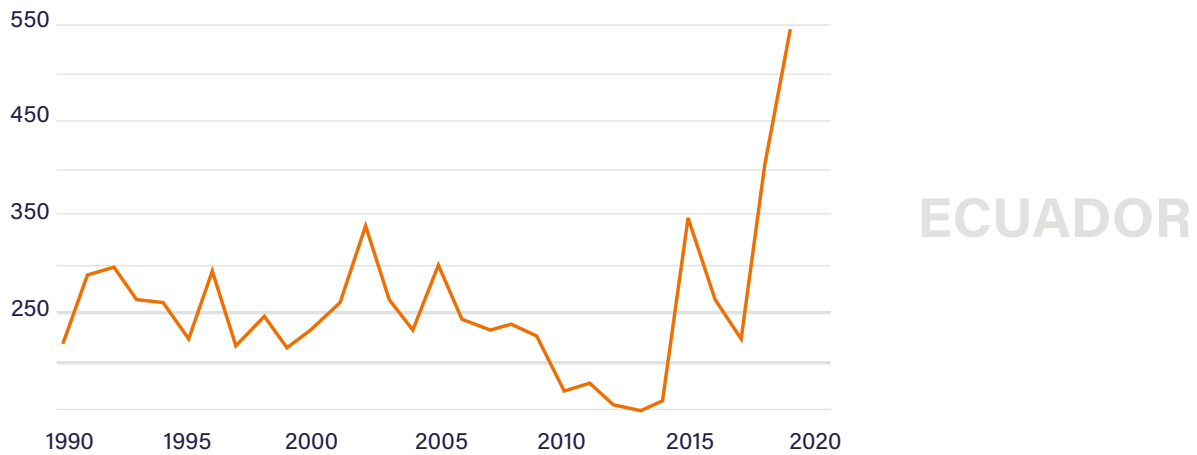


ECUADOR

Though it is too early to judge their durability, changes in Ecuador were largely driven by domestic actors. Pro-democracy governments nonetheless quickly recognised the window of opportunity for a reset of their engagement with the Ecuadorian Government, as the Moreno administration shifted towards democratisation. Following years of growing mistrust between the Correa government and civil society, donors' work has focused on supporting the convergence of reformist forces in the country, by diversifying the type of actors they work with and building bridges between them. This work was particularly valuable both because it fostered new kinds of alliances for reform, and because it strengthened the building blocks of democracy, which may help to insulate the country against backsliding in future.

This is important because the changes initiated under Moreno remain vulnerable. Despite being seen as a reformer, Moreno was criticised for his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as for the excessive force used to manage major protest in the country in 2020.

Decried by supporters of the old guard, but judged not to have gone far enough by the reformist camp, he became increasingly unpopular and chose not to run in the 2021 general election (Stuenkel 2019). The mantle of strengthening Ecuadorian development and democracy therefore fell on Guillermo Lasso, a former banker. Lasso has faced major challenges since taking power, not least in the form of a rapid increase in drug trafficking and high inflation, which led to major protests in June 2022 that brought the country to a standstill. While many people remain supportive of Lasso's economic and institutional reform agenda, high levels of political polarisation and a challenging economic context may fatally undermine his authority, especially as he lacks a majority in the legislature.[7] A return to power for the old guard could result in a further period of backsliding, demonstrating the importance of using windows of opportunity to not only advance democratic reforms, but to strengthen the barriers to their future erosion.

**Image next page: Former Ecuadorian president Lenin Moreno delivering a speech. Quito, Ecuador, 2 April 2017.**

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the common pitfalls of engagement with authoritarian regimes, the lessons from the case studies, and the findings of the literature – as summarised by Munday (2022) – we propose seven recommendations. These range from the need to set out a clear and bold democratic vision in the context of a rising authoritarian wave, to setting out concrete ways in which pro-democracy governments can do less harm. This will require a fundamental reconfiguration of their interactions with authoritarian partners: one that promotes consistency, adaptability, and the mainstreaming of democratic values, norms, and practices across everyday forms of engagement. These recommendations are:

- Engage more consistently and coherently

- Demonstrate belief in, and the benefits of, democracy

- Understand the limitations of technical programming

- Calculate and offset the cost of everyday engagement

- Anticipate authoritarian efforts to circumvent democratic demands

- Prioritise cases of gradual democratic erosion

- Differentiate democratic strengthening from preventing authoritarian backsliding

## Recommendation 1: Engage more consistently and coherently

Faced with the extensive challenges of engaging with authoritarian regimes, some pro-democracy governments may feel that the best course of action would be to simply cease engaging with them – especially when autocratisation accelerates. But in practice this is both unhelpful and unfeasible. Instead, western states need to continue to engage, but to do so in a way that puts their commitment to democracy front and centre. Democracy should not just be understood as one aspect of foreign policy among many, but as a central aim that facilitates the achievement of other goals. Democracies have been shown, for example, to generate less conflict, generate higher levels of economic growth, and do a better job of fighting climate change.

Failing to engage with authoritarian states is unfeasible for three main reasons. Most obviously, disengagement ends any possibility of fostering more democratic institutions or building blocks (such as more independent civil society), and means that pro-democracy governments miss out on possible windows of opportunity that sometimes emerge unexpectedly even in apparently closed contexts. Perhaps somewhat less obviously, a complete cessation of relations can lead to the collapse of personal networks and the erosion of inter-government trust, which in turn significantly increase the costs of re-engaging at a later point. Moreover, the withdrawal of pro-democracy governments creates a vacuum that would likely be filled by greater engagement with authoritarian states. For this reason, several researchers argue that it is important for democratic states to remain engaged in order to counter-balance the growing influence of authoritarian power such as China and Russia (Tolstrup 2014; Matanock 2019; Sen 2018).

Disengagement is also impractical given how

closely entwined many democratic countries are with a range of authoritarian states. While disengagement might be possible in the context of a highly closed state such as North Korea, it is impossible with authoritarian powers that are fully integrated into the global economy. China, for example, is the largest trading partner of the United States and has the second highest holdings of US debt owned by foreign companies. It is also true that major global challenges such as climate change, food shortages, and transnational crime can only be resolved by working in collaboration with the full universe of international states. Precisely because disengagement would be unhelpful and unfeasible, there is a strong consensus within the policy literature that it would do more harm than good (SIDA 2018; Swiss Agency 2020; Yerkes 2022).

But this does not mean that it should be "business as usual". Instead, it is critical that international engagement becomes more consistent in two respects. First, pro-democracy governments need to recognise that behaving in very different ways in different countries, especially for geostrategic or economic reasons, undermines their legitimacy and credibility, and hence their influence (Ruy and Conley, 2021: 8). They therefore need to develop a more coherent approach that mainstreams democratic norms and values into foreign policy engagement more consistently (Bouchet et al. 2022). Given the growing perception among western governments that China and Russia represent a serious threat to global security and stability, it will be particularly important that western states avoid the temptation of signing up international allies solely on the basis of geo-strategic concerns. Doing this may give the appearance of greater security by creating "anti-Chinese" or "anti-Russian" alliances, but in reality will serve to increase the number of non-democratic states and so the existential threat faced by the democratic world.

Second, pro-democracy governments need to act more consistently within individual countries. Democracy programming – and basic diplomatic engagement for that matter – is far more likely to be effective if it is part of serious and sustained long-term engagement, i.e., if key priorities are not regularly changed by shifting fashions and the preferences of new governments (Dudley 2020; Poling et. al. 2022). This means adopting a less short-termist approach to policymaking, planning programmes that have a timeline of six or more years, and thus enabling human capital and institutional capacity and memory to be built across multiple elections. Raising democratic norms consistently with authoritarian regimes, including during discussions on security, helps to maintain the credibility of commitments to these goals while also promoting change within the authoritarian regime itself (Franklin 2008; Poppe 2017; 2019).

In the best-case scenario, this can lead to a "spiralling effect" (Donno et al. 2018), in which authoritarian governments adopt certain democratic norms and values – as many have done in terms of holding elections and allowing international observers – which then increases the likelihood of further reforms, and more durable ones.

<span style="color:orange">**Recommendation 2: Demonstrate belief in, and the benefits of, democracy.**</span>

It is critical that pro-democracy governments make the case that democratic rule is essential for future economic prosperity, peace, and an effective and coherent international community that can respond to global challenges such as climate change. Many of the greatest challenges facing the world, and of greatest concern to the UK and like-minded governments elsewhere, are the product of authoritarian rule. This includes the conflict and instability triggered by authoritarian regimes beyond their borders, the spread of transnational criminal networks that often operate under the cover of authoritarian

leadership, and the high levels of migration generated by abusive and failing states. A world where democratic values, institutions, and practices prevail would be much better placed to meet these challenges both domestically and internationally.

Despite this, the value of democracy is not fully or globally recognised – and is losing ground. Instead, democrats are at risk of losing the argument that democratic systems of government are better placed to deliver economic development and stability. The rise of authoritarian economic powers such as China – and to a lesser extent the success of countries such as Rwanda and Singapore – has led to the revival of aspects of the "developmental state" argument, which suggest that the centralization of power under a dominant political authority is necessary for sustained economic growth. This trend has accelerated in recent years, when there has been greater evidence of a deliberate policy of autocracy promotion on the part of some authoritarian powers, complete with an ideology that authoritarian government has distinct advantages (Munday 2022). At the same time, successive economic and political crises, combined with growing cynicism as to the motivations of western states and the rise of illiberal forces in many democratic states, has tarnished the appeal of democracy as a model of governance. Although popular support for democracy remains high in regions such as Africa and Asia, the appeal of authoritarian rule is growing among many leaders, intellectuals, and citizens. This is especially problematic in countries in which leaders have sought to paint the intrinsic benefits of democracy, such as civil liberties and political rights, as western concepts unsuited to local realities. This weakens domestic demand for democracy, which is critical to both consolidating democratic gains and preventing democratic backsliding.

It is therefore essential that pro-democracy governments invest in research and dissemination that demonstrates its benefits for a range of key outcomes. Democracy has been shown to be positively correlated with economic growth and this relationship is particularly strong in sub-Saharan Africa (Masaki and van de Walle 2015), home to most of the world's poorest citizens. Meanwhile, authoritarian states are on average more corrupt, more prone to conflict, and less likely to deliver in key areas such as public services. The notion that a "strong leader" is necessary to govern diverse or poor countries is therefore a myth, but western leaders have rarely made this point explicitly. Moreover, some development agencies have fallen into the trap of believing that authoritarian regimes are more likely to deliver on key outcomes, suggesting that they are not fully aware of the recent findings of the literature. Against this backdrop, there is a pressing need for pro-democracy governments to disseminate the practical benefits of democracy for the things that citizens value most.

This will only work, however, if western states demonstrate a commitment to democracy themselves and communicate in a way that builds solidarity rather than resentment. This first task requires democratic states to acknowledge and commit to a path of democratic renewal to deal with the growing challenges that their own political systems face, from voter suppression in the United States to the anti-democratic aspects of recent electoral and policing legislation in the United Kingdom. Pro-democracy governments will not be able to speak credibly on democracy abroad if their commitment to democracy at home is in doubt. The second task will require democratic governments to undertake the task of promoting democratic norms and values in a humble way that recognises their own historic and contemporary limitations. International conferences and programmes designed to reinvigorate democracy, for example, should not be framed in terms of the exporting of

expertise from western states to the rest of the world, but rather as an opportunity for global lesson-sharing that frontloads the successes and the democratic innovations of countries such as Botswana, Chile, Costa Rica, Ghana, and South Africa.

## Recommendation 3: Understand the limitations of technical programming

It is also critical that pro-democracy governments recognise that the challenges of engaging with authoritarian governments cannot be sidestepped by focusing on technical projects or sectors and shift their working practices accordingly. This point is the central thesis of the Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) community (Dasandi et. al. 2019). To be successful, projects either need to align with, or manage to change, the interests and incentives of the politicians, bureaucrats, and officials whose support is necessary for effective implementation (Craney et al. 2022). Failure to recognise this means that programmes that are in other respects well planned and funded nonetheless deliver disappointing results. As the then-Chief Economist of the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), Stefan Dercon, put it in 2013: "Politics is too important for development in general to be left to political scientists and governance advisors only – we all need to think about it when we act."

Yet while there is now widespread acceptance of the need to adopt problem-based approaches and adaptive management strategies, and while TWP and PIDA has entered the lexicon of many governments, there is less evidence that programme design has shifted to reflect this new way of thinking. Instead, barriers to reform within pro-democracy governments themselves mean that many programmes continue to reflect old practices. One reason for this is that the "organisational cultural and DNA" of government departments both in national capitals and "in-country" has not yet changed

to embody TWP and PIDA principles (Teskey 2021: 16). This is problematic because there is growing evidence that engagement in authoritarian contexts is more effective when "it is related to an understanding of the political economy context, the ability in practice to adapt work and programming to locally grounded choices about what is possible in the protection and realisation of human rights, and to operate in politically informed ways" (Alffram et al. 2020: 40).

It is therefore critical that pro-democracy governments train their staff in these new techniques and transform the way in which programmes are designed and commissioned to ensure that they consider the need to think and work politically in all forms of engagement with authoritarian states. This will involve developing new ways of operating on a day-to-day basis, understanding the links between the technical and political, as well as understanding the connections between the government, state, and society in authoritarian settings, to better calculate the costs of engagement with authoritarian states. This also means putting as much emphasis on processes as results. Because this shift runs counter to dominant organisational logics that are geared towards organisational accountability and results-based management, making this change will also require pro-democracy governments to invest in the types of leadership and programming that allow for adaptability and innovation. An important part of this will be to accept that not every new approach that is tried will work, and that piloting non-traditional approaches will require patience and sustained commitment.

Emphasising processes as much as outcomes also means that pro-democracy governments should attempt to increase the opportunities for policy participation, transparency, and accountability whenever they engage abroad – whether with authoritarian or democratic states. At a minimum, this means removing any confidentiality clauses on international agreements and promoting debate and

discussion over important policy decisions within democratic institutions such as parliaments. Promoting debate and scrutiny does not on its own strengthen democracy, of course, but it does help to reduce the risk that highly centralised forms of engagement undermine the accountability of governments to their own people, and the capacity of civil society groups to shape policy in key areas such as the budget.

A good example of how this can be done is the shift from Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) to Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers adopted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in the early 2000s. In response to criticism of SAPs, which were widely criticised for their top-down formulation of economic policy involving little consultation with the wider public and civil society, the IMF and the World Bank proposed "a new process for development lending, which would be country-driven, results focused, long-term, comprehensive and partnership-oriented" (Whitfield 2005: 641). Henceforth, countries were "required to chart a poverty reduction strategy – laid down in a PRSP document – through a broad participatory process. This process aims to include a wide range of stakeholders' views" (Bwayla et al. 2004: 3).

While PRSPs were no panacea – they attracted criticism for not going far enough, and it has been suggested that they ultimately gave rise to similar economic policies as SAPs (Whitfield 2009) – there is considerable evidence that they were much more consultative: they increased and broadened participation, and in some countries this led to civil society strengthening its "organisational capacity and political position considerably by participating in the PRSP process", with the potential for this to spill over "into other spheres of policy-making, thus broadening the democratic space" (Bwayla et al. 2004: 28). Adopting similar approaches that seek to encourage domestic participation and accountability in key policy areas is an important way in which western states can seek to deepen democracy through everyday engagement.

The shift to PRSPs also illustrates the value of pro-democracy governments switching from policy conditionality to "process" conditionality (Birchler et al. 2016). This approach focuses attention on the extent to which partners implement reforms that shift decision-making processes in ways that make them more inclusive and accountable, rather than simply emphasising the adoption of specific projects. In the case of PRSPs, this meant adding additional consultative processes that created greater space for civil society groups and opposition parties – and hence the population in general. In turn, greater transparency and accountability can limit the ability of authoritarian governments to subvert aid and extend political control.

## Recommendation 4: Calculate and offset the cost of everyday engagement

No country will base their entire foreign policy around strengthening democracy. There are always going to be other goals, from securing economic trade deals to mutual security pacts. It is therefore unrealistic to expect western states to always put democracy first. What we can expect, however, is for them to always calculate the cost of their actions to democracy and human rights, so that trade-offs are explicit, and so that actions can be taken to ensure that everyday engagement does not result in the violation of key principles and undermine the core of democracy strengthening programmes. In other words, pro-democracy governments must ensure they do no harm.

Exactly what this means depends on the specific activity in each case, but examples would include: making it clear to authoritarian leaders that support for foreign policy goals does not give them a free pass on issues such as human rights; mitigating the risk that support

to "professionalise" the security forces may enable the government to more effectively repress its own citizens; understanding the potential for security legislation – for example anti-terror and anti-hate speech measures – to be manipulated and used to target civil society groups and critical voices; acknowledging the risk that providing aid for public services in corrupt regimes can effectively prop up failing governments that would be able to provide for their own citizens if they were not so wasteful, undermining accountability.

One related example is how some international organisations have already begun to move in this direction by adopting a human rights-based approach (HRBA) to their work. HRBAs essentially involve putting human rights at the heart of development activity and has so far been adopted by Swedish International Development Agency and several other European bodies, but not, for example, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (ICAI 2022). This approach features several elements that could be usefully adopted much more widely. One is the explicit recognition that achieving respect for human rights can strengthen development work, which is clearly the case when it comes to the right to education, to gender equality and so on. Another is the fact that, when appropriately designed, development programming can play a greater role in efforts to strengthen human rights than is often the case. There is already evidence that approaches like this can pay dividends. For example, "[adopting an HRBA] enabled the MFA [Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs] to more systematically consider other human rights standards beyond civil, political and women's rights early on in the policy and programming cycle. This includes a number of innovations to promote social, economic and cultural rights through sectoral programming" (Piron and Sano 2016).

The limitation of HRBAs at present is that they are much more likely to be adopted by development agencies than national governments or foreign ministries, and that they lack a clear focus on democracy. What is therefore needed is to mainstream approaches which factor in the impact of all engagement – including economic trade deals and military assistance packages – on human rights and democracies in both development and foreign policy engagement with authoritarian states. One way to do this would be to conduct a democratic risk assessment for all major programmes, identifying the direct and indirect ways they might be used to strengthen authoritarian rule.

## Recommendation 5: Anticipate authoritarian efforts to circumvent democratic demands

Authoritarian leaders are savvy and understand well the potential threat to their power that enacting democratic reforms represent. Partly as a result, there are numerous accounts of figures promising to enact reforms and then subverting them in ways that enable them to secure financial assistance without actually strengthening democracy – for example, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni. This can include simply failing to implement agreed upon constitutional reforms, or deliberately only moving ahead with issues that are less likely to challenge the ability of the government to maintain control, such as women's political representation (Donno et al. 2018). It often also involves claiming that certain reforms cannot be made because they would have negative security implications – when in reality exclusionary government and high levels of repression represent a greater threat to political stability and peace. Just as importantly, authoritarian governments have become quite good at understanding which democratic reforms they can adopt to get international support, while skirting more threatening ones. The authoritarian mobilization of democratic norms has become a common means to

legitimise themselves with western states and domestic publics. Pro-democracy governments therefore need to expect that authoritarian leaders will seek to subvert democratic reform process, and design them accordingly.

Further research needs to be undertaken in terms of the best ways to identify and outmanoeuvre authoritarian efforts to circumvent democratic reforms, but existing policy and academic work suggests that at least four steps will be required, some of which relate to general engagement and not just foreign aid specifically. First, pro-democracy governments must avoid falling into the trap of low expectations (Brown 2011; Brown and Raddatz 2014), in which poor quality democratic processes are more likely to be accepted simply because a country or region has not performed well in the past. Second, international actors should undertake both a historical analysis and a political economy analysis to understand the areas in which reforms have been most likely to be subverted and are most likely to face internal resistance. Third, when seeking to make progress in these areas, pro-democracy governments should avoid repeating cycles of failure. This means looking for new ways to increase influence and leverage, while being particularly careful not to deliver what the authoritarian government is most interested in – such as access to international financial assistance and events – until concrete and meaningful changes have occurred.

Finally, if red lines are stipulated, for example if a donor commits to suspending aid if there is a resumption of human rights violations, or if certain key measures are not enacted, agreed measures – such as aid suspension – should be implemented. While it is important for democratic states to remain engaged, and starting a programme incurs sunk costs that are often lost it aid is suspended or withdrawn, this does not mean failing to enforce agreements at the programme level. Indeed, enforcing key agreements and principles is particularly important because failure to do so can

undermine the credibility of pro-democracy governments in all areas – including human rights and security. Staying engaged is important, but withdrawing and suspending aid in a consistent manner, i.e., based on prior agreements and agreed standards, represents an important signal that reinforces the value of democracy to all concerned.

## Recommendation 6:
## Prioritise cases of gradual democratic erosion

The tendency of pro-democracy governments to emphasise rapid autocratisation over gradual democratic erosion risks focusing attention on a specific set of cases and overlooking the much broader process of backsliding that has occurred in a much less visible way over the last few months. It is now time to prioritise gradual democratic erosion, focusing on mechanisms to strengthen anti-authoritarian forces in a way that does not expose them to further backlash. This will involve at least three steps. First, it calls for developing a clearer and more unified methodology for identifying gradual backsliding – which is partly overlooked precisely because it is less obvious. Second, it requires evolving a set of responses designed to strengthen remaining democratic institutions while reducing the risk of further atrophy, and funding this properly. Third, it will involve working flexibly with a greater number and type of organisations to build broader support for key goals and offset the risk that any particular institution or group will be targeted with retributive measures.

The challenge of doing this without exposing partners to greater backlash is particularly significant. It will require more flexible and innovative strategies. Take the case of civil society, where large increases of donor funding to pro-democracy and human rights groups has been shown to be a potential trigger of anti-NGO legislation. Spreading donor funding among a wider group of civil society actors may help to reduce the pressure faced by any one

organisation, while building a broader coalition of groups willing to mobilise against restrictive laws. Backsliding is less likely when "countervailing institutions" of a state and non-state nature reinforce and support one another (Carothers and Press 2022: 16). Pro-democracy governments can help by protecting these democratic building blocks and helping to strengthen the relationships between them.

Doing this successfully will require pro-democracy governments to adopt more flexible forms of support that can be received by a greater variety of organisations. Residents' and vendors' associations, for example, rarely receive international support, in part because they are small scale and so poorly suited to comply with complex donor requirements, and in part because donors have tended to assume their secondary importance in comparison to national civil society organisations. Yet residents' and vendors' groups often play a key role in fighting localised struggles against land grabbing, economic exploitation, and corruption and are harder for autocrats to explicitly target precisely because they are not overtly political or explicitly partisan. Once wider movements of resistance to authoritarianism gain ground, these actors are also often key in terms of mobilising and communicating to citizens at the neighbourhood level, and hence can be key anti-authoritarian forces.

Strengthening a broader set of civil society groups can also have a positive impact on democratic institutions such as parliaments. By sensitising communities to governance issues that have a direct impact on their lives and mobilising citizens to work together, these groups and localised social movements can put pressure on local government officials and politicians. Especially in first-past-the-post electoral systems, this pressure has been shown to encourage MPs to vote against repressive legislation (Cheeseman and Dodsworth 2022).

## Recommendation 7: Differentiate democratic strengthening from preventing authoritarian backsliding

The literature on foreign aid suggests that development and democracy aid are more effective at exacerbating existing trends than checking them. In other words, while development and democracy aid can help to strengthen a poor-quality democracy that is moving in roughly the right direction, they appear to have much less of an effect at halting the slide of an increasingly closed political system. One reason for this is likely to be that pro-democracy governments have not significantly differentiated between the strategies required in these very different situations (Carothers and Press 2022). As the recent OECD report cited in the introduction concludes, regime type does not appear to be a significant factor in the distribution of aid (OECD 2022).

Engaging more effectively with authoritarian states in the future will require pro-democracy governments to develop a more fine-grained set of tools. More research will be required to identify exactly how programming should differ in slowly democratising contexts as opposed to those that are backsliding. Support to civil society offers a good example of the varying approaches this will require. At present, western states tend to channel money to non-state groups when they are particularly worried about giving it to the state either because the state is seen to be corrupt or because it is seen to be problematic in other ways. Many see this strategy as particularly attractive because it "may mitigate the risk of regime capture of these resources" (Niño-Zarazúa et al. 2020: 24).

Yet, while this approach may work well in countries moving towards democracy, it can backfire when it comes to working in rapidly autocratising contexts. As noted above, large increase in funding for civil society groups has been found to be one of the triggers of anti-NGO legislation that seeks to curb the activity of pro-democracy civic groups (Cheeseman and Dodsworth 2019). Moreover, civil society groups themselves are more likely to be tied to the state, and influenced by the state, in more authoritarian contexts. Because authoritarian partners are well-aware of pro-democracy governments' predilection for civil society, they have become adept at either controlling civil society or creating their own version. This does not mean that donors should not fund civil society groups – far from it. But it does mean that the way that such support is provided, and assessments of who it should be provided to, need to be done much more carefully.

The leverage pro-democracy governments require to achieve core democratic goals is also likely to be very different in these two contexts. While a sector specific political economy analysis would be needed to set out key barriers to reform, in a country moving slowly towards democracy, western states are likely to find greater common ground with leaders and hence face fewer vested interests willing to subvert pro-democracy programmes. The situation will be very different in rapidly autocratising contexts, in which domestic factors and logics of political survival are likely to be driving democratic backsliding (Bader and Faust 2104). A more widespread and careful intervention – including a reconfiguration of everyday engagement with their authoritarian counterparts – is likely to be necessary to reconfigure the incentive structures facing political elites to persuade them to choose reform over coercion.

It will also be critical to adapt support to non-authoritarian forces depending on the context they face. One way to do this, as proposed by Carothers and Press (2022: 18), is to tailor messages and campaigns to the kind of authoritarian regime in power. When the regime has deliberately accentuated political and social polarisation to prop themselves up, it makes most sense to emphasise campaigns that counteract illiberal agendas through narratives aimed at promoting cohesion and de-escalation. By contrast, where authoritarian leaders are more motivated by using power to secure their own economic interests, it may be more effective to focus on economic and anti-corruption measures (2022: 18).

Finding the right context-specific responses that factor in the incentive structures of autocratic regimes will require creative thinking and additional research. This will need to be done by a collective of researchers, activists, and policymakers working in partnership across governments, donors, and countries at various levels of democracy. Some of these networks already exist, but others will need to be created, and their collective findings acted upon rather than simply listened to. The time to start is now.

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# Endnotes

1    https://civil.ge/archives/511062

2    https://civil.ge/archives/511062

3    https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/02/us-military-confirms-300m-cut-in-aid-to-pakistan

4    We thank Srdjan Vucetic for comments on this case study.

5    Known as Macedonia prior to the 2018 Prespa Agreement settling a dispute with Greece over the country's name.

6    The Economist Intelligence Unit also upgraded its categorization of North Macedonia from hybrid to flawed democracy (2022: 11).

7    https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/ecuador-plans-referendum-cut-assembly-seats-fight-drug-trafficking-2022-09-12/

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