More Autocracies Worldwide - But Democratic Resistance Is Growing

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Democracy is on the defensive. This is shown by the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index 2026 (BTI). The BTI was first surveyed twenty years ago, when democracies were still in the majority. Today, 56 percent of the 137 countries surveyed by the BTI are ruled autocratically. However, this rarely leads to better governance. Autocracies are more susceptible to corruption, less capable of shaping the future, and less consensus-oriented. However, examples such as Poland and Brazil show that social resistance and political competition can pave the way back to democracy.

Gütersloh, March 26, 2026.
A majority of 77 of the 137 states surveyed by the BTI are now ruled autocratically and are taking increasingly repressive action against the opposition, the media and civil society. Of these countries, 52 are hard-line autocracies in which fundamental rights are completely disregarded - more than at any time since the survey began in 2006. But autocratic tendencies are also gaining ground in numerous democracies. "Many elected governments have undermined core democratic institutions in order to stay in power, and this paves the way for autocracy," says democracy expert Sabine Donner.

In 54 percent of the countries, elections no longer meet minimum standards. In some countries, such as Gabon or Niger, they were suspended after military coups, while in Belarus, Russia and Rwanda they are strictly controlled legitimizating rituals. However, numerous free and fair elections also led to peaceful changes of government. In Madagascar, Tanzania and Venezuela, mass protests following rigged elections were violently suppressed, but strengthened political mobilization beyond the election date.

Examples such as El Salvador, Serbia and Turkey show that the repeatedly touted promise of authoritarian efficiency is rarely fulfilled. Corruption is insufficiently combated in more than 100 countries, two thirds of which are autocracies. "In autocracies, loyalty must be rewarded and positions secured," says BTI expert Hauke Hartmann. "The supposed efficiency of authoritarian regimes is a myth."

However, persistent grievances continue to ensure that protests by dissatisfied citizens show no sign of abating. In Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, protests forced a democratic opening, while a democratic turnaround was achieved in Brazil and Poland. "The BTI shows how much pressure democratic institutions are coming under - at the same time, we are seeing remarkably lively resistance to their erosion in many places," says Daniela Schwarzer, Member of the Executive Board, Bertelsmann Stiftung. "This ability to mobilize, which comes above all from an active civil society, is a key potential for democratic renewal."

www.bti-project.org

Additional information:

Since 2006, the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index has analyzed the quality of democracy, market economy and governance in 137 countries every two years. Currently, 23 OECD countries, such as Germany and the USA, are not part of the study. The study was carried out between February 1, 2023 and January 31, 2025.

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