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REVISITING STRUCTURAL AND AGENTIAL APPROACHES TO DEMOCRATISATION IN THE AGE OF INTERNETISATION AND CYBERISATION

İNTERNETİZASYON VE SİBERİZASYON ÇAĞINDA DEMOKRATİKLEŞMEYE YÖNELİK YAPISAL VE FAİL TEMELLİ YAKLAŞIMLARIN YENİDEN DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ

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ABSTRACT

Humanity's long-standing challenge to exist freely under authoritarian regimes and its pursuit of democratisation are two enduring themes. The resurgence of populist authoritarianism in recent years has elevated the discourse on democratisation to the forefront of political discourse. The transformative advancements in internet technology and the subsequent cyberisation process have redefined the spectrum of possibilities for structures and agencies in the realm of political contention, profoundly altering the dynamics of the structure-agency relationship. In light of these developments, this study aims to reconsider the theories of democratisation. In order to achieve this, the principal theories that seek to elucidate the processes of democratisation in a range of geographical contexts have been presented and subjected to further analysis in the context of the internetisation and cyberisation processes that began to emerge in the 2000s. In this context, the evolving nature of democratisation demands have been initially interrogated, and subsequently, the counter-moves of authoritarian regimes within this equation have been examined. Furthermore, this study adopts a normative stance against populist authoritarianism and espouses the values of democracy. The cyber world, as an alternative to the physical world, provides actors with the capacity to act independently of spatial and temporal constraints, enabling the pursuit of social opposition beyond the confines of the physical public sphere and beyond the reach of authoritarian regime control. Thus, efforts to democratise authoritarian regimes gain ground on the Internet due to the ability to shape public opinion and organise effectively. Authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, seek to stifle democratic movements by employing censorship, algorithmic manipulation, and the exploitation of public discourse through the use of troll armies and bot accounts.

Keywords: *Democratisation, Structure, Agency, Internetisation, Cyberisation.*

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ÖZ

İnsanlığın otoriter rejimlerde özgürce var olma mücadelesinin ve demokratikleşme taleplerinin tarihi çok eskilere uzanmaktadır. Popülist otoriterliğin son yıllardaki yükselişi ise demokratikleşme konusundaki tartışmaları yeniden gündemin üst sıralarına taşımıştır. İnternet teknolojisindeki çığır açıcı gelişmeler ve bunların bir sonucu olarak ortaya çıkan siberizasyon süreci ise yapıların ve aktörlerin siyasi mücadele anlamındaki imkanlar setini yeniden belirlemiş ve yapı-fail ilişkisinin dinamiklerini kökten değiştirmiştir. Söz konusu gelişmeler ışığında bu çalışma, demokratikleşme teorilerini yeniden ele alma amacı taşımaktadır. Bu amaç doğrultusunda çeşitli coğrafyalardaki demokratikleşme süreçlerini açıklamaya girişen başlıca teoriler ortaya konmuş ve söz konusu teoriler 2000'lerle birlikte ortaya çıkan internetizasyon ve siberizasyon süreci ışığında yeniden tartışmaya açılmıştır. Bu çerçevede önce demokratikleşme taleplerinin değişen doğası sorgulanmış, sonrasında ise otoriter rejimlerim bu denklemdeki karşı hamleleri inceleme konusu yapılmıştır. Ayrıca bu çalışma normatif anlamda popülist otoriterliğin karşısında ve demokratik değerlerin yanında pozisyon almaktadır. Fiziksel dünyaya alternatif bir biçimde ortaya çıkan siber dünya, faillere mekândan ve zamandan bağımsız eylemde bulunabilme yeteneği kazandırmış, toplumsal muhalefetin otoriter rejimlerin denetimindeki fiziksel kamusal alanın dışında da yürütülebilmesine olanak tanımıştır. Böylece otoriter rejimlerdeki demokratikleşme mücadeleleri gerek kamuoyu oluşturabilme gerekse örgütlenebilme avantajı sayesinde siber alanda yürütülebilir hale gelmiştir. Diğer taraftan otoriter rejimler ise siber alanda sansürler uygulayarak, algoritmik müdahalelerde bulunarak ve trol orduları ile bot hesaplar vasıtasıyla kamusal tartışmayı manipüle ederek demokratikleşme mücadelelerine karşı hamleler geliştirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Demokratikleşme, Yapı, Fail, İnternetizasyon, Siberizasyon.*

Introduction

The process of democratisation and stabilisation of democracies are highly debated topics in today's world. The concept of democracy, which is shortly defined as the "rule by the people" (Grugel & Bishop, 2014, p. 9), possesses a positive connotation for most people, and especially for those having Western origin. Democratisation has been a remarkable reality of world politics from early in the twentieth century to today and gained pace especially after the 1970s. While the proportion of authoritarian countries in the world was 68% in 1975, this figure had decreased to 26% by the end of 1995 (Potter, 1997, p. 1). From 2000s to today, on the other hand, the globe has been experiencing a different phase in terms of rises and retreats of democratic regimes and re-emergence of populist authoritarianism in many democracies. It can be argued that the demands and struggles for and against democratisation have undergone significant transformations in the 2000s and particularly in the 2010s. This is due to the proliferation of internet technology and cyberisation in everyday life, as well as the advent of new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI). Hence, such a new phase with its very new dynamics necessitate to

question the validity of current democratisation theories by reconsidering the questions below.

- *Are the transitions to democracy the product of conscious actors?*
- *Is democratisation restricted by political, social, economic, cultural or international structures?*
- *Have the answers to these questions been changed from 2000s with the rise of internet technology and cyberisation?*
- *And finally, is a revision for those structural and agential explanations needed?*

Any attempt to find adequate answers to these questions inevitably requires an introduction to the issue of structure and agency in order to better clarify what is meant by a structure-based and agency-based explanation of democratisation and people's demands for democratisation. Any attempt to explain the principal factors influencing the process of democratisation can be situated within one of two distinct traditions within the social sciences: Contingent reasons (strategists/actors) or structural reasons (social and economic conditions/deeper structures) that lead to democratisation (Ajagbe, 2016, p. 85). And such an attempt necessitates an intellectual focus on the effects of internetisation and cyberisation processes add a new dimension to the structural and agency-based discussion regarding the issue of democratisation.

The agency-structure problem has its roots in a series of enduring controversies in the history of human thought, from the differentiation of the state and the individual in the medieval period to the metatheoretical disagreements that persist within political philosophy, epistemology and science in the present day (Carlsnaes 1992, p. 245). Within the boundaries of this discussion, agency-based approaches constitute the opposite camp *vis-à-vis* structure (or structural position). It is therefore important to ascertain whether the potential for a transition to democracy is contingent upon the actions of agencies or the constraints and capacity for determination of structures. This is a crucial aspect of the study of democratisation, as the answer to this question will elucidate the causal mechanisms underlying the process of democratisation and the prospects for success of new struggles for democracy. The question also requires a more nuanced response, given the profound impact of technological advancement, internet usage and the proliferation of social media on the dynamics between individuals and structures.

In light of the aforementioned introduction, the primary argument put forth in this paper is that no singular theory is capable of providing an exhaustive explanation for the multifaceted phenomenon of democratisation across the globe. The structural and agential approaches discussed in this paper are found to have notable limitations when confronted with the emergence of novel dynamics within the realm of democratisation, especially with the increasing influence of the internet in daily life, the trend towards cyberisation and the emergence of new technologies like artificial intelligence (AI). The term "Internetisation" is used throughout the article to describe the growing influence of

internet technology as the primary means of conducting daily affairs and its increasing dominance in the storage and processing of daily data. Cyberisation can be defined as the process of transferring activities that were previously conducted in the physical world to the cyberspace and executing them within this domain through the cyber identities. Therefore, as in the physical world, the cyberspace becomes a political struggle terrain where political organisation can occur, public opinion can be shaped, and individuals can be directed towards a particular ideal. This political struggle also encompasses demands for democratisation.

It is important to note that these new dynamics related to technological advancements have also revealed the relative strengths and weaknesses of each approach to democratisation. The primary objective of this paper is, therefore, to revisit the structural and agential explanations for democratisation and to demonstrate the impact of new dynamics resulting from technologication and internetisation on regime changes, with a particular focus on examples from the global experience over the past two decades. Furthermore, the paper seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the theories of democratisation by examining a diverse range of theoretical perspectives.

In order to achieve the aforementioned objectives, the paper is divided into three sections. The initial section presents structural explanations of democratisation, with a particular focus on historical sociology, international approaches and modernisation theory. The second section assesses the agency-based approaches to democratisation. The third section examines the evolving nature of actors' demands for democratisation within authoritarian regimes, considering the impact of technological and internet-driven developments in the period following the 2000s. The fourth section presents an analysis of the counter-tactics that structures have developed in response to the evolving demands for democratisation by actors.

The Structural Explanations of Democratisation

The underlying conditions of democratisation represent the fundamental basis for structural explanations of democratisation. These conditions, which encompass embedded forms of societal frameworks, influence the ease or difficulty with which a transition to and sustainment of democracy can be achieved. In the simplest terms, as defined by Hay (2002, p. 94), structure refers to context and the site on which political, economic, and social events arise and become meaningful. From this perspective, the opportunity for a regime shift towards democracy lies in the construction of the social system. Therefore, understanding the source of democratisation is directly related to changes in the structure of society (Ajagbe, 2016, p. 85).

The question of whether the conscious actions of individuals can facilitate the democratisation of a country is of critical importance. At this juncture, as Bakewell (2010, p. 1694) has observed, conceptualising society as the aggregation of individuals from an individualist perspective may prove problematic, given that people congregate

within intricate networks of social relations, establish organisations, and manifest behavioural patterns. The outcome of these processes holds greater significance than the mere aggregation of individuals. Notable scholars such as Lipset (1959), Almond and Verba (1963), Moore (1966), Li and Reuveny (2003), Pevehouse (2002) have advanced structural explanations to address the phenomenon of democratisation. These explanations have highlighted the limitations of agency-based explanations in understanding the process of democratisation. It is also important to consider that structures and actors have developed new counter-strategies as a result of the influence of the internet and social media, and these approaches should be reconsidered.

a. Modernisation Theory

The prominent theory that provides a structural explanation for the transitions to democracy is the 'modernisation theory', which was first proposed by Seymour Martin Lipset (1959). This theory highlights the role of economic factors in triggering the process of democratisation. The theory posits that the stability of democracy is contingent upon two factors: economic development and legitimacy. The elements of economic development are industrialisation, wealth, urbanisation and education (Lipset, 1959, p. 71). In comparing the situations in Latin American, European and Anglo-Saxon countries, Lipset (1959, p. 75) found that the more democratic states were wealthier and that the education levels and the rates of urbanisation and industrialisation in those countries were much higher. In his own words, Lipset (1959, p. 31) posited that "[t]he more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy." The fundamental indicators employed in the research were per capita income, the proportion of the population employed in the agricultural sector, the number of telephones per 1,000 citizens, the proportion of the population residing in urban areas of varying sizes, and the proportion of the population that is literate (Rueschemeyer, Stephen, & Stephen, 1992, p. 14).

In a similar vein to Lipset, Leftwich (1996, p. 337) also posited that democratic regimes are unlikely to emerge in poor countries, given that those who benefit from the scarcity of resources are disinclined to relinquish their political power. Similarly, Leftwich (1996, p. 337) posited that countries with lower levels of formal education, literacy and communication are less likely to undergo democratisation. This can be observed in the case of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, Lerner's analysis of data from Middle Eastern countries indicated that the essential elements of democratic development were urbanisation, communication and education (Arat, 1988, p. 22).

In their 1997-dated study, Przeworski and Limongi distinguished between two explanations for the correlation between economic development and democratisation. They termed these 'endogenous' and 'exogenous' explanations, respectively. The endogenous explanation, also known as modernisation theory, posits that countries are more likely to undergo democratisation as their level of economic development increases.

In contrast, the exogenous explanation posits that the democratisation process is independent of economic development. However, economically developed democracies are more likely to survive (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997, p. 157). Przeworski and Limongi (1997, p. 159) also proposed that the democratisation process may originate from disparate factors, yet it is sustained in economically prosperous countries and is likely to falter in less affluent ones. In other words, the process of democratisation is sustained in countries that are modern, but it is not a consequence of modernisation. Of the 32 democracies whose income is above $6,055, none have fallen. Conversely, 39 out of 69 democracies in poorer countries have ended (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997, p. 165).

b. Civic Culture

A seminal study focusing on the influence of structures and especially the political culture on the process of democratisation belong to Almond and Verba (1963). In their theory, they classified political cultures under three categories: Parochial political culture, subject political culture and participant political culture. Parochial political culture represents a form of political culture in which there is a lack of demand from the general public on the political system. This form of political culture, exemplified by Almond and Verba in African tribal societies, corresponds to a culture in which individuals lack political consciousness and become ineffective. Those who can be defined as belonging to the subject political culture category demonstrate a comparatively elevated level of political awareness. Nevertheless, they exhibit a tendency to establish a passive relationship with the political system. On the other hand, individuals within a participant political culture are evidently oriented towards the administrative and political system, exhibiting a high level of political awareness. Furthermore, they demonstrate the quality of activism, challenging the political system in various ways (Almond & Verba, 1963, p. 16-18). At this juncture, Almond and Verba (1963, p. 30) put forth the notion of a civic culture as an allegiant variant of a participant culture, wherein the political structure and political culture are in a state of concord with one another.

c. Historical Sociology / Social Forces

The approach of historical sociology has provided a substantial structural explanation for the routes towards democratisation. The primary focus of historical sociology is the investigation of the manner in which a political system is shaped by the evolving relationship between the state and social classes (Grugel, 2002, p. 51-52). Moore, a prominent figure within this perspective, concentrated on the part played by historical factors in the advent of democracy in his book *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (1966). He emphasised the diverse political roles played by the peasantry and the landed upper classes in the transition from agrarian societies to modern industrial societies.

By conducting research into the transformation of political regimes in eight countries (Great Britain, the United States, France, Russia, India, China, Japan and Germany), he

identified three distinct pathways that these countries followed. These three paths were identified as capitalist democracy, fascist dictatorship and communist dictatorship. Moore (1966, p. 5) emphasised that the path leading to capitalist democracy was a historical phenomenon that was unlikely to be replicated. This approach suggests that the transition to democracy is not a short-term phenomenon and that it cannot be achieved by the decision of a few individuals. Rather, the transition to democracy is the result of a long-term conflict between classes (Grugel, 2002, p. 52). As with Moore, Stephens (1988) also asserted that structural determinants provide a powerful explanation for democratisation processes in South America. He suggested that the middle class constituted the base of social movements or parties which were demanding and acting for democracy (Stephens, 1988, p. 25).

Moore's theory offers a valuable framework for analysing the historical contexts in which class struggles have been most clearly identified. For example, he compared the paths of England and France towards democracy, highlighting that the autonomy of the landed aristocracy and nobles from the king, along with their acceptance of commercial agriculture, were pivotal factors in England's democratisation. However, the path of France towards democracy was distinct, as the French nobles were dependent on the King (Moore, 1966, p. 40).

d. International Determinants

Another structural explanation that has been proposed in relation to the issue of democratisation is the international effect, which is posited to influence the trajectory of countries with regard to the adoption or rejection of democratic institutions. The actions of international actors can both impede and facilitate the process of democratisation, as part of broader economic and military-security processes (Pevehouse, 2002, p. 518). Some analysts have proposed that international factors exert a significantly greater influence on the democratisation process than was previously acknowledged (Geddes, 2007, p. 319).

In his study, Teorell (2010, p. 77) identified three mechanisms through which external actors can facilitate democratic transitions. These include the influence of international trade, the diffusion of norms among neighbouring countries, and the pressure from regional international organisations. It can be observed that countries become more economically interdependent. Moreover, the dissemination of global ideas across national frontiers is a phenomenon that has become increasingly prevalent in recent times. The growth of international broadcasting and the increasing significance of intergovernmental organisations also signifies that national governmental systems are becoming progressively interdependent in a political sense.

The global capitalist world order, encompassing ideas, organizations, and norms, can be regarded as a significant factor influencing the processes of democratisation, both in a positive and negative manner. In response to the modernisation theory and optimistic

arguments of the liberal perspective about the positive effects of an ideal open-market world system, Li and Reuveny (2003) put forth the proposition that portfolio investment inflows and trade openness have a negative effect on democracy. In the long term, portfolio investment inflows have an increasingly negative effect on democratisation, whereas trade openness remains constant in terms of its impact on democratisation. Conversely, foreign direct investment inflows exert a positive impact on democratisation, although this effect diminishes over time. Hadenius (1992, p.91) argued that the phenomenon of economic dependency has resulted in a situation whereby Third World countries are frequently characterised by fragility and the prevalence of authoritarian rule. Those countries are subject to the influence of major economic powers, which engage in direct or indirect intervention when their status appears to be under threat in a range of ways. They are positioned as the 'underdog' within an international system that is characterised by inequality and exploitation.

On the other hand, particularly in the wake of the 1980s, transitions have been shaped by the proliferation of democratic principles and directives pertaining to democratisation from international actors, including financial organisations (Geddes, 2007, p.328). Pevehouse (2002, p.535) posited that states are more likely to undergo democratisation when they are members of regional organisations comprising the majority of member states with democratic systems. The directives of the EU, namely the Copenhagen Criteria, provide an illustrative example of the impact of regional organisations on the democratisation process of member states. With regard to the political criteria, the "stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities" are set forth as indispensable conditions for EU membership (European Commission, 1993).

It is important to make a distinction between the non-tangible effects and the more tangible impositions of the international system at this juncture. Notable examples of such impositions include humanitarian interventions and military interventions conducted with the objective of promoting democracy in authoritarian regimes. There have been both unsuccessful international interventions in non-democratic regimes, as evidenced by the case of Somalia (Karns & Mingst, 2010, p. 291), and successful cases, such as that of East Timor (Heywood, 2011, p. 323). In this regard, Mill ([1859]1984) posited that individuals themselves should be the primary agents of struggle for their rights, rather than relying on external actors. Otherwise, the rights in question cannot be considered genuine and enduring, as they are bestowed by external forces.

The Agential Explanations of Democratisation

The instances of democratic transitions in the post-1970s period provided the impetus for the development of new theories of democratisation, shifting the focus from structuralist to voluntarist approaches (that is to say, agency-based approaches). This theoretical shift originated from instances of successful democratic transitions in which the requisite

structural conditions for democratisation were absent (Mahdavi, 2008, p. 143). In such cases, the agency side, that is to say, an actor or several actors, was called upon to compensate for the lack of structural conditions.

The agency-based approaches represent a significant contribution to the field of political science, offering insights into the processes that lead to regime change towards democracy. The term 'agency' is directly related to the abilities of groups or individuals to transform their environment, whether intentionally or otherwise (McAnulla, 2002, p.271). Ahearn (2001, p.112) defined agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act". In these approaches, the democratisation process is carried out by conscious actors (Grugel, 2002, p.56). Accordingly, the agential explanation posits that political leadership is the primary driver of regime change (Ajagbe, 2016, p.84). The success of a regime change is contingent upon the power and capacity of the political leadership in question. The contributions of scholars such as Rustow (1970), O'Donnel and Schmitter (1986), Higley and Burton ([1989] 2012), and Bratton and van de Walle (1997) have significantly advanced the field of democratisation and regime change studies through their emphasis on the role of agents. Those scholars were unified in their insistence on the primacy of actors in the transitions to democracy, as opposed to the role of structures.

a. National Unity

Among democratisation theirs, models have emerged which posit that processes have placed actors on a trajectory of democratisation. Rustow (1970, p.350-361) postulates that the sole prerequisite for democratisation is "national unity", which denotes the internalisation of citizenship among the majority of the population. In the preparatory phase of the transition to democracy, a protracted and indecisive political struggle is necessary. Furthermore, a conscious decision-making phase is necessary for those in political leadership roles to acknowledge the coexistence of diversity within unity and, subsequently, to institutionalise fundamental aspects of democratic procedure. The democratisation process is an extended and inclusive political struggle that commences with the advent of a new elite group, which incites previously disorganised social groups to engage in collective political action. Therefore, a period of habituation ensues, during which citizens become accustomed to the democratic procedures and methods of problem-solving that are characteristic of a democratic system.

b. Elite-Driven Democratisation

The role of elites in the democratisation process is a topic that has been widely explored by prominent scholars in the field (Higley & Burton, [1989] 2012; Garrard, 2002; Hajrullahu, 2011). These approaches typically indicate a process in which elite groups assume a leading or guiding role with regard to the democratisation of a given society or political system.

In their seminal work (Higley & Burton, [1989] 2012, p.246), the authors posited that the most effective approach to understanding both democratic transitions and breakdowns is to examine the fundamental continuities and shifts in the internal dynamics of national elites. The most prevalent form of elite is identified as the 'disunified national elite', which is held to be responsible for the production of unstable regimes that periodically fluctuate between democratic and authoritarian forms, and vice versa. In contrast, the consensually unified national elite, which is a rare phenomenon in historical terms, is posited as having the capacity to construct stable regimes that can result in a modern democracy, as evidenced by the cases of the USA, Britain, or Sweden, provided that facilitative and economic conditions do not present an obstacle. It is not possible to regard a shift from consensual unity to disunity, which is referred to as a democratic breakdown, or from disunity to consensual unity, which is called a democratic transition, as a permanent occurrence if it does not occur concurrently with elite-driven transformations. Hajrullahu (2011) also emphasised the significance of functional elites in the process of democratisation, highlighting their capacity to drive meaningful democratic reforms in their own countries through their actual potential and resolve.

Pact-making constitutes a pivotal topic within the domain of transition theory (Grugel, 2002, p.60). The term is used to describe the formation of a significant consensus among elites regarding the rules of the democratic process and the value of democratic institutions (Burton, Gunther & Higley, 1992, p.3). The Spanish transition, which was brought about by the introduction of a new democratic constitution and a tripartite economic alliance, the *Moncloa Pacts*, provides an illustrative example of elite pact-making (Grugel, 2002, p.60).

c. Unpredictable Decisions of Actors at the Times of Abnormality

A notable divergence from structuralist perspectives is the accentuation of agency-based approaches, which emphasise the dynamic and unpredictable nature of transitions. By coining the term "extraordinary uncertainty of the transition", O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986, p.3) drew attention to the inherently uncertain nature of regime changes. They sought to counter the highly deterministic explanations put forth by structuralist approaches by emphasising that extensive transformations give rise to unpredictable changes in society. These changes take place in the absence of behavioural and structural parameters that serve as reference points for guidance and prediction. In those times, actors are driven to make pivotal, fortuitous and unforeseen decisions within an environment characterised by insufficient information, ideological ambiguity and ethical quandaries. This suggests that the stability and predictability inherent in structural frameworks do not necessarily dictate the trajectory of transitions; rather, it is the actor, with their unique capabilities, who determines the outcome of a transition towards democracy in periods of 'abnormality'.

In parallel with the abovementioned standpoint, Bratton and van de Walle (1997, p.22) contended that the socioeconomic preconditions posited as the indispensable foundation for democracy by structuralist perspectives fail to acknowledge the dynamism inherent in the democratisation process. At this juncture, the ever-changing and inherently unpredictable nature of human beings proves to be a pivotal factor in the process of democratisation.

d. The Democratisation Role of the Masses

The question of whether transitions are carried out by elitist groups or by the participation of broader social and ideological groups represents a significant point of divergence within the framework of agency-based approaches. At this point, elitist approaches to transition may underestimate the role of civil society in the democratisation process (Baker, 1999, p.1). Within this framework, the decisions of elites to undertake political reforms may be directly affected by accelerating mass protests. It is evident that social forces other than those pertaining to economic class actors, such as human rights activists, university students, regional elites and church leaders have been detected as playing a role in the popular mobilisation surges that have occurred in other parts of the world in the context of recent democratisation. In those circumstances, collective action embraced by the mass public appears to have been a prevalent phenomenon with purported democratic consequences (Bratton and van de Walle 1997). Consequently, the implementation of political reforms may result in a call for competitive elections, which may in turn lead to a political transition. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Slovenia, Latvia, Poland and Lithuania serve as illustrative examples of regime change that commenced with mass mobilisation (Bunce, 2003, p.172).

The Changing Nature of Demanding Democratisation in Post-2000s

The twenty-first century is a period of significant importance in terms of the culmination of the informational and cognitive phase of globalisation. The processes of internetisation and cyberisation have effectively abolished the constraints of geographical and temporal boundaries, thereby undermining the preeminence of traditional deeply-rooted structures in both the construction of reality and the formulation of mainstream discourse. In other words, actors have gained autonomy in terms of spatial and temporal boundaries, in comparison to the structures that previously constrained them within the limits of national and societal contexts. This enabled the proliferation of demands for democratisation on a global scale, facilitating the organisation of democracy supporters within their respective countries.

In light of the potential role of historical sociological factors in facilitating democratisation, it can be posited that these factors have been globalised concurrently with the increased ease of labour mobility on a global scale. Labour migration provides individuals with the opportunity to secure employment in areas where it is needed. In addition, it can lead to higher wages and increased productivity when migrants are

matched with roles that are best suited to their skill sets and abilities. At this point, the internet serves as a conduit for the convergence of workers and job opportunities. Furthermore, cyberspace has enabled workers to operate in a location-independent as well as time-independent manner. Today, the movement of workers across geographical boundaries for the purpose of employment is a growing phenomenon on a global scale. In many high-income countries, migrant workers constitute a substantial proportion of the workforce and contribute significantly to economic growth (Chattu et al., 2023). Considering that the number of international migrants worldwide in 2020 was 281 million, representing 3.6% of the global population (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024), it is evident that individuals have the potential to transcend the constraints of their local sociological contexts.

Moreover, the process of internetisation and cyberisation has led to the emergence of the cyber world as an alternative to the physical world. This has had a significant impact on the dynamics of political opposition and the nature of political activism. The term 'cyberactivism' has also become part of our lexicon during this period. It was coined to describe a new phenomenon that enables individuals to raise their voices and actualise political opposition in a novel way. McCaughey and Ayers (2003, p.1) offered a concise definition of cyberactivism as "political activism on the Internet". By means of cyberactivism, individuals are now able to establish cyber public spheres within the digital domain, thereby forming opinions on public matters. Additionally, they have gained the capacity to extend the organisations they have established in the cyberspace into the physical realm. During the Arab Spring, social media played a significant role in mobilising people, facilitating communication and coordinating actions. It also facilitated the spread of revolutionary ideas both domestically and internationally. Furthermore, it played a role in fostering a sense of Arab identity, which in turn contributed to the spread of revolutionary movements (Tudoroiu, 2014). From this point of view, it can be argued that the development of cyberactivism has served to enhance the collective influence of the general public with regard to the process of democratisation, while simultaneously augmenting the ability of revolutionary elites to direct the actions of the masses.

The process of internetisation and the utilisation of social networking has facilitated a significant expansion in the visibility and representation of social movements, reaching a broader audience than previously possible (Rodriguez, 2016, p.324). Consequently, international and non-governmental organisations demonstrated a notable enhancement in their capacity to monitor human rights violations in non-democratic countries. IOs (and NGOs) have the potential to draw attention to voices that have previously been under-represented. For example, the occurrence of a considerable number of fatalities as a consequence of police operations may be reported on as an act of crime or as a matter related to law enforcement. However, when a collective of lawyers at the local level is emboldened to categorize these deaths as extrajudicial killings, their declaration may be disseminated through channels of communication that accentuate legal and human rights-oriented perspectives (Chaudoin, 2023, p.243). Therefore, it can be posited that civil

society is currently more robust at the global level than it has been in the past. This power serves to reinforce the connections between those who are enthusiastic about democracy and community leaders on a global scale.

The phenomenon of digitalisation is exerting an influence on the established order of indigenous information infrastructures, cultural identities, worldviews and lifestyles, and the national heritage of peoples. Consequently, it is permeating remote regions of the globe and exerting a dominant influence at the global level (Udoinwang & Akpan, 2023, p.2). Thus, international norms may emerge within the context of domestic political discourse. Demands for the integration of international norms into domestic discourse can originate from state or social actors and frequently manifest as calls for alterations to the policy agenda. Advocates of the international norms invoke them to justify modifications to state policies or institutions, or to substantiate the preferences of other actors within the domestic sphere (Cortell & Davis, 2000, p.70). As the potential for education, information access and engagement with alternative discourses grows in the cyberspace, the mental autonomy of individuals will be safeguarded. This serves to enhance the transitivity of universal norms and associated democratic values on a global scale. Civic culture and similar cultural elements, which are integral to the formation of attitudes towards democratisation, can be imported from external contexts, even in the absence of such elements within the local environment.

On the other hand, it cannot be asserted that the elimination of geographical boundaries through the advent of the internet has totally resulted in the unification of all global citizens under a singular set of democratic values. Modernisation theory can be seen as an attempt by the West to impose its own values on the rest of the globe (Dunn, 2013, p.3). It is also a misconception that modernisation inevitably results in the dilution of traditional values (Ntini, 2016, p.62). In contrast, traditional values may be reinforced by means of local norm circles embedded in societies. As defined by Elder-Vass (2010, p.122), norm circles are social entities that possess both normative and causal power. These circles produce practices by creating an effect on their members, thereby exerting influence over the norms and behaviours of those within their social networks. The individuals comprising a norm circle are unified in their intention to endorse the norm in question. Consequently, they evince a greater propensity to espouse and advance the norm than they would in the absence of this collective intention (Archer & Elder-Vass 2012, p.100). Consequently, given the inherent difficulties in challenging authoritarian regimes on the path to democratisation, it is similarly challenging to challenge the norms of local communities.

Furthermore, in certain instances, the internet can serve to reinforce local connections. The internet, which brings distances closer with people who have never met, can also bring distances closer between families scattered in different geographies. According to a study conducted by De Bruijn (2014) on Cameroonian families scattered in different parts of the world, communication via mobile phones and the Internet plays an important role

in the lives of these families. Despite the geographical distance, the family structure, perceptions of social roles, information exchange and solidarity remain intact. The perception of distance is entirely shaped by communication technologies, and rather than being separated, families have become more connected due to these technologies. This renders modernisation, which provides the conditions for democratisation, unfeasible for a considerable number of societies.

It is also important to acknowledge that the penetration of universal values and norms into societies through the internet is not always met with enthusiasm by the very individuals and communities that it seeks to influence. For many people, the process of digital transformation has the potential to alter the fundamental aspects of human culture and the very fabric of society. This, in turn, could lead to a loss of the distinctive characteristics that define the cultural identity, values and existential ontologies of different societies. The situation in African countries serves as a prototypical illustration of this phenomenon (Udoinwang & Akpan, 2023, p.7). As an example for perceiving a threat from foreign values and norms, Mirzayevich (2023, p.784-787) indicated his concerns about young people who engage in online interactions with individuals they have never met in person. This practice, in his view, has the potential to disseminate misinformation, immorality and a narrow-minded perspective on culture and consciousness among the younger generation within society. Hence, he claimed that the growing influence of social networks is having a detrimental impact on the spirituality of young people in Uzbekistan. It seems probable that such perceptions will result in greater popular support for populist authoritarian regimes and a reduction in enthusiasm for democratisation.

Authoritarian Counter-Tactics against Demands for Democratisation

Internetisation and cyberisation have resulted in a reconfiguration of the power dynamics between structures and actors. It can be posited that authoritarian regimes, whether consciously or unconsciously, manifest new counter-tactics in response to the changing nature of agential power. These structural counter-tactics comprise censorship mechanisms designed to restrict and control cyberspace, algorithmic techniques that seek to influence and shape the prevailing discourse within this cyber domain, and the deployment of online troll armies and bots with the objective of establishing dominance within the digital public sphere.

The utilisation of social media censorship, inclusive of those processes enabled by artificial intelligence, represents a pervasive mechanism of control within social media, particularly within authoritarian regimes, with the objective of effectively eliminating the freedom of expression to a significant degree (Chen et al., 2023, p. 12-13). A significant proportion of users' experiences of the internet are characterised by instances of unannounced and sudden government manipulation of public information. Users are abruptly unable to access a specific news website, unable to enter a previously accepted

keyword search phrase into a search field, unable to view certain content on social media, and unable to discern whether comments on social media are authentic or the result of paid commentators (or government-supported trolls) hired by the government (Kou, Kow & Gui, 2017, p. 2335). As an instance to those authoritarian countries that enjoy restricting cyber space, China possesses the most intricate internet censorship mechanisms in the world, encompassing a multitude of techniques such as IP blocking, DNS hijacking and keyword filtering. IP blocking represents the earliest and most rudimentary form of filtering (Xu, Mao, & Halderman, 2011). The North Korean regime, on the other hand, exemplifies a form of complete totalitarianism that has transcended censorship, achieving a complete elimination of internet access. International organisations that monitor internet penetration, such as the United Nations and the World Bank, either assign North Korea a zero rate for internet penetration or do not disclose any data (Gerschewski & Dukalskis, 2018, p. 12).

The discourse and ideas that are attempted to be restricted by structures on the internet cannot be restricted as much as expected, as internet users discover new tactics of resistance. For instance, it is readily circumventable due to the fact that webmasters are able to alter their IP and DNS records at will (Xu, Mao, & Halderman, 2011). Moreover, as Chen, Zhang and Wilson (2013) have demonstrated, the practice of censoring a topic is associated with higher levels of user engagement. The findings indicate that the implementation of censorship measures is ineffective in preventing the discussion of sensitive topics that do not elicit a high level of engagement. Additionally, the research suggests that users employ variations in word usage, known as morphs, to circumvent keyword-based censorship. The experience of previous instances of censorship has taught Internet users to observe and anticipate the limits of what can and cannot be said publicly. This enables them to avoid including potentially sensitive information in the public record and to share it only through private channels such as private chats and instant messaging (Kou, Kow & Gui, 2017, p. 2335).

Another tactic utilised by the structures to direct and control the masses is the deployment of algorithms. As elucidated by Klepper (2023), algorithms are automated systems employed by social media platforms to recommend content to users based on assumptions derived from their past interactions on the internet, including their groups, friends, topics and headlines. As an instrument of surveillance, control and manipulation; they undermine claims that social media constitute an unprecedented space of freedom. This ideological control embedded within social media platforms is often organised in a way that favours authoritarian, populist, far-right political organisations or governments. The conjunction of algorithmic control with government-made censorship leads to the complete suppression and increasing invisibility of alternative ideas in cyberspace (Başkan, 2024, p. 15).

In recent years, considerable research has been conducted to examine the assertion that the algorithms and artificial intelligence applications employed by social media platforms

effectively neutralise the arguments of pro-democratic individuals and promote right-wing extremist ideologies (Bryant, 2020; Ledwich, Zaitsev & Laukemper, 2022; Amalinda & Nugrahani, 2024; Luger, 2024). The results of independent tests designed to replicate the algorithmic process have demonstrated a clear bias towards right-leaning political videos, including those espousing racist views associated with the alt-right community. While the algorithmic technique may appear to be primarily focused on maintaining user engagement through the recommendation of alt-right content, the ultimate consequence is the inadvertent empowerment of Neo-Nazi and alt-right recruitment efforts on YouTube. Thus, the filter bubble effect has the consequence of pushing individuals into a self-reinforcing loop, whereby they are drawn towards radical sources of information and away from more objective and evidence-based resources (Bryant, 2020). The algorithms used by social media platforms can also influence communication in the physical public sphere, potentially leading to a shift towards more polarised debate and a greater emphasis on popularity. This can provide an opportunity for far-right groups to gain traction. Furthermore, AI technology can be harnessed by non-state actors and far-right activists for the purpose of inciting provocative campaigns that may ultimately result in extreme actions or violence that contravene human rights (Amalinda & Nugrahani, 2024, p. 473-474).

The use of mass media to influence public opinion is a long-standing phenomenon. In recent years, however, online platforms, and social media in particular, have emerged as the primary arena for this practice (Urman & Makhortykh, 2024, p. 1). The deployment of troll armies and bots by authoritarian regimes represents a significant and troubling trend. These digital tools are utilized with the objective of blacking out news coverage of human rights violations and undemocratic practices, as well as suppressing public responses to such issues. Furthermore, trolls or bots are also employed to generate and disseminate fabricated public opinion. The online dissemination of prejudiced discourses via social media platforms has the effect of creating an 'us versus them' dichotomy and exacerbating polarisation in the digital ecosystem (Mustaffa & Lokmanoglu, 2025, p. 35). Trolls utilise generic hashtags, including *#politics*, *#news* and *#sports*, which facilitates the dissemination of their content to a broader audience. Thusly, when users search for *"#news"*, they are exposed to tweets that have been created with the intention of provoking a reaction. Another noteworthy point is that trolls select controversial topics that are currently being discussed by a significant number of Twitter users (Addawood et al. 2019, p. 20). In this manner, they are attempting to establish themselves as the dominant voice in the cyberspace.

The 2016 US presidential election was characterised by suspicions that the cyber operations of a suspected Russian troll army influenced the outcome of the election. Furthermore, there is substantial evidence that the Russian troll army, which was organised to disseminate false or misleading information on the Internet, has manipulated democratic processes in numerous countries other than the US elections (de Vera & Vergara, 2024, p. 672). Similarly, during the Ukraine-Russia war, trolls originating from

Russia disseminated anti-Ukrainian narratives in the English-language sphere of social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok (Molotkina, 2022). The Philippines provides a further illustration of the potential for online trolls to incite concern and panic among internet users, as well as among journalists and political commentators (Cabañes & Cornelio, 2017).

Conclusion

The issue of democratisation has become a prominent feature of the political agenda in recent decades, particularly since the twentieth century. Despite the fact that democratisation represents the optimal solution among the options available to humanity, a considerable proportion of the global population is still compelled to reside in authoritarian regimes. This may be due to the influence of structural factors on individual behaviour, as well as the lack of power held by individuals to effect societal transformation. It can be stated that the rise of the internet and the subsequent dominance of cyberisation have had a profound impact on the nature of people's struggles for democratisation.

Firstly, the processes of internetisation and cyberisation have increased the possibilities of political opposition and enabled dissidents to organise in cyberspace. Consequently, in authoritarian regimes where the physical public sphere is shaped by bans, people can produce discourse outside the mainstream discourse. Thus, the emancipatory effect of cyberspace reduces the capacity of structures to construct mainstream discourse. Furthermore, the capacity to organise in cyberspace allows revolutionary-democratic elites to assume a leading and directing role in civil society in this domain.

As cross-border ties have increased in comparison to the past, the structural conditions that would facilitate the process of democratisation have also become more flexible in favour of democracy. There has been a notable expansion in the range of educational opportunities available to all individuals, wherever they may reside, accompanied by an enhanced likelihood of exposure to contemporary values. Furthermore, the phenomenon of migration for the purpose of education and employment enables individuals to circumvent the sociological determinism of the regime in which they reside. It would also be a gross oversimplification, on the other hand, to suggest that the internet technology has resulted in the global community being unified under the banner of democratic values. The importation of values from external sources may be perceived as a threat by some societies. This perception of threat serves to consolidate populist authoritarian regimes.

In response to the actor-based gains resulting from the internetisation and cyberisation of society, authoritarian regimes have employed a range of counter-tactics, including censorship, algorithmic interventions and the use of automated social media bots and trolls. In response to attempts at censorship, which are designed to exert total control over discourse within the cyber public sphere, internet users have developed their own specific

tactics of resistance. Algorithms, on the other hand, can be regarded as an inherent malfunction of the Internet, serving as a catalyst for the proliferation of far-right and populist ideologies. As a consequence of this attribute, algorithms have the potential to impede the universalisation of democratic processes. One of the most effective strategies employed by authoritarian regimes to disrupt cyber public space is the use of troll armies and bot accounts. These have the effect of disrupting the process of idea generation in the virtual public sphere, while simultaneously devaluing existing content due to the prevalence of poor-quality content.

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