**Electoral autocracy**

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In recent years the world has started to see a reversal of the trend towards democratization. While the contrast between democracies and dictatorships has always been there and is fairly clear, a new trend has started to now emerge.

Several countries are now being labeled as ‘electoral autocracies.’ These are countries where leaders are chosen through an electoral process, but the executive branch exercises such unilateral control over the judiciary, and even mass media and the legislature, that they cannot really be termed a true democracy.

According to a well-researched report by V-Dem, a nonprofit research organization based in Stockholm, Sweden, there are now 56 electoral autocracies in the world, up from 40 just a few decades ago. Fully 44 per cent of the world's population now lives in such electoral autocracies.

Subversion of the will of the electorate by elected politicians has been a growing trend over the past few years. Countries that are entering this category among others, include Turkey, Hungary, Serbia and India. Others such as Pakistan and Algeria, while holding elections, have never progressed beyond the level of an electoral autocracy.

It appears would-be autocrats who come to power through somewhat legitimate elections have settled on a formula for controlling their countries and perpetuating their rule. These include neutralizing the independence of the judiciary, a high level of control over mass media, and of course curbing any political influence their military may have exercised.

While many countries have been in this camp for years, the emergence of EU member Hungary and the back sliding of India, often cited as the world's largest democracy, is very discouraging.

Other countries gearing to move in this direction include Israel, where proposed curbs on the power of an independent judiciary are leading to mass protests. Inclusion of Israel in the world's democracies anyhow requires ignoring the multi-generational occupation of the Palestinians who have little say in how their lives are controlled.

President Biden often draws a stark contrast between democracies and autocracies. He has painted the tension between western democracies versus Russia and China as a battle between freedom and dictatorship.

Yet, when it comes to actual policy actions Biden's criticism of autocracies can be quite selective. China is routinely criticized for its autocratic rules and harsh treatment of religious minorities, while India is given a pass.

Clearly, other geopolitical considerations such as the perceived role of India in US-China tensions plays an important role, thereby undermining the principles behind the argument. Similarly, Turkey is frequently criticized for undermining the independence of the judiciary and for the government's control over the media. India not so much.

In this context the work of V-Dem can be illuminating. Their report titled ‘Varieties of Democracies 2023’ grades all countries on a sliding scale from zero for full autocratic rule to 100 for full democracy. This starts to paint democracy as something not so black and white. Such a scale is particularly useful with the emergence of large numbers of electoral autocracies.

Discouragingly, even democracies such as the US are seeing an increasing trend towards minority rule in several of the 50 states. As an illustration, one can look at the recent example of North Carolina. The state has a total of 7.2 million registered voters. Of these 2.4 million are registered Democrats, 2.2 million are Republican and 2.6 million declare themselves as unaffiliated. Yet the state legislature is two-thirds Republican, facilitated by highly gerrymandered district lines.

A state that has twice elected a Democrat as governor, is now effectively under the rule of the opposite party. Any law vetoed by the governor, or any action by the executive can simply be overruled by the legislature on partisan grounds. On top, the Supreme Court of the United States has given a green light to partisan gerrymandering by states.

Also, North Carolina Supreme Court, has now reversed an earlier opinion where it had cancelled previously gerrymandered electoral map, thereby allowing even more extreme partisan maps. It would not be a surprise if a party with no more than one-third registered voters gets to control 80 per cent or more of the seats in the legislature.

The move to electoral autocracies, sadly, is not just a disturbing trend in countries in faraway lands but is also very much a growing trend within the US itself.

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