Global South democracies fifty years after the *third wave*: contemporary challenges

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Essay

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Abstract: The objective of this research is to analyze contemporary processes of de-democratization and democratic breakdowns, with an emphasis on the Global South. To achieve this objective, the study first analyzes how the main material and narrative changes in the global order affect democracies in the Global South. Secondly, it examines how digital technologies have reconfigured the public sphere and how they have been instrumentalized at both national and global levels to promote authoritarianism in the Global South. The essay argues that the decline of democratic powers, such as the United States and the European Union, alongside the new dynamism of authoritarian actors like China and Russia, have transformed the demonstration and diffusion effects of political systems. Digital technologies have also contributed to the rise of authoritarianism. While these tools are not inherently authoritarian, authoritarian governments—especially China—have been highly assertive in their goal to cooperate and project their power globally through them. Furthermore, digital technologies have blurred the lines between national and international public spheres, making political systems more vulnerable to global dynamics. Most countries in the Global South are particularly vulnerable to these dynamics due to their technological dependence, the digital divide, and weak civil and governmental infrastructure.

Keywords: global south; global order; democracies; authoritarianism.

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Democracias del Sur global a cincuenta años de la tercera ola. Retos contemporáneos

Resumen: El objetivo de esta investigación es analizar los procesos de des democratización y quiebres de la democracia contemporáneos, con énfasis en el Sur global. Para conseguir este objetivo, primero se analiza como los principales cambios del orden global, materiales y narrativos, afectan a las democracias del Sur global. Y en un segundo momento, se examina como las tecnologías digitales han reconfigurado la esfera pública y como ha sido instrumentalizada en las esferas nacionales y global para promover el autoritarismo en el Sur global. En el ensayo se argumenta que el declive de las potencias democráticas, Estados Unidos y la Unión Europea, y el nuevo dinamismo de actores autoritarios como China y Rusia, han transformado las variables de efecto demostración y difusión de los sistemas políticos. Las tecnologías digitales también han contribuido al aumento del autoritarismo. Si bien estas herramientas no son intrínsecamente autoritarias, los gobiernos autoritarios, especialmente China, han sido muy asertivos en su objetivo de cooperar y proyectar globalmente su poder a través de ellas. Las tecnologías digitales también han difuminado las fronteras entre las esferas públicas nacionales y las internacionales, haciendo a los sistemas políticos más vulnerables frente a las dinámicas globales. La mayoría de los países del Sur global son especialmente vulnerable frente a estas dinámicas, debido a su dependencia tecnológica, brecha digital y débil infraestructura civil y gubernamental.

Palabras claves: democracias, autoritarismo; orden global; sur global.

1. Introduction

Fifty years have passed since the so-called Third Wave of Democracy, a sufficient period to evaluate the processes of democratization and de-democratization. This timing is relevant not only because of the anniversary but also to assess the demonstration and diffusion effects that changes in the contemporary global order are having on national political systems, especially those in the Global South.

Democracy theory has focused on variables internal to the state, but the empirical evidence of synchronized democratization and de-democratization processes, along with common patterns of authoritarian practices at the regional and global levels, demands greater attention to how global governance affects political systems.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to analyze contemporary processes of de-democratization and democratic breakdowns, with an emphasis on the Global South. To achieve this objective, the study first analyzes how major changes in the global order, both material and narrative, affect democracies in the Global South. Secondly, it examines how

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digital technologies have reconfigured the public sphere and how they have been instrumentalized in national and global arenas to promote authoritarianism in the Global South.

We start from the empirical evidence of the rise of authoritarianism in the Global South and the hypothesis that some global orders are more conducive to democracy, such as the one established after the Cold War, while others, like the contemporary one, are less favorable.

2. Reconfiguration of the Global Order and Its Effect on Democracies

The end of the Cold War marked a major turning point in the global order and had significant implications for democracies worldwide. It created an extraordinarily favorable context for democratization, as the Soviet collapse not only discredited that form of authoritarian rule but also eliminated the main source of external support for its allied dictatorships. The end of the Cold War also removed the *raison d'être* for many anti-communist dictatorships.

A military, economic, and ideological hegemony of the United States was established. The promotion of democracy gained prominence in US foreign policy. The US, and to a lesser extent its allies, held a virtual monopoly on global economic aid. This, combined with military pressure, created strong incentives for other countries to adapt to their conditions. Consequently, by the mid-1990s, democracy was considered *the only game in town*.

This enthusiasm is evident in Francis Fukuyama's 1992 work, *The End of History and the Last Man*. In it, Fukuyama argues that liberal democracy could represent the culmination of humanity’s ideological evolution, as well as the definitive form of government and the end of history. According to Fukuyama (1992), liberal democracy satisfies the deepest longings for material well-being and human dignity. He points out that previous forms of government, such as fascism and communism, collapsed due to internal flaws and irrationalities; however, liberal democracy is free from such contradictions. He indicates that modern science is one of the engines of history and requires universal and specialized education to function. This creates the social conditions for people to think for themselves and claim their dignity. This struggle for recognition is the other engine of history. As living standards rise and populations become more cosmopolitan and educated thanks to scientific progress, people cease to be satisfied with wealth alone and begin to demand recognition of their status and autonomy as free human beings. However, he warns that capitalism creates economic inequality, which implies unequal recognition among citizens and could potentially reopen the cycle of history.

Democracy is indeed considered the political system that best guarantees human dignity and freedoms. However, some caveats must be noted. Many democratic political systems, especially in the Global South, coexist with high levels of inequality and poverty. Additionally, due to a lack of state capacity, democracy has also failed to deliver on its promise to guarantee dignity and freedom.

The aforementioned triumph of liberal democracy wasn't just in the realm of ideas; it also had empirical expression. Also, Samuel Huntington (1991) published his work, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. In it, he identified that global democratization processes have occurred in *waves*, with the most recent one beginning in 1974 with the Portuguese Revolution. This wave more than doubled the number of democratic systems from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s in Southern Europe, Latin America, East Asia, and eventually, Eastern Europe and parts of Africa.

In his 1991 work, Huntington (1991) identified five factors that converged to propel this third wave of democratization. First, 20th-century authoritarian regimes increasingly lacked an ideological basis for governing and instead relied on performance-based legitimacy, such as their ability to generate economic well-being. Second, the growth of the urban middle class and rising literacy rates fostered values and attitudes that were more favorable to democracy. Third, changes within the Catholic Church following the Second Vatican Council transformed its role from defender of the status quo to an active opponent of authoritarianism. This made the third wave largely a Catholic wave. Fourth, major powers, such as the United States, began to actively promote human rights and democracy under the Carter and Reagan administrations, exerting diplomatic and economic pressure on dictatorial regimes. The Soviet Union also contributed to this wave when Gorbachev renounced the Brezhnev Doctrine in the late 1980s, allowing Eastern European countries to transition toward democracy without fear of military intervention. Finally, the demonstration effect occurred: the success of democratization in one country stimulated similar efforts in others.

These factors have changed significantly, not only compromising the advancement of democracy but also leading to major setbacks. First, authoritarian countries are performing well economically, with China being the prime example. Second, urbanization, economic improvements, and rising educational levels have not empowered societies to demand democratic reforms. Third, the Catholic Church has much less influence in the modern world. Fourth, the foreign policy priorities of major powers have shifted, particularly in the United States, whose own democracy is in significant decline. Fifth, this contagion effect is evident not only in democratic regimes, but also in processes of autocratization.

As identified by the Instituto V-Dem (2024), since 2009, the proportion of the world's population living in *autocratized* countries has been rising uninterruptedly. Countries with large

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populations, major economies, and military power, including regional and global powers such as India, Mexico, the Philippines, Pakistan, Poland, Russia, and Turkey, have experienced significant democratic decline. The number of liberal democracies fell from 43 between 2007 and 2012 to just 32 in 2023, while the number of closed autocracies rose from 22 in 2012 to 33 in 2022. Currently, V-Dem (2025) warns that there are 88 democracies and 91 autocracies, with 72% of the world's population living under autocracies. This erosion of democracies and strengthening of authoritarianism marks the lowest level of global democracy in the last 25 years.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) remain the region with the lowest levels of democracy globally, a trend exacerbated by the recent *autocratization* of Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia, Turkey, and Yemen. In Sub-Saharan Africa, democracy is also in decline, including several coups *d'état* in the Sahel subregion between 2020 and 2023. Even countries with the best democratic records, such as Benin, Botswana, and Ghana, have seen their democracies decline. In South and Central Asia, democracy continues its decline, including the case of India and the even more accelerated deterioration in Pakistan and Bangladesh. In East Asia and the Pacific, a democratic downturn is observed in Indonesia and the Philippines, all of which are highly populated countries. Finally, Latin America is the most democratically resilient region in the Global South, where the majority of its population lives in a democracy, including Brazil (V-Dem, 2025).

The case of India is particularly important. As the world's most populous country and the leading power in the Global South, it has been considered the longest-standing, though interrupted, democracy in the region.

Currently, India is governed by the BJP, a nationalist and Hinduist party that views the country as a civilizational state and heir to Hinduism. The BJP came to power with the help of a sophisticated media strategy, which included GIS mapping, ad saturation campaigns, contradictory messages to different audiences, and negative portrayals of their opponents. This occurred amid significant advances in India's digital public infrastructure, with mobile phone usage tripling between 2008 and 2023, reaching 1.2 billion people. The BJP administration has sought to base its legitimacy on appealing to the majority, primarily the Hindu population, which accounts for 80% of the total population. This has contributed to a process of illiberal democratization, which has seen greater socioeconomic inclusion and representation. In fact, the administration has been characterized by reducing minority rights, freedom of expression, and the cultural and intellectual autonomy of institutions, thereby endangering the secular and pluralist foundations of India's democracy and state (Ganguly, 2019; Vaishnav, 2024).

All of this has been a consequence of global and regional conditions that have created more room for the growth of authoritarianism. These conditions include the decline in leadership of the major powers of the liberal order and their democracies, along with a shift in relative economic power.

In the United States, the primary leader of the contemporary liberal order, the political system currently faces several issues such as anti-nationalist conflicts, violations of the rule of law, difficult socioeconomic mobility, and urban violence. The two administrations of Donald Trump have eroded the country's democracy, jeopardizing its political cohesion in a way not seen since the mid-19th century. For the first time since the founding of the contemporary liberal order, the U.S. has a president who is hostile to core democratic values and practices, has distanced himself from the country's main traditional democratic allies, and presents himself as a friend to the world's most authoritarian leaders, like Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin. Trump has also abandoned multilateralism in general, thus dismantling more than fifty years of institutional construction (Acharya, 2023; Haass, 2023; Ikenberry, 2020).

Within the European Union (EU), the primary global model for democratic integration and cooperation, the nationalist far-right is gaining ground and jeopardizing democracy. The EU also has a diminishing capacity and interest in protecting democracies, even within its own bloc, as seen in Hungary and Poland. Its internal economic, social, and political problems have diverted resources and priority away from the defense and promotion of democracy. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom, a major historical leader of the liberal order alongside the United States, decided to withdraw from the European Union in 2016 (Ikenberry, 2020; Levitsky & Way, 2020; Way, 2022).

It must also be noted that the failure of the United States and its allies to establish democratic regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan has undermined their legitimacy as leaders of the free world. This has been further diminished by their complicity with Israel, a country often proclaimed as the sole democracy in the Middle East, in perpetuating some of the worst violations of human rights and humanitarian law through its actions against Palestinians.

Thus, the decline of the contemporary liberal order has its roots in internal dynamics and the decline of its historical leaders. Additionally, these dynamics are compounded by other factors that are also reconfiguring the global order and its hierarchies, particularly economic ones. Since the free market and liberal democracy promoted by the United States reinforced each other to shape the contemporary global order, the current political economy has become more favorable to authoritarian regimes.

Autocracies have increased their share of global GDP from 24% in 1992 to 46% in 2022. At the same time, the proportion of world trade conducted between democracies has fallen from 74% in 1998 to 47% in 2022. Furthermore, the dependency of democracies on

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autocracies has doubled over the last 30 years (V-Dem, 2023). According to V-Dem (2025), democracies are now at their lowest point of economic power in at least fifty years.

The main driver of this economic dynamic has been China, which, after implementing its reform and opening-up strategy in the late 1970s, achieved an average annual growth of 9.9% and an annual increase in international trade of 16.3% over the next 30 years. China surpassed Japan in 2010 to become the world's second-largest economy and replaced Germany as the largest global exporter. Since 2010, China has contributed almost one percentage point annually to the global GDP growth rate. By 2016, China's contribution exceeded 15% of global GDP, positioning it as the second-largest economy, only after the United States. It also boasts the largest industrial GDP worldwide, at 22.5 percentage points, and is the world's largest agricultural producer, accounting for 30% of the value added from global agricultural activity. China is the second-largest economy in terms of household final consumption at 9.6%, and it is the largest builder of physical infrastructure and provider of development assistance in developing countries. It is the largest trading partner for Europe, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. China is the world's leading exporter and second-largest importer. By 2018, it contributed 15.8% to global GDP (World Bank, 2020).

Additionally, this economic dynamism led to an increase in the prices of natural resources, especially hydrocarbons and minerals. This, in turn, has consolidated and given greater economic projection to various authoritarian regimes, such as Venezuela, Azerbaijan, Algeria, Cameroon, the Republic of the Congo, Gabon, and especially Russia.

These elements have fundamental implications for the global democratic context. First, the United States no longer has a monopoly on economic sanctions and rewards, meaning countries worldwide no longer have strong external incentives to align their political institutions with democratic standards. This has also allowed authoritarian governments to create a narrative that seeks to legitimize successful authoritarian models based on economic growth. Finally, there is a diffusion effect, where countries can emulate authoritarian mechanisms and economic policies.

Additionally, during the 2008 global financial crisis, China had ample fiscal space and abundant foreign exchange reserves. This allowed it to recover in the first quarter of 2009 and become the most important driving force for global recovery. Its growth rate reached 9.1% in 2009 and 10.1% in 2010 (Lin, 2010).

This critical juncture is of particular interest because the 2008 financial crisis was felt most deeply in the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia. Additionally, countries that distanced themselves from the policy recommendations of the Bretton Woods institutions were better able to handle the crisis. This event completely reshaped the hierarchy of the global political economy, highlighting the greater levels of interdependence and the inability of

democracies to manage global economic problems in isolation. It also broke the monopoly of legitimacy held by market capitalism, as promoted by liberal democracies, by exposing its limitations, incapacities, and the relevance of heterodox policies.

The emergence of non-traditional powers does not present an alternative to contemporary global governance due to their lack of unity and common objectives. However, this does not mean the current global order is uncontested. Emerging autocracies are increasingly cooperating on specific issues that endanger global democracy. Their strategy is not to create a grand anti-democratic metanarrative but rather to promote individual practices that undermine democracy.

China and Russia have become more authoritarian and are positioning themselves as major global powers capable of promoting authoritarian practices. Xi Jinping aims to achieve at least regional Chinese supremacy, while Vladimir Putin seeks to re-create Russia's sphere of influence. A key distinguishing feature of the contemporary era is the close relationship between Beijing and Moscow, as expressed in their 2022 *no-limits friendship* declaration.

China has transformed its material resources into global projects that enhance its influence, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It is also working to challenge the dollar as the primary reserve and exchange currency by developing the world's first major central bank digital currency.

For its part, Russia has intervened more contentiously, especially in the post-communist space. It has shared repressive tactics targeting opponents, provided financial resources to select aligned groups within the ruling elites, and offered peace operations. Russia has also given extraordinary and multidimensional support to the regimes of Belarus and Armenia and has interfered in the elections of Georgia and Romania. Internationally, Russia has also meddled in the U.S. presidential election and in several European Union countries, such as Hungary and the Czech Republic. However, its model of super-presidentialism, with its limited economic success, is not seen as an attractive model to emulate globally.

For example, in the Global South, China and Russia have provided financial support to Venezuela, allowing it to evade economic sanctions imposed by the United States. Other regimes, such as Myanmar and Sudan, have received significant diplomatic support in various forums, including the United Nations Security Council, which has prevented stronger condemnation. China, which leads four of the fifteen specialized agencies of the United Nations, has cooperated with Russia to undermine liberal order institutions as well as human rights and democracy norms from within their very epicenters (Diamond, 2022; Levitsky & Way; Plattner, 2020; Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022; 2005).

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Middle and regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran also provide economic and military aid to various authoritarian regimes. In fact, even democratic regional powers like South Africa have supported authoritarian regimes, such as that of Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe. Conversely, Latin America's democratic resilience can also be explained by its regional dynamics, specifically by the democratic improvements within its leading power, Brazil.

As O'Neil (2022) argues, various economic, commercial, and migratory dynamics are more regional than global. This also holds true for ideas and information, which, while traveling even faster, are still nuanced by local and regional factors. This underscores the importance of regional powers for democracy.

For example, Latin America is the region in the Global South with the highest levels of democracy; the majority of its population lives in a democracy, and democratization trends have been positive in recent years. Despite the region's heterogeneity, which includes authoritarian regimes like those in Nicaragua and Venezuela and high-quality democracies like those in Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Chile, Brazil stands out. As Latin America's leading regional power and, along with India, one of the primary powers of the Global South, its democratization is significant for the entire region due to both its demonstration effect and its interconnectedness. Brazil's return to the path of democracy, after withstanding the Bolsonaro administration's attacks on democratic institutions amid corruption scandals and deep inequalities, underscores the importance of the country's institutional resilience and its democratic commitment (Mainwaring, 2025; V-Dem, 2024).

While democracy remains the most esteemed political system, autocracies are now showcasing their economic successes as democratic powers struggle with internal and external problems. Although no single grand metanarrative presents a clear alternative to democracy, such a narrative is no longer needed to erode or dismantle democratic systems. During the Cold War, China and Russia were largely unsuccessful in their attempts to promote communism internationally. Today, however, they have managed to promote authoritarian practices, which have become especially effective and pernicious in the digital sphere.

3. De-democratization and Authoritarian Practices 2.0

The relationship between humanity and technology is an ongoing story of coevolution. Major technological transformations have always shaped societies, and the contemporary digital revolution is no exception. The digital era marks an unprecedented transformation in human history, radically altering how we live and interact. Digitalization has established a global infrastructure of connectivity where access to information is instant and omnipresent. Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and big data, have created a

hyperconnected world where information flows at dizzying speeds and the public sphere expands from the national to the global level.

These dynamics have also affected democracy. On the one hand, they have reshaped the foundations of democracy, such as the public sphere and the relationship between citizens and the government, leading to the de-democratization of society. On the other hand, these technologies have been directly used to promote and enhance authoritarian practices like censorship and surveillance.

For example, in his 1998 work, *Homo Videns: The Televised Society*, Giovanni Sartori, argues that television has brought about a cultural shift by prioritizing images over abstract thought and the written word. This shift results in cognitive impoverishment, affecting individuals' ability to understand complex concepts and participate in political life. He also asserts that the media fosters misinformation and a democracy based on emotions rather than rationality. This *video-politics*, understood as the influence of images on political processes and the exercise of power, drains liberal democracy of its substance by favoring emotional messages and demagogues while marginalizing the rationality necessary to administer the res publica. Sartori also anticipated his critique of the impact of the internet and digital technology, warning that these new media could deepen isolation and the lack of critical discernment in contemporary society.

Sartori (1988) also warns that a distinction must be made between publicized opinion, an opinion that is merely disseminated to the public, and public opinion, which is an opinion the public has formed on its own and in which the public is the active subject.

Today, the digital era has enhanced publicized opinion while undermining substantive public opinion. This new communication architecture presents several paradoxes: it has empowered citizens, allowing them not only to consume information but also to produce and disseminate it. However, this information can be empty of content and manipulated. Spaces for debate have multiplied, but individuals often only interact with ideas and people that reinforce their own beliefs, transforming political debate into a series of parallel and irreconcilable monologues.

Thus, *Homo videns* has given way to *Homo conexus*. While communication in the time of *Homo videns* was hierarchical and unidirectional, communication in the time of *Homo conexus* is multidirectional and seemingly horizontal. Citizens are hyperconnected, but they inhabit a public sphere that is fragmented by algorithms and flooded with mass disinformation. Big data and artificial intelligence enable personalized messaging, where algorithms deliver political messages tailored to each individual. Unlike a televised advertisement, which is seen by everyone, a digital message is invisible to most and cannot be publicly debated or refuted. The political ideas and decisions of *Homo conexus* are shaped by opaque actors, including

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international ones. Public deliberation is replaced by calculated segmentation, which strips the democratic process of its collective character.

The era of *Homo conexus* shares a key characteristic with the era of *Homo videns*: objective facts have less influence on public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. However, the speed and virality inherent in social media make it a prime space for the spread of disinformation and fake news in the age of *Homo conexus*. Unlike traditional media, digital platforms lack editorial filters. Social media algorithms are designed to maximize engagement and screen time. They prioritize content that generates the most user interaction. This content is often sensational or emotional, regardless of its truthfulness.

Fukuyama (2021) warns that the main threat digital platforms pose to democracy is their ability to amplify or silence certain messages on a scale that can alter political outcomes, thereby concentrating excessive power. Furthermore, this power cannot be controlled by citizens, but only by the government or by market competition.

Among the digital tools used by authoritarian governments are algorithms that track social media, and communication and information technologies used in conjunction with AI to manipulate available information. They also use bot and troll armies to spread pro-regime messages, direct citizens toward specific publications, run automated and hyper-personalized disinformation campaigns targeting specific individuals or groups, and produce realistic video and audio forgeries, known as deepfakes. AI is also being instrumentalized with advanced information systems, like facial recognition that can monitor crowd density and then cross-reference images in real-time with big data and advanced biometrics (Feldstein, 2019; Hoffman, 2022; Kreps & Kriner, 2023).

These tools are particularly harmful to the Global South because most of its countries have a combination of factors that amplifies their negative effects. These factors include technological dependence, significant digital and connectivity disparities, fragile civil and governmental infrastructure, an absence of legal frameworks for data protection, weak institutional accountability, and low digital literacy levels.

Authoritarian governments also use national cyber-borders to limit citizens' access to international information. One such example is China's so-called *Great Firewall*, which can filter keywords and URLs to control what users inside the country can see online. Other countries, including Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Yemen, and Vietnam, have sought to replicate this system. Furthermore, governments are increasingly using social surveillance and control systems, such as stricter registration and identification requirements that link individuals to specific accounts or devices. Some regimes even require citizens to obtain government permission before using the internet (Deibert, 2015).

However, these technologies are, of course, not intrinsically pernicious to democracy. In fact, they have great potential to improve democracy and the lives of citizens in general. It is how they have been instrumentalized that has harmed democracy.

For example, the Arab Spring can be cited as the first major sociopolitical movement of the digital age. In recent decades, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have been one of the most authoritarian regions in the world. However, these stable authoritarian regimes were challenged by a civil society that used digital technologies as its main tool. The video of Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia moved the local population and attracted the world's attention. The immediate distribution of this video on YouTube, as well as those of the repression in Egypt's Tahrir Square, broke the state's monopoly on information, countered official propaganda, and challenged the regimes' ability to control the narrative of events. Subsequently, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter managed to overcome state censorship of traditional media and bans on public gatherings, becoming tools for mobilization and coordination. On these platforms, protests were called, marches were coordinated, and messages of resistance were shared almost instantly. The digital age allowed these movements to grow in size and reach at a dizzying speed.

Thus, the digital sphere, which is still in a state of reconfiguration, has become a space of contention between democracies and authoritarianisms. The effect it will have on political systems will be decided not only at the national level but also at the regional and global levels.

The United States and China lead the world in AI technology, but the latter is instrumentalizing it more effectively to cooperate with its authoritarian allies. This gives them greater coordination and a stronger capacity to project their power globally (Feldstein, 2019). In geopolitical terms, China and other authoritarian governments are instrumentalizing technology to expand their global influence. For example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), led by China and Russia, presented a draft of the International Code of Conduct for Information Security to the UN, which, among other things, proposes greater state control over cyberspace. China has also played a significant role in the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), two of the world's largest technical standardization bodies. Furthermore, China has a strong presence in the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and has actively participated in global bodies that set technical standards for emerging technologies, such as 5G, the Internet of Things (IoT), and AI (Deibert, 2015; Hoffman, 2022).

All of this allows China and its authoritarian allies to gain greater control over the digital sphere. This provides them with a stronger capacity to define international norms in a way that favors their political interests. This trend is combined with the rapid global adoption of Chinese

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technologies, especially in the Global South, which gives China greater control, not just *de facto*, but also in global normative.

China's primary global outreach project is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which it uses to disseminate its AI technology. This process creates incentives for governments worldwide to align with China's interests. By 2018, the Chinese government had invested nearly $80 million in the Digital Silk Road program, aiming to establish global 5G and fiber optic networks (Feldstein, 2019; Jang & Yoo, 2024).

Additionally, these dynamics present an attractive form of global governance. It purports to be neutral and easily integrates into democratic regimes, and even more so under weak bureaucracies and laws like those in the Global South. China has offered training to a significant number of countries for implementing digital infrastructure, including centralized digital censorship. China is a pioneer in facial, biometric, and language recognition technologies. When combined with artificial intelligence and *big data*, these technologies allow authoritarian governments to gain total control over their citizens. For example, there has been a significant correlation between Chinese investment and an increase in authoritarianism in sub-Saharan Africa (Beckley & Brands, 2023; Jang & Yoo, 2024). The sphere of totalitarianism has expanded exponentially.

These practices are especially pernicious because the actors and agencies that promote democracy dedicate their attention and resources to violent democratic breakdowns, while these new mechanisms harm specific dimensions, systematically eroding democracy.

China is home to many of the world's leading companies that export technological products, and the spread of AI has become one of its key geopolitical tools. For example, the Chinese company Global Tone Communications Technology (GTCOM), which self-identifies as a multilingual big data firm controlled by China's Central Propaganda Department, collects massive amounts of data from all over the world in more than sixty-five languages. It then processes this information for government and corporate clients. The company claims to collect between two and three petabytes of data annually, which is the equivalent of about twenty billion photos on Facebook. GTCOM has also applied for patents related to an automated translation method based on Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs). This technology can synthesize images, use visual speech recognition to read lips, and generate voice. This is the same technology used to create synthetic or artificial multimedia content, also known as *deepfakes* (Feldstein, 2019; Hoffman, 2022).

The Global South is characterized by weak states and rapid digital connectivity. For instance, the number of internet users in Nigeria increased from fewer than one million in 2000 to 70 million today. This digital infrastructure enables governments to control their populations more effectively and inexpensively. While human operators have limited time and attention, AI

can automate many functions and cover a much broader spectrum. AI is omnipresent, induces behavioral changes, and creates a significant deterrent effect without the need for sustained physical violence. Citizens are aware that bots are monitoring all communications and that algorithms will detect and report dissenting messages to the authorities. Rather than relying on security forces to suppress citizens, which comes with associated costs and political risks, authoritarian leaders are adopting digital tactics to monitor, surveil, and harass their citizens (Deibert, 2015; Feldstein, 2019).

Finally, transnational networks that coerce dissidents and exiled activists have also promoted authoritarianism. These tactics, which range from arbitrary arrests to physical assaults, are enabled by cooperation among the security forces of authoritarian regimes.

Thus, digital technologies have reconfigured the public sphere, and with it, have changed politics and the political realm in general. They have also made the national public sphere more permeable to global dynamics. These technologies are neutral in terms of democracy, but they amplify its influence. In the contemporary era, it is authoritarian governments that have implemented them more assertively to achieve their objectives, which presents one of the most distinctive and dangerous challenges to democracy of our time.

4. Conclusions

After fifty years of the so-called third wave of democracy, contemporary trends are not encouraging. The current global order, compared to the 1990s, is more favorable to authoritarianism. The decline of democratic powers, namely the United States and the European Union, and the new dynamism of authoritarian actors like China and Russia, have transformed the demonstration and diffusion effects of political systems.

Digital technologies have also contributed to the rise of authoritarianism. While these tools aren't inherently authoritarian, authoritarian governments, especially China, have been highly assertive in their goal of using them to cooperate and project their power globally. Digital technologies have also blurred the lines between national and international public spheres, making political systems more vulnerable to global dynamics. Most countries in the Global South are particularly susceptible to these dynamics due to their technological dependence, digital divide, and weak civil and governmental infrastructure.

These dynamics are not irreversible. Greater solidarity among the world's democracies is needed to confront the threats posed by authoritarian governments. This solidarity should include both material support and the promotion of democratic values. Local governments and other branches of government not co-opted by authoritarian leaders are a good starting point for preventing de-democratization and democratic breakdowns.

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Cooperation on civil and government digital infrastructure is also fundamental for bridging the divides between global powers and national governments, as well as between these governments, local authorities, and citizens. This approach has the advantage of being less intrusive and adopting a long-term vision. The goal should be to empower citizens through digital devices, accompanied by greater digital education and accountability tools. Similarly, regional and global early warning systems for democratic deterioration can also be developed.

This digital architectural design is a technological, legal, and political issue. Digital companies have accumulated a disproportionate amount of power, thereby harming democracy. Civil society hasn't had the necessary tools to confront this immense power, which is why governments are positioning themselves as the main actors to promote accountability. This is precisely the proposal of authoritarian governments: that governments should control digital tools, adding them to their various sanction and coercion tools. This is a great paradox of contemporary democracy at the global level. For this reason, greater cooperation is needed among democratic governments on this issue. Technological tools should be promoted, such as algorithms that can identify fake news or threats to data security. National and international legal frameworks where ethical principles are a transversal component should also be developed.

However, the global agenda does not prioritize the defense and promotion of democracy. The world's democratic powers are using their resources for other objectives and have their own internal political problems. Contemporary global governance is focused on traditional issues like war and great power competition, without recognizing that democracy also influences these dynamics.

Finally, the Global South cannot be understood as a passive actor in these dynamics. The narrative of a more plural and just global order must also include that of a more democratic world. There is a great diversity of capabilities within the Global South, including digital ones, but in general, these countries have not shown strong commitments to promoting democracy. At this point, the actions of regional powers are particularly significant. Special attention should be paid to democracies like India, Brazil, and South Africa, and how they could promote democracies globally through initiatives like IBSA.

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