

# Governance in Authoritarian Contexts



Across the world we are currently witnessing a ‘democratic backslide’ or a ‘recession of democracy’<sup>1</sup>, a trend that is looking more and more like a regression in many countries towards authoritarianism. The current COVID-19 crisis is likely to increase this trend. The Swiss Development Cooperation’s engagement in authoritarian regimes has been subject to different kinds of learning processes within the organisation. This policy note is the summary of findings from a learning journey on *shrinking space for civil society* (2018/19) as well as a learning journey on *authoritarian regimes* (2019/20). It also relates to the insights from a learning journey on *governance in fragile contexts* (2018/19). Authoritarian contexts present a challenge for development cooperation: should one support an authoritarian regime with questionable records on elections, human rights and civil liberties? What if the aid spent in this country delivers more results in terms of efficiency than in other more democratic countries? The policy note summarises (1) the conceptual approach to understand different kinds of authoritarian regimes and trends, (2) SDC’s approaches to work in authoritarian states and contexts, (3) a collection of possible concrete entry points for programming, and (4) lessons learned for cooperation offices and HQ in Bern. A longer academic guidance paper is available on the topic (*Learning Journey on African Authoritarian Regimes – Synthesis report*).

<sup>1</sup> See for example Diamond, Larry. «Facing up to the democratic recession» *Journal of Democracy*, 26.1 (2015): 141-155; International IDEA. *The Global State of Democracy Report* (2019); Freedom House. *Freedom in the World 2020 Report* (2020).

# 1 How can we understand authoritarian regimes?

Despite current concerns with democratic backslides, it is important to distinguish between countries that have never experienced a robust democracy to begin with and those, where a reversal of democratic progress can be observed. For example, a lot of countries in Africa have experienced incomplete transitions to democracy and many of them have always experienced varying degrees of authoritarianism. The variations can be understood using two dimensions: democratisation and liberalisation.

*Democratisation* is about public contestation and the opportunity for citizens to make up their own minds about their political choices, express them publicly, and have their opinions taken into account by government through elected officials exercising constitutional control over governmental decisions. It encompasses all forms of changes in regimes that strengthen democratic political institutions and increase the capacity of citizens to make enforceable claims upon the government. In this understanding, democratisation is conceptualised as the extension of citizenship rules and procedures, including the secret ballot, universal adult suffrage, regular elections, partisan competition, associational recognition and access, and executive accountability. Democratisation in this broad understanding must not be confused with countries that only show “formal” signs of democracies, which can even be the case for autocracies. Thus, they have parliaments and rulers that are elected and nice worded constitutions. However, these institutions are often façade institutions with a “deep state” behind that functions according to a different logic.

*(Political) liberalisation* measures the degree to which these opportunities extend to all citizens equally. Political liberalisation approximates ‘inclusiveness’, and is conceptualised as the process of institutional change that increases political rights and civil liberties and leads to an overall opening of the political arena. It enhances the capacity of different groups of citizens to voice opposition and hold their governments accountable. For example, it includes review of remand (habeas corpus), privacy of home and communications, fair trial or freedom of movement and assembly.

Regime types can be compared in terms of these two dimensions: democratisation (the level of political competition and opposition that they allow) and liberalisation (the proportion of the population that can participate in politics). Taking these dimensions, one can distinguish four different forms and pathways leading from an authoritarian to a democratic regime. Most scholars today back away from describing a linear logic of democratisation and rather support the notion of different paths how democratisation can happen. Also, there is no linear way of how “backsliding” happens, but rather rulers narrow or widen boundaries of participation and expression in response to current challenges they are faced with. This leads to an adaptable ecology of repression, control and partial openness.

### BOX 1: Four different regime types



**Autocracy:** In autocracies, **neither there is a possibility for political competition, nor do citizens have the possibility to take part in public opinion making.** One of the main challenges in autocracies is that the (political) processes are often opaque and information is often intentionally distorted. While rulers also depend on maintaining the favour of people, they depend just on a small coalition of powerful supporters, not all voters. What makes autocracies particularly fragile is that there is no reliable third party to enforce compromises among key players of the overall system. This also means that power-sharing deals often lack credibility, which again leads to widespread uncertainty. Autocrats use façade democratic institutions like political parties, legislatures or elections to deal with uncertainty and for their own survival.



**Liberal autocracy:** While in liberal autocracies the rulers guarantee the adherence to **some basic human and civil rights**, there is **guided pluralism, controlled elections and selective repression.** Meaning that while a plurality of views might be allowed, all are guided or controlled by the government, and some are more controlled than others. This quality of the boundaries of participation and expression is widened or narrowed, depending on the opportunistic need of the rulers to stay in power. Depending on the political bargaining, sometimes some groups are even given the illusion of symbolic opposition and voice in parliament or public.<sup>2</sup>



**Limited political democracy:** In limited political democracies, some democratic practices are functioning well, like regular free and fair elections, however, the **participation of certain groups in politics is restricted** and there exist limited civil liberties for example with regards to expression of opinions or holding assemblies. Yet, the extent of these freedoms is often limited, as arbitrary detentions, torture or ill-treatment in custody are widespread. Also, discrimination on ethnic, religious and gender grounds still happens. Another possible feature is that the political competences of elected civilians is – behind the scenes – conditioned by non-elected officials like the military.



**Political democracy:** In terms of liberalisation, political democracies show the following features: **effective participation before a policy is adopted or rejected, equality in voting, informed electorate, citizen control of the political agenda, inclusion** (every woman and man is entitled to participate), fundamental rights. In terms of democratisation, the institutional features of political democracies are free, fair and frequent elections, a functioning and free media system, where there are independent sources of information, where citizens can found, join and leave political parties, movements or organisations freely.

<sup>2</sup> Brumberg, Daniel. "Democratisation in the Arab world? The trap of liberalised autocracy." *Journal of democracy* 13.4 (2002): 56-68.



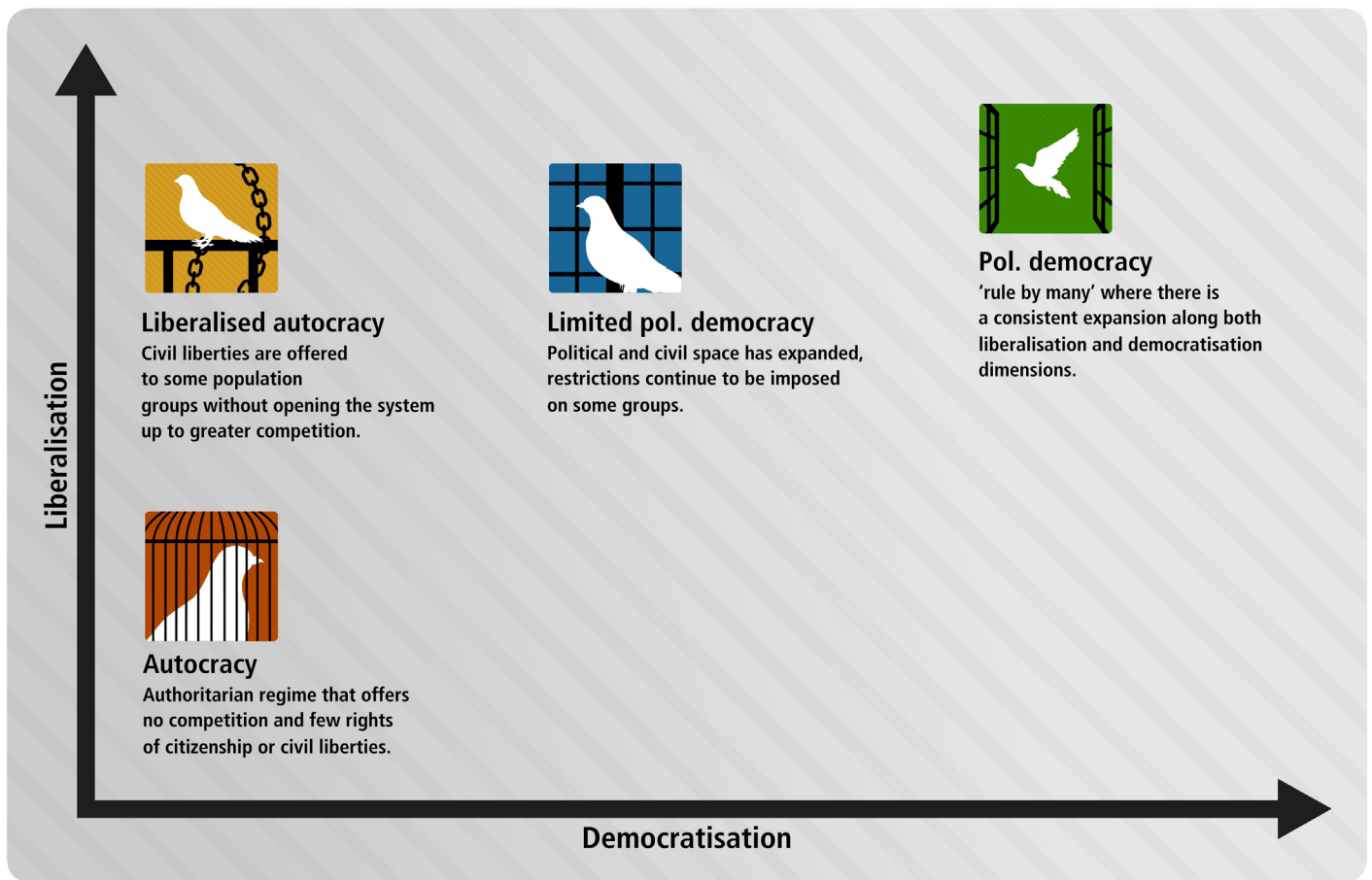


Figure 1: A typology of regime types<sup>3</sup>

**The practical relevance of this approach is the recognition that transitions out of authoritarianism (or reversals back to it) do not follow a linear path, and can combine different configurations of the two dimensions of liberalisation and democratisation.** Also, the approach points out that it is often the *gradual weakening* of democratic aspects that is problematic and that we can seldom observe an event that shows a clear cut change. It is rather a “progressive diminution” of existing spaces for civilians and their constitutional guarantees.<sup>4</sup> An important indication how regression starts however, is the fact that controlling the media and curtailing the space of civil society are often the first signs of backsliding, before a few years later also electoral integrity and other aspects of democratisation suffer<sup>5</sup>. The exemplary placement of a country on the two dimensions and in the four different kinds of regimes can also help to determine the kind of partnership and collaboration within development cooperation (see chapter 2). Here, a political economy analysis on the particular elite settlement might be helpful additionally (see chapter 3).

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from: O'Donnell, Guillermo, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds. *Transitions from authoritarian rule: Comparative perspectives*. Vol. 3. JHU Press (1986).  
<sup>4</sup> Diamond, Larry, Marc F. Plattner, and Yun-han Chu, eds. *Democracy in East Asia: A new century*. JHU Press (2013).  
<sup>5</sup> Anna Lührmann, Seraphine F. Maerz, Sandra Grahn, Nazifa Alizada, Lisa Gastaldi, Sebastian Hellmeier, Garry Hindle and Staffan I. Lindberg. *Autocratization Surges – Resistance Grows. Democracy Report 2020*. Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) (2020).

## 2 Approach and possible entry points when working in authoritarian states

### Staying engaged

SDC's internal learnings and experiences have shown that staff in cooperation offices and HQ constantly evaluate the impact and negotiate cooperation activities while working in authoritarian contexts. The first (or last) question in this multi-layered negotiation process is: do we want to stay engaged in a particular context? The Swiss International Cooperation Strategy 2021-24 has two relatively broad criteria to determine in which countries Switzerland works: a privileged access to the partner government willing to dialogue, and openness of the partner government for reforms. Additionally, staying engaged is a basic principle of SDC's commitment to work in fragile contexts<sup>6</sup>. Clearly, there seems to be a broad consensus within SDC that *staying engaged* in situations of democratic and even liberal backsliding is the better option than leaving in order to be ready once a window of opportunity for change opens again. While it will always be a political decision to be active in a certain partner country, experience proves that it is not sensible to establish "red lines" for SDC overall, as contexts are always different and decisions will be shaped by a multitude of factors and interests.

The *advantages* of staying engaged are that rather than being confronted with the situation of rebuilding everything once things have changed, it is better to consciously and constantly adapt strategies and approaches to increase effectiveness and work on areas or topics, even if limited, where change is still possible. Staying engaged also allows to continue supporting domestic liberal forces trying to stem the democratic decline or nurturing a democratic culture, practices and linkages in view of future openings. Switzerland is known as a country that offers "good offices" particularly in situations where dialogue proves difficult. It has an image as a donor that is pragmatic and neutral. Hence, staying engaged also means possibilities for constructive dialogue with "difficult" actors. At the same time, it is important to consider the *risks* of staying engaged, particularly to adapt its interventions and not become complicit with an authoritarian regime and "do harm". Particularly in a situation where change does happen incrementally, where freedoms and rights are starting to be inhibited slowly and gradually, the risk is not to be fully aware of this, and start to see these things as "the new normal". Such an attitude and approach is a very big risk and the acknowledgement of working in an authoritarian context needs to be purposefully made and stated.

Apart from staying engaged, an important general approach in situations of democratic backsliding is to move to a "bigger picture". Taking a regional perspective gives flexibility to invest where opportunities arise, while it allows to stay engaged in more difficult countries within the region. This also allows for learning of reform actors within the region as well as cross-pollination of ideas among CSOs and other actors.

Given the shrinking space we witness in authoritarian settings, it can be difficult to determine what is even possible in terms of partnership and programming, and how to deal with challenges and dilemmas outlined above. Taking the four different contexts as a starting point, the following assumptions about governance change have been established in cooperation with country offices that show possibilities where to begin and seek entry points. Additionally, Figure 2 at the end of the chapter places SDC's partner countries within those four different regime types.

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<sup>6</sup> Switzerland also endorsed the "New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States" adopted in Busan in 2011. The commitment is reflected in SDC's peacebuilding and statebuilding strategy (2015). Considering that fragile states are also mostly authoritarian states, this provides another justification for staying engaged. The OECD 2018 State of Fragility Report mentions that according to the EIU's Democracy Index most fragile contexts (31/58) are classified as authoritarian regimes.



## 2.1. Autocracy – focus on governance of basic services and dialogue

Thinking about and acting on how to stay engaged is most difficult in these circumstances. In order to have the full picture, it is important to stay/be engaged with all WoGA partners. If a backsliding in a fully blown autocracy happens permanently, the “staying engaged” needs to be discussed with more rigor among all actors using different instruments of Swiss foreign policy. It is important to give special attention to transversal governance when supporting basic services and support spaces for dialogue and trust building in any intervention.

- *Integrate transversal governance when working on basic services:* Working on governance through other sectors (health, education, and water) allows to stay engaged with a governance perspective. Linking governance with tangible aspects such as service delivery might tap into governments’ interests and open doors for dialogue and influence the inclusivity of governance processes that might otherwise be close to a “chosen few”. A sector-based approach helps to address governance issues in a pragmatic and possibly effective way as delicate political issues can be avoided. Thus, the focus is on trying to bring a country up on the liberalisation dimension by making governance processes for specific services more inclusive and possibly participatory.
- *Support spaces for dialogue:* Identify spaces for dialogue with the government on non-contentious issues and sectors like service delivery reforms in health, education or water, or focus on uncontroversial aspects like improving market supply. Build and strengthen “infrastructures for dialogue” at national and subnational level: institutions, mechanisms, resources and skills through which dialogue between the state and the people can be maintained and social cohesion sustained<sup>7</sup>. This can be done through working with CSO, public sector or also media actors that focus on factual information. Absence of dialogue is an important contributor to mistrust and suspicion between the different actors in a society and state institutions. In order to identify these spaces, better analysis of the regime’s elites and other key governance actors, including civil society actors, like their origin, their interests, sources of legitimacy, their role in the country’s independence and other critical junctures or how they see themselves is relevant. These insights can then be used to support indirect advocacy through various non-state actors for example business bodies, private sector producers or else and allows for a deeper understanding of the politics involved in reaching agreements over specific issues.
- *Going local might prove difficult:* Depending on the specific context, going local and engaging in de-concentration might prove difficult in full autocracies, as the “control apparatus” is so well developed that it stretches from the very national level down to the municipalities and there might be as little room for change at the local as at the national level. Often, internal security actors have a lot of room to implement measures and do this in harsh ways, to the detriment of the local population. As rulers are dependent on them for their regime survival, they seldom ask for accountability. Additionally, in autocracies a culture of fear as well as a certain lethargy often makes participatory approaches more difficult from a behavioural change perspective.
- *Risks:* Particularly in systems that build on exclusive governance of a few, the issue of “fungibility”, where an all-powerful government allocates funds away from services to supporting regime survival (security services, personal rents and favours) is highly problematic. The fact that regimes might rely for basic services on external support but still remain unwilling to open up spaces or dialogue, might lead to a situation where a regime is legitimised or even strengthened through cooperation activities.

<sup>7</sup> Building on the notion used in peacebuilding: Verzat, Vincent. “Infrastructures for Peace.” (2014).



## 2.2 Liberalised autocracy – focus on opening up spaces for participation and social accountability

All governance approaches that work in an autocratic context might be further developed in a liberalised autocracy. At the same time, it might be possible to push the system a little bit more into more liberalisation, with a stronger focus on the local level, opening political spaces to everyone, institutionalising social accountability particularly in the delivery of basic public services and bringing these to the attention of the national government.

- *Laboratory approach at the local level:* If a backsliding from a limited democracy to a liberalised autocratic regime happens, SDC usually stays engaged by reducing its operations, strengthening its work at the local level while engaging at the national level mainly through policy dialogue. While “Localising the SDGs”, working on decentralisation and bottom-up is a typical Swiss approach, it might prove appropriate in situations of limited autocracies. It is based on the assumption that people’s participation is a central element of liberal democracies and an important step towards more democratic governance and might be best nurtured at the local level. Moreover, it is a possibility to mitigate risks as working locally allows for a “laboratory” approach in order to find out what works and then if it does, this can be scaled up nationally. Thus, governance processes are not supported at the national level, where some of the good governance principles might prove difficult to materialise, but they are introduced at the local level with a strong focus on inclusion, participation and social accountability measures particularly for planning and financing at the local level.
- *Encouraging broad and diverse participation.* Strengthen programme activities that organise groups around interests at local level (associations, cooperatives, professional groups). These groups can become “buds of democracy and good governance” from the bottom up or the local level through the deepening of mechanisms of citizen participation in planning and accountability – with the caveat that these spaces can easily be infiltrated by regime’s covert security forces, or remain isolated islands with no systemic impact. Make use of successful “technical programmes” (like market systems development) that have a social component (like the creation of professional organisations) and where the alignment between private interests (increased income of beneficiaries) and public benefits (conflict resolution or gender equality) fosters improved relations between the state and its citizens.
- *Developing CSO landscape.* Support CSOs’ survival and growth through umbrella partners with long-standing regional experience that are allowed to operate in the country. Through these umbrella partners cooperation offices can provide strategic financial assistance through flexible funding, as well as tailored coaching and training, access to platforms for networking and exchanging experiences with other CSOs locally, regionally and internationally. CSOs need to demonstrate their value to the public and particularly to government in an effort to shape the public narrative. For enhancing this legitimacy and credibility, data is key. Another entry point might be working through art and artists in such a situation, as art has the possibility to bring issues to the fore without necessarily naming them upfront.
- *Social accountability:* Social accountability emerges through actions by citizens and civil society organisations aimed at holding the State to account, as well as efforts by government and other actors to support and respond to these actions. Even though the notion of accountability is difficult to talk about in liberalised autocracies, there might be room to specifically support social accountability. This might include a range of governance issues and processes including: public information-sharing, policy-making and planning; the analysis and tracking of public budgets, expenditures and procurement processes; the participatory monitoring and evaluation of public service delivery, and possibly complaints handling mechanisms. These activities however never aim at a political contestation of the regime in power. One possibility here is to support local media in informing citizens in a factual and objective way, without political bias. Also, depending on the context, the judiciary can start to play a more reformist role by supporting citizens in the tracking and follow up of public service complaints.
- *Risks:* While all of these activities encourage a broadening of the people that can take part in governance processes either territorially or given different population groups, it is important to be realistic about systemic change. Also, not all of these pathways of change that are outlined above might work in all contexts and without a proper analysis they might be flawed. Good informal networks and a broad range of mutual learning between different actors is relevant to feel the possibilities of change.



### 2.3 Limited political democracy – focus on combining social and political accountability

All governance approaches that work in a liberal autocracy might be further developed in a limited democracy. At the same time, it might be possible to push the system a little bit more into the direction of actual political pluralism: a decentralised system with strong sub-national regions and cities, social and political accountability that are linked; a range of actors contesting the political power holders organised in political parties or movements; regular, free and fair elections, functioning and transparent parliaments; a functioning media sector; and an open and deliberative exchange to find mutual solutions among citizens.

- *Diversification of power centers*: One of the features of an autocratic system is that it is by definition centralised and any decentralisation of power also means a contestation of the autocratic regime. However, in a limited political democracy, this starts to change and there is growing room for some political pluralism or diverse power centres or even the insight of a regime that for sustainable development, active participation of all government levels national, provincial, and local is needed. Thus, in these situations the decentralisation agenda with a strong focus on financial issues at the local level should be supported further. Sub-national units should be supported in the autonomy in financial management, revenue generation and long-term investments. For this, it is interesting to push the support of local governance programs to work more on transparency of inter-governmental fiscal relations and the sub-national participation in the annual budget process. This can then also help subnational governments to foster local economic development and achieve longer term financial viability and sustainability.
- *Encompassing accountability system*: Apart from social accountability, it is important to intensifying political accountability of state actors; not only the administration, but also the politicians. On the one hand, this includes watching over the system of checks and balances between the institutions (executive, parliament and judiciary). In many countries, the parliament and the judiciary are supported to implement their oversight function by various secondary institutions like ombudsmen offices or human right commissions. An independent judiciary is playing a powerful role in holding the executive branch to account. On the other hand, strengthening the government's own ability to combat corruption by diverse measures like instituting robust internal controls and encouraging citizens to report misconduct is also important. Accountability is additionally exercised through fiscal mechanisms, like formal systems of auditing and financial accounting. Also the media are important partners in the overall accountability system, as they disseminate information that allows to hold the public administration accountable. They can also serve as platforms of political dialogue around possible reforms. A good understanding of possible entry points in the overall strengthening of the accountability system can help to fortify democratic practices.
- *Diversifying civil society actors*: Also here, the diversification of the support to civil society actors might bring additional support on the way to a full political democracy. Focus on creating an enabling environment for CSOs to facilitate implementation, ease replication, ensure sustainability and enable advocacy on specific issues. There is the possibility to advance CSO support through core funding, aiming at increasing transparency, reducing fragmentation of funding and duplicating support, alleviate the administrative burden of partners, and save time and free up resources for a more strategic and sustainable engagement of the organisation. Particularly in situations of limited democracy, this has different advantages for the partners: predictable funding, flexible use of funds, setting their own priorities given the changes in the country, but also the bridging of financial gaps and facilitating internal development. In terms of topics to work on, start to build the capacity of local civil society organisations to form watchdog coalitions and advocate for political reform. It is imperative for civil society to significantly bolster data knowledge and capacity in order to be able to meaningfully engage the state. Supporting digital-savvy CSOs in collaboration for example with local governments can strengthen important information for government policies and build trust relations. Also think about how to support unusual actors like political movements that might not sustain over time. Another possibility is to support public education campaigns or supporting civic education to raise awareness and increase access to information with regards to democratic governance. Build the capacity of local media outlets to disseminate timely, accurate, relevant information; and generate an open forum for political discussion.
- *Risks*: In limited democracies, there is still the risk of political capture of key institutions, especially the legislative and judiciary powers but also independent state institutions and the media, leading to no credible checks on the executive. And it is possible that reformers from in- and outside the government are punished by the ruling elite and removed from office. Also, there is a specific challenge to such contexts in the assessment of governance results and how to measure if support actually led to a deceleration of a democratic backslide.





## 2.4 Political democracy – stay committed and develop further in light of new challenges

Democracies are not set in stone – democratic behaviors and processes need to be practiced every day and need to be negotiated day by day. Research shows that democratic backslides happen quicker, if a country is not classified as a political democracy since a long time. Countries that enter the space of political democracies also face a huge challenge, while the minimal requirements in terms of structures, processes and culture is in place, it might be difficult to “deliver” on all democratic promises, because of the limited financial resources. Thus, there needs to be continuous support building on the entry points mentioned above in order to build this historical trajectory of a democratic culture.

- *A system of checks and balances:* It is important to continue to support a system where each branch of the state has specific processes only they can follow that help to protect against fraud, errors or illegal action. These processes should be distributed evenly so that neither the executive, the judiciary nor the parliament have most of the power. One possibility is a focus on independent institutions which form part of the overall accountability system, another possibility is to strengthen media as the “fourth power”, and also focus on supporting a system of think tanks and universities that can help to establish good data for evidence based policy making.
- *Supporting political pluralism:* Democratisation processes are sustainable not only by relying on state institutions or civil society and media, but also on those institutions that regulate how politics unfold: elections, parliaments or even political parties. If the legislature does not have the means to check on the executive, it is difficult for them to fulfil their role in the overall system of checks and balances. Thus, the political parties need to be able to aggregate citizens interests, provide political choice and develop policies, so that there is political pluralism and choice. Elections need to be seen not as single day events, but as cycles where accountability can be asked from politicians. Finally, the political negotiation happens in parliaments, and it might be important to support the secretariats or commissions of parliaments so that they can prepare and support decision-making in an efficient and neutral way.
- *Long-term view of governance processes:* In political democracies, “using country systems” should be the default modality, in order to support and strengthen sustainable and long-term institutionalisation of governance structures and processes. Thus, it is worth considering (sectoral) budget support and especially strengthening fiscal decentralisation systems that go through the foreseen procedures, even if this might sometimes take longer. Also, in the same vein, it is important to strengthen actors outside the public realm with a long term view with the prospect of no aid flowing into the country.

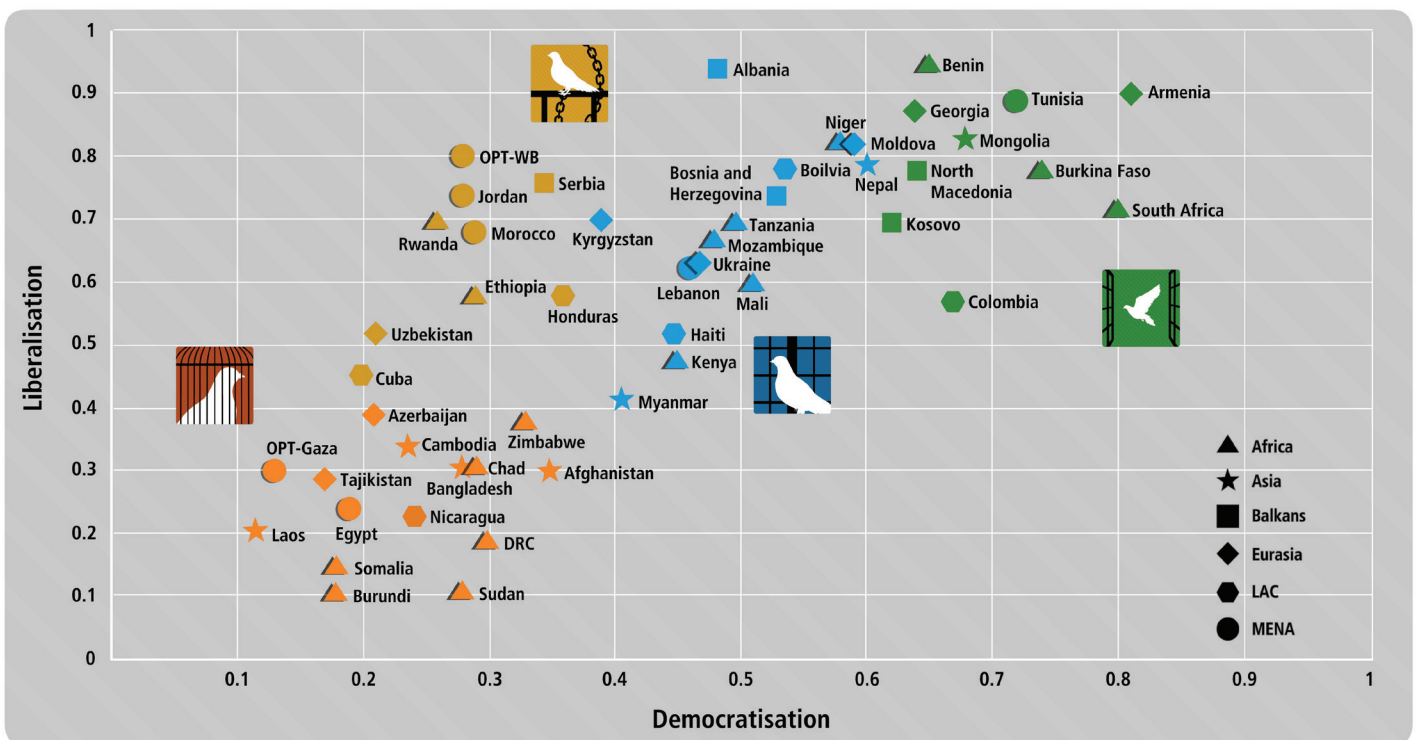


Figure 2: Categorization of SDC partner countries (using V-Dem data)

### 3 Management considerations – analysis, cooperation and personnel

In the joint process, three important implications for supporting programs in authoritarian contexts have been identified with specific learnings for cooperation offices and headquarter (HQ) in Bern. These remain relevant in all contexts, even in political democracies. However, particularly in autocracies and those contexts in between, these communication and cooperation aspects are of utmost importance.

#### 3.1. Politically smart analysis leading to precise overall Swiss Theory of Change

The formulation of (more) realistic and precise Theories of Change (ToCs) and objectives in cooperation programmes and projects is key in order to establish a more strategic orientation in authoritarian contexts. This should be based in strong *contextual analysis*. SDC depends on its cooperation offices and embassies to invest systematically in Political Economy Analysis (PEA) aiming at understanding elite settlements and to consider findings for adapting strategies and programmes. PEAs can be complemented with historical analysis and other analytical tools that help assess the kind of authoritarian regime, its historical trajectory, root causes of endurance, key actors (including critical actors and the overall appetite for democracy), triggers and entry points for dialogue, as well as level of peer influence at regional level. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) activities can complement SDC assumptions with evidence and lessons learnt. Apart from MEL activities, also administrative processes are implicated by working in authoritarian contexts: Oftentimes, administrative, financial or legal processes cannot run in a “business-as-usual” way and HQ needs to be aware of this.

##### *Lessons for cooperation offices*

- Invest in identifying critical actors at national level (going beyond the usual suspects and interacting with informal institutions, private sector, media, political parties, unions, the judiciary, the bureaucracy, parliaments);
- Identify networking and coalition-building opportunities (a) within SDC (making full use of NPOs); (b) nationally (allowing for NPOs and implementing partners to mingle, learn and share tricks and ways of navigating); and (c) regionally (getting critical actors to engage regionally);
- Be aware of what other donors are doing and identify opportunities for coordination (including multilateral and non-DAC);
- Establish ways and processes that ensure mutual learning within the cooperation office as well as with partners, and discuss possibilities of active adaptation of strategy and programming;
- For all this, the main starting point is an open and honest dialogue within the cooperation office and an empowerment of its staff to share their context interpretation and to formulate suggestions in an atmosphere of trust.

##### *Lessons for HQ*

- Allowing for flexibility and adaptive programming both in terms of activities as well as financing. To counteract this flexibility, establish a rigorous ex-post reporting that is done within short time intervals and that instead of focussing on external control, allows for joint learning;
- Better include and understand the differing restraints that the cooperation office is faced with.

### 3.2. Aim at realistic strategies that are broadly supported

With a savvy PEA as a starting point, clear and “non-glossed over” communication is important, not only across SDC between cooperation offices, embassies, and HQ divisions but also with other external Swiss stakeholders and implementing partners. On the one hand, it is important to invest in realistic strategies that are supported by all Swiss government partners (consider time). In particular the relationship between SDC cooperation offices and Swiss embassies is crucial for adopting a Whole of Government Approach (WoGA) in such politically delicate circumstances. The success of this relationship is often dependent on individuals and their propensity to shoulder some of the political burden associated with engagement in authoritarian contexts. On the other hand, clarity is also needed when it comes to the formulation of goals. In authoritarian contexts, there is a tendency that cooperation strategies and project documents are written in a ‘poetic’ style, at times with unrealistic objectives and targets. While this is sometimes a necessary element of working in a politically-charged environment, it can also lead to a lack of clarity on what the actual aims are. A better differentiation between long-term visions and more realistic mid-term strategic goals could enhance clarity and reduce pressure to achieve unrealistic results.

Additionally, WoGA is a precondition for a coordinated engagement with other donors. Apart from the fact that the coordination with other donors creates synergies, helps avoid approaches that proved unsuccessful in the past, and facilitates co-financing, coordination is particularly relevant in authoritarian states. It enhances the possibility that there is a shared understanding and analysis of the situation in the country, allows for joint priorities and boosts negotiation power vis-à-vis the government. Alone, there is not much to achieve in authoritarian contexts.

#### *Lessons for cooperation offices*

- Invest in communication: inform HQ and Switzerland about the complexities of working in authoritarian contexts, elaborating convincing business cases for democracy; allow for enough time to deal with and retrieve expectations from HQ, partners in recipient countries and implementers.

#### *Lessons for HQ*

- Support cooperation offices in defining realistic goals for the given context and mirror in exchanges, if aims and goals become too abstract and intangible;
- Invest in coordination efforts and communication channels from HQ side without a concrete demand from the cooperation office, so that when things need to be decided quickly, processes are clear and defined.

#### **BOX 2 – Quick questions to understand elite settlements**

- What are the factors and structures shaping the character and legitimacy of the state, the political system, and economic choices?
- What are the power dynamics and institutional “rules of the game”?
- Who are the key actors and what are their interests and incentives?
- Who are the main drivers and restrainers of change?
- Is power concentrated in the head of government or dispersed?
- Is the support base of the government narrow or broad?

Source: Adapted from DFID. *Political Economy Analysis. How to Note*. Practice Paper (2009).

### BOX 3 – Politically-smart donors

Using the new development orthodoxy of Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) and Doing Development Differently (DDD), donors should promote democracy and fight the modern democratic backsliding through politically-smart tactics and strategies:

- Learn from recipient countries' domestic actors to identify what the problem really is and identify solutions which are considered politically plausible and appropriate by these actors;
- Support strategic alliances, brokering networks and relationships with different actors, including the 'beyond the usual suspects';
- Calculate when it is worth using international norms as political leverage and when not to, to prevent backlash and accusations of undue influence;
- Pay attention to informal institutions, learning how they affect political decision-making;
- Work across thematic and sectoral silos, adopting a whole-of-government approach (WoGA);
- Use insights from political economy analysis and power analysis to identify windows of opportunity and incentive structures for change.

Source: Menocal and Domingo (2018) *Renewing Representation: The role of international assistance in supporting democratic revitalisation*. Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

### 3.3. Duty of care towards own staff and implementing partners

In many authoritarian contexts SDC's implementing partners are under pressure and more exposed. SDC can support them by strengthening their capacity of risk analysis and allowing an adaption or even a pull-back if activities become too risky. Partners' security is a leadership task and should not be delegate to national program officers who are often exposed themselves.

#### *Lessons for cooperation offices*

- Engage in a constant dialogue with your partners about the security situation and what SDC can and cannot do;
- Apply the Guidelines on "Protecting Human Rights Defenders" from the Department of Foreign Affairs to implementing partners<sup>8</sup>;
- Establish communication channels for times of emergency and crisis that even then, a dialogue is possible.

#### *Lessons HQ*

- Clarify SDC's duty of care policies for in-country staff and implementing partners;
- Increase leeway for adaptive management, such as flexibility regarding funding and process requirements, and help with finding resources to protect partners.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/home/foreign-policy/human-rights/human-rights-policy/swiss-commitment/human-rights-defenders.html>