

HACKING OF DEMOCRACY

By

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Democracy is often addressed as humanity's most sophisticated system of government. Yet growing evidence shows it can be hacked, not by code, but by entrenched interests, disinformation, and the politics of perpetual campaigning. Across the world, disillusionment runs deep. In 2024, a global survey found that 64% of citizens in twelve high-income democracies believed their system "wasn't working" (Journal of Democracy, 2025). Confidence is quietly collapsing. Back in 2016, David Van Reybrouck warned of this erosion in his remarkable essay "Why Elections Are Bad for Democracy." Citing data from the European Union's official research bureau, he noted that fewer than 30% of Europeans trust their parliaments. It was a chilling diagnosis of democratic fatigue, and a prophecy fulfilled.

Today, more voters openly express a yearning for strongman rule, the kind Van Reybrouck described as "a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections." It is not hard to see why. In many democracies, politics has become an unending campaign. Elected officials spend vast energy on re-election and fundraising, chasing applause with short-term populist gestures instead of long-term solutions. The result is clear. Institutions once meant to serve citizens now seem compromised. As Joel Day wrote in the Journal of Democracy, modern politics too often rewards "gamesmanship rather than genuine responsiveness." Power, not public service, has become the prize. So, the question is no longer whether democracy is perfect, for it never was, but whether it is still viable in the form we continue to practise it.

Recent years have produced many stark examples of leaders extending their rule through controlled elections. In Cameroon, 92-year-old President Paul Biya won an eighth term in the just-concluded October 2025 election, an outcome that Reuters reported the opposition immediately labeled fraudulent. Officially, Biya took just over 53% of the vote, but demonstrators insisted the real winner was his rival, and riots left several people dead. Biya's victory will likely keep him in office well into his late 90s. Likewise, in the Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire), 83-year-old President Alassane Ouattara recently secured re-election with nearly 90% of the vote. Critics note that prominent opposition figures, including a former president, had been barred from running, leading many to call it a "political heist." In Zimbabwe, a similar playbook is underway. The ruling party has already moved to amend the constitution so that 83-year-old Emmerson Mnangagwa, who pledged in 2023 not to seek a third term, could stay in power until 2030. Mnangagwa's opponents deride this as binding only on his party, not the country. These events show elections held in name only, where incumbents use the machinery of democracy to entrench authoritarian practice.

Moving away from political leadership in Africa, quasi-democratic processes have likewise affirmed decades-long rulers in developed countries such as Russia and Turkey. In Russia's

2024 vote, as reported by ABC News, Vladimir Putin ran unopposed and claimed 87% support, extending his 24-year rule to 2030. Even though toothless, international observers condemned the “heavily stage-managed” election as neither free nor fair, but on the ground, it achieved its goal to legitimize another term. Photographs from Moscow’s victory rally show ecstatic crowds and massive Putin banners, a carefully choreographed spectacle rather than a genuine contest. Similarly, in May 2023, Turkey’s elections reaffirmed President Tayyip Erdoğan after 20 years in power. Officially, Erdoğan won 52.1% of the vote, according to Reuters’ report. His victory speech framed it as a mandate to continue, but the result cements Erdoğan as Turkey’s longest-serving leader since its founding. Opposition figures denounced the election as “the most unfair in years,” pointing to media control and suppression of rivals, but Erdoğan, like Putin and Biya, brushed off the criticism. Even within the European Union, Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, who has been in power since 2010, has leveraged media and legal tools to cement his party’s dominance. When Orbán’s Fidesz party won another supermajority in 2022, critics warned that this “subversion of democratic norms” would further weaken checks and balances. In all these cases, the veneer of elections obscures the reality: leaders treat democracy as a toolbox for retaining authority, not as a system of accountability.

Outside these autocratic strongholds, even established democracies show worrying signs of decay. In the United States, for example, former President Donald Trump’s post-2020 campaign to overturn the election highlighted how far “respect for the rules of peaceful transfer” can be stretched. A mob attacked Congress after being incited to “fight” against the electoral outcome. On Capitol Hill, Republican leaders signaled they might challenge certified results. As if that were not enough, Trump displayed his intention to nurse the ambition of going for a third term, a scenario that has never occurred in the history of the United States. When he was asked about the possibility in his interview with NBC News, he declared, “No, I’m not joking, I’m not joking” (Reuters and The Washington Post, 2025).

We have always thought that the abuse of democracy was all about Africa or African leaders who were not originally born into democracy. At least it is understandable that the system (i.e. democracy) was colonial and foreign to Africans. It could be claimed not to be in African blood; in fact, some even coined the adage that “revolutionaries do not make good democratic leaders,” pointing to the President of Tanzania, among others, all accused of being democratic dictators, where some had utilized a tool known as a “constitutional coup” to propose amendments for approval by the legislature and the judiciary.

Some even believe, based on facts, that democracy was introduced in Africa to enslave Africa, because African leaders who have utilized the tools of democracy to stay in office for decades are still encouraged by some leaders of the developed world, so far as they do their bidding. Even though not literally made, we do not expect a public statement from a developed-world leader saying, “Yes, stay in power longer,” to an African leader who has broken democratic norms. However, the combination of strong alliances, one-sided

diplomatic relations, and minimal pressure for institutional reform does create an environment where extended tenure is tolerated.

Various research and backgrounders note that African leaders with decades in power maintain strong international partnerships. According to a 2025 report by the Council on Foreign Relations titled *Africa's Leaders for Life*, it clearly stated that "Washington has chosen not to penalize long-serving leaders of partners such as Cameroon, Chad, and Uganda," and further added that "analysts contended that the United States has often prioritized security interests over concerns about prolonged rule."

The same allegation has also been made against France, such as the close ties maintained between the French President and Côte d'Ivoire's President, despite the latter's incessant tenure in office. France was even accused of double standards in the controversial change of government in Chad. Despite its public stance against unconstitutional changes of government, France openly supported a military takeover in Chad following President Idriss Déby's death. President Macron's endorsement of Déby's son, Mahamat, who seized power by fiat, revealed France's double standards in applying democratic principles abroad.

These episodes prove that no system is immune, not even established democracies like the United States and France. The truth that democracy can be manipulated and used to mislead an entire nation is now fully evident. In other words, the "hacking of democracy" is no longer a conspiracy theory but a demonstrated fact. Democracy is no secret recipe for fair governance. It can be hijacked by money, propaganda, and legal manipulations, leading to "democratic" regimes that resemble oligarchies or dynasties.

It is time for a frank debate about alternatives. No system is perfect, and blind faith in one model risks breeding frustration and despair. Political systems must fit their people. A government that works in one country may fail in another because of different values, social structures, or historical contexts. Countries should be free to experiment, drawing on their own traditions and contemporary realities to devise institutions that actually serve their people, rather than cling dogmatically to a system that global experience now shows can be gamed and degraded.

The real question today is not whether democracy has served in the past, but whether we should continue with this particular eighteenth-century model when so many advanced countries are evolving