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Democratic Recovery After Significant Backsliding: Emergent Lessons

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Summary

In a global political landscape marked by twenty years of widespread democratic backsliding, some good news exists: in a handful of countries where leaders significantly undercut democratic norms and institutions, elections have brought to power new leadership with a strong declared commitment to restoring democracy. Although these cases are relatively scarce and the processes of attempted re-democratization still new, they nevertheless provide valuable provisional lessons about an emergent democratic recovery playbook.

In search of such lessons, this paper examines four ongoing cases of attempted re-democratization: Poland, Brazil, Zambia, and Senegal.

We begin by exploring what the backsliding processes in each of these countries consisted of. We identify how backsliding leadership in each case undermined free and fair elections, weakened or undermined the rule of law, constrained or silenced independent media, and limited space for civil society. But we also note key differences among the cases, based on the degree of institutionalization of the backsliding moves, the severity of repression, the distinctive illiberal focal areas, and the leaders' use of ideology.

We then turn to the question of what led the citizens of Poland, Brazil, Zambia, and Senegal to reject their backsliding leaders. We find two critical common factors: the resilience of civil society and its ability to inform citizens about the damage being done to their democracy, and the ability of political opposition to pursue smart tactics like forging coalitions and broadening their appeal beyond traditional supporters. While other factors—such as the role

of the judiciary and the nature of international pressure on backsliding leadership—played important but varied roles in ousting electoral backsliders in the different nations, the importance of civil society mobilization and smart opposition tactics stands out.

Our analysis of the elements of the prior backsliding and the dynamics of the turnaround elections sets the stage for an examination of the democratic recovery efforts taken since the new leaders came to power. We trace four main elements of democratic recovery:

1. *Restoring basic democratic norms and behavior at the top:* Ceasing or at least substantially reducing illiberal practices by the leadership, such as threats to opponents and denunciations of electoral processes.
2. *Restoring civic freedoms:* Reversing the repressive policies of backsliding predecessors—like in Poland and Zambia, where restoring media freedom was an early focus for the new leadership.
3. *Pursuing anti-corruption:* Targeting the corrupt, illiberal activities of the previous regime—such as in Brazil, where former president Jair Bolsonaro has been charged for his abuse of power and for plotting a military coup. New governments may also seek to strengthen anti-corruption guardrails—like the efforts in Senegal to reduce governmental conflicts of interest and improve transparency.
4. *Reforming institutions:* Undoing anti-democratic institutional deformations of the past, such as the political co-optation of Poland's judicial institutions or the militarization of Brazil's government.

The four case studies reveal important variations among democratic recovery efforts. For example, in the countries where backsliding was significantly institutionalized, new leadership often places more emphasis on re-democratization efforts than leaders in countries without meaningfully altered democratic institutions. The particular foci of recovery processes in each nation align with the different institutions and norms that had been previously targeted by backsliding leaders.

Unpacking the attempted re-democratization processes also brings to light several common challenges to such efforts:

1. *Pushback from political opposition:* Re-democratizing leaders must contend with fierce pushback from former ruling forces and their supporters, and a continued high level of political polarization.
2. *Difficulty of reforms:* From reversing judicial co-optation to unwinding executive aggrandizement, re-democratizing distorted institutions is often legally complex and practically difficult.

3. *Uncertain political rewards of a recovery focus:* It can be difficult for new leadership to maintain a focus on democratic reforms given the uncertain political rewards for doing so and the often-urgent socioeconomic needs of citizens.
4. *The danger of illiberal slippage:* Even among leaders who come to power with an apparent commitment to democracy, slipping into new illiberal patterns is a danger—especially because the new leaders inherit the reins of inordinately strong institutional powers created by their backsliding predecessors.

The paper concludes with some suggestions of steps international supporters of democracy can take to support recovery processes.

Introduction

The democratic recession of the past twenty years has sparked many studies of democratic backsliding.¹ Much rarer have been analyses of democratic recovery—where a country that experienced significant democratic erosion achieves a positive turnaround.² For the first fifteen years of the recession, too few cases of such turnarounds existed to provide much empirical foundation for such a study. But that picture has begun to change. In the last five years, a handful of countries have experienced tentative democratic rebounds, usually after elected leaders who had significantly undercut democratic norms and institutions lost power through elections and were replaced by leaders who voiced a strong rhetorical commitment to restoring democracy. These cases are still early in the process of attempted recovery. But enough experience has accumulated to warrant a comparative look at such processes and extract some provisional lessons.³

This study presents such an analysis. From the relatively small pool of potential examples, it focuses on four ongoing cases of attempted democratic recovery after the electoral defeat of a backsliding leader: Brazil following the defeat of Jair Bolsonaro in 2022, Poland after the loss of power of the Law and Justice party (PiS) in 2023, Senegal following the election of Bassirou Diomaye Faye in 2024, and Zambia after the election of Hakainde Hichilema in 2021. (Other cases also meriting study, though beyond the scope of this paper, include

Ecuador subsequent to Rafael Correa's departure from power in 2017, Guatemala since Bernardo Arévalo assumed the presidency in 2024, and Lesotho after its 2022 general elections.) For each of the four cases examined herein, three questions are addressed:

- What did the backsliding processes in those countries consist of?
- What led the citizens of those countries to reject the backsliding leaders?
- What forms have democratic recovery efforts taken since the turnaround election and how they are faring?

For each of these questions, the paper first presents a thumbnail sketch of the relevant events in each of the four cases and then a synthesis of the key comparative conclusions.

The overall picture that emerges from these cases is cautionary but not necessarily pessimistic. Courageous, often adroit political and civic resistance succeeded in paving a path to electoral defeats of leaders who had been working relentlessly to amass political power in undemocratic ways. All four have made democratic gains since the departure of those leaders. At the same time, their attempted recovery processes are proving often turgid and conflictual, and more partial than many engaged citizens initially hoped. Although definitive lessons cannot yet be extracted from the relevant cases, worthwhile insights both for domestic political reformers and international actors who seek to support them are starting to accumulate about a topic that will likely become increasingly relevant in the years ahead as more backsliding leaders wear out their welcome and further democratic openings emerge.

The Backsliding Context

To understand a process of democratic recovery, it is necessary to probe some of the specifics of the backsliding that preceded it. In a simple sense, to understand how something can be undone, one must have a clear view of what was done in the first place. A brief look at the backsliding process in the four cases highlights the following:

Poland: Hard Right Turn

Polish democratic backsliding emerged after the Law and Justice (PiS) party came to power in 2015. In the nation's elections that year, the PiS campaign capitalized on growing public dissatisfaction with the incumbent Civic Platform (PO), positioning itself as the party of reform in the face of the migrant threat and the loss of traditional religious values, and winning its first elected majority.⁴ Only subsequently did the party's more radical and authoritarian positions manifest themselves.

The most anti-democratic institutional changes enacted by PiS targeted the nation's judicial system. Through various illiberal reforms, PiS managed to co-opt the court system for its own political purposes. It placed loyalists on Poland's Constitutional Tribunal, enacted measures to give the party power over appointments to the Polish National Council of the Judiciary, and lowered the retirement age for Supreme Court judges, replacing 40 percent of the sitting judges with PiS allies. At the same time, the party also passed measures to increase its control over the electoral system. It granted the PiS-loyal National Electoral Commission authority over electoral commissioner appointments and amended election laws to give its new, politicized Chamber of Extraordinary Control and Public Affairs the power to validate or deny electoral results.⁵

In addition to this illiberal co-option of key governmental institutions, PiS also employed repressive techniques to gain influence over the media and civil society. It imposed limits on press access to government proceedings, gave right-wing media access to greater advertising revenue, and sought to prevent foreign ownership within the media. The directors of several public media companies were ousted and replaced with PiS loyalists who skewed coverage in favor of the party. And PiS efforts to control the information landscape extended throughout society, as the PiS government monitored Polish cultural activities and censored dissident texts, performances, or events.⁶ A 2016 law gave authorities greater discretion over permissions for public gatherings. Another increased the security agency's ability to surveil and block internet content.

Brazil: Enter Bolsonaro

The 2018 election of Jair Bolsonaro to president marked the onset of Brazilian democratic backsliding. Bolsonaro's rise to power came amid widespread public frustration with the nation's elite and political system, stemming from massive corruption scandals like "Operation Car Wash." His platform capitalized upon this popular discontent, promising "Brazil above everything" and an anti-corruption agenda rooted in traditional conservative values and anti-elite sentiment.⁷ Once in power, however, Bolsonaro proved to be an illiberal, strongman leader who led the nation's democratic erosion. His tenure was characterized by persistent anti-institutional rhetoric, attacks against critical media and government institutions, and efforts to militarize the state apparatus.

Bolsonaro's constant illiberal rhetoric over the years had a pernicious effect on Brazil's democratic culture. The most damaging of these narratives was his insistence that the nation's electoral system was corrupt. In the lead-up to the 2022 elections, he claimed that the country's electronic voting system had been compromised in previous elections and warned that: "We run the risk of not having elections next year."⁸ This conspiracy theory fueled extensive anti-government sentiments and pushback against the elections from his supporters. Bolsonaro's political rhetoric was often broadly illiberal. In multiple instances, he celebrated

Brazil's 1964–1985 military dictatorship, once stating that it was “a very good” era.⁹ He promised at one point to imprison his electoral opponent. And throughout his presidency, he often publicly threatened both the media and the judiciary.

Bolsonaro's attacks against the media fostered a culture of fear and censorship. He repeatedly suggested that critical reporting on his government was “fake news” and verbally attacked journalists.¹⁰ His administration targeted the media with lawsuits, investigations, and threats of imprisonment under Brazil's National Security Law. Government institutions were the frequent target of such attacks, particularly the judicial system. As Brazil's Supreme Court investigated the activities of Bolsonaro's regime and its followers, Bolsonaro repeatedly vilified the court, accusing it of unconstitutional overreach, and threatening to impeach justices and disobey the court's orders.¹¹

Bolsonaro also partially militarized Brazil's political system. From the outset of his presidency, he filled his cabinet with military loyalists and populated federal government positions at all levels with members of the armed forces, even at the cost of ousting experienced civilian officials. He permitted active military leaders to exert political influence, often legitimized through Article 142 of the Constitution which grants the military authority to defend “law and order.”¹² In 2021, Bolsonaro's efforts to control the military led the heads of the army, navy, and air force to resign from their offices. After the 2022 election, military leaders revealed that Bolsonaro had developed plans to overthrow the government in a military coup if he lost the presidency.¹³

Zambia: Rising Repression

Zambian political backsliding was led by successive presidents representing the Patriotic Front (PF) party from 2011 to 2021. In the 2011 election, PF candidate Michael Sata defeated the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy incumbent in Zambia's presidential election, positioning his party as a grassroots alternative that would solve the country's economic woes and reduce its reliance on foreign investors through a decentralization of power. Once president, however, Sata made use of existing and new constitutional provisions to expand executive authority. He leveraged tenets of the strong executive role enshrined in the Zambian Constitution to exert control over the judicial branch—such as employing his authority to select judicial personnel and suspend judges. Under Sata's successor, Edgar Lungu (2015–2021), the PF continued to wield executive powers to consolidate control. In 2016, the PF government led a constitutional amendment process that further entrenched executive authority, granting the president the ability to select the commissioners on the Electoral Commission and to dissolve parliament if it could not “effectively govern.”¹⁴ Amid parliamentary boycotts in 2017, Lungu imposed a state of emergency that gave him the ability to control public gatherings and suspend civil rights.

Throughout its tenure, the PF also significantly curtailed media and civil society freedoms. The government shut down opposition newspapers and television networks, detained journalists, seized newspaper printing mechanisms, and used media licenses to exert influence over content. It targeted civil society with similarly repressive tactics. It utilized existing security laws like the Public Order Act of 1955 to police civil society gatherings and the State Security Act of 1969 to censor and limit freedom of speech. And it passed new repressive measures—such as the Cyber Security and Cybercrime Act of 2021, which permitted police to confiscate electronic devices from citizens.¹⁵ The PF also leveraged this securitization against its political opposition. Most notably, in 2017, the main opposition leader, Hakainde Hichilema of the United Party for National Development (UPND), was arrested for obstructing the presidential motorcade and charged with treason, disobedience to lawful orders, disobeying statutory duty, and using insulting language.

PF leaders also eroded the country's electoral integrity. In both the 2015 by-election triggered by Sata's death and in the 2016 presidential election, Lungu narrowly bested Hichilema. During both elections, however, the PF government used its power to bolster its candidate's chances and undermine avenues for electoral competition. In 2016, for example, the PF-led Electoral Commission of Zambia adopted new procedural rules after the campaign period had started, state-controlled media provided disproportionate coverage for the PF, and the administration restricted public assembly. When opposition members later attempted to appeal aspects of the election, the courts denied their attempts.¹⁶ In 2018, the PF-loyal Constitutional Court ruled that Lungu was permitted to run for his third term, circumventing the two-term limit. As it became clear that Lungu had lost the 2021 presidential vote, he publicly claimed that the election had been unfair and even suggested that the country should not adhere to its results.¹⁷

Senegal: Elections in Doubt

Senegalese democratic backsliding began during the second term of former president Macky Sall, who was first elected in 2012. Following his re-election in 2019, Sall and his Alliance for the Republic party responded to the increasing popularity of the main opposition party, the African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity (PASTEF), by eroding democratic norms and consolidating control over the nation's institutions.

Electoral repression was a central aspect of Sall's executive-led erosion of Senegal's democracy. His government targeted the political opposition. It imprisoned Ousmane Sonko and Bassirou Diomaye Faye—key PASTEF leaders—under charges that included disturbing public order, provoking insurrection, and defamation.¹⁸ It later banned PASTEF and prohibited Sonko from participating in the 2024 presidential elections. In its most explicit anti-democratic gambit, Sall's government announced in early February 2024 that Senegal's presidential election would be delayed, seeking to extend Sall's own presidency.

Sall's government also imposed extensive restrictions on freedom of speech and the press. Police arrested politicians and activists for voicing opposition to the president. The administration placed legal limitations on media content, using a 2021 law targeting defamation or "fake news" to quash media criticism. At critical moments, the government suspended television stations, blocked the internet, and restricted social media. And as the 2024 elections drew near, the government imposed more limitations on journalists, preventing them from reporting on protests or political events. Violence against civil society protesters also surged. In widespread 2023 protests, police fired tear gas and even live bullets into crowds and protesters responded with stones and burning public buildings. The police held at least 500 protesters in prison that year and there were over sixteen fatalities.¹⁹

Backsliding Similarities and Differences

Major elements of backsliding by elected would-be autocrats tend to be similar across different cases. The core of backsliding is a process of executive aggrandizement in which the leadership seeks to amass and exercise exclusive dominance of political power by undercutting the political and civic forces that oppose it and by weakening the main institutional constraints on its rule. This typically involves efforts to: 1) undermine free and fair elections, such as by compromising the integrity of election administration and harassing or repressing political opponents; 2) weaken or undermine the rule of law, especially independent judicial institutions; 3) constrain or silence independent media; and 4) limit space for civil society.

Within and around this common core, however, important elements of variability often exist, which are crucial to understanding some of the dynamics of the subsequent attempted recovery:

Degree of institutionalization: One critical issue is the extent to which the backsliding entailed institutional changes, through legal and regulatory measures. Bolsonaro for example constantly criticized the courts and the media, yet did not manage to institutionalize those attacks. In contrast, the PiS succeeded in carrying out substantial institutional changes to the Polish judiciary. And in Zambia, the PF leveraged new and existing securitization laws to suppress dissent and undermine political opposition.

Degree of repression: A related but broader area of variability is the overall severity of the backsliding, particularly concerning the amount of repression it involved and whether it entailed political violence emanating from the backsliding forces. While the PiS and Bolsonaro railed harshly against their political opponents, they did not limit their ability to operate and compete in elections. In contrast, in Zambia the PF targeted political opposition with arrests and restrictions on public gatherings. In Senegal, Sata engaged in intense political repression, including banning political opponents and using violence against protesters. Similarly, attacks on the media varied in severity across the four cases from Bolsonaro's rhetorical attacks on critical media to Senegal's imprisonment of journalists and internet shutdowns.

Distinctive focal areas: Some backsliding leaders go beyond the four main areas of backsliding outlined above and press on other issues they see as useful for their anti-democratic drive. A distinctive feature of Brazil's backsliding, for example, was Bolsonaro's measures to militarize the state and undercut the boundaries of civil-military relations in the country. This involved appointing military officers to traditionally civilian-held government positions and permitting military allies to influence Brazilian politics and elections. A distinctive feature of Zambia's backsliding was constitutional executive aggrandizement. Zambia's constitution granted the president extensive control over judicial appointments and parliamentary proceedings. The PF-led constitutional reform effort in 2016 expanded Lungu's control over the judicial branch, further undermining independent institutional checks on the executive-led backsliding.

Use of ideology: A noteworthy difference among cases of backsliding is whether the process is wrapped in an ideological vision. In Poland and Brazil, the leaders were pursuing an explicitly ideological project—right-wing revanchism. They justified their attacks on the media, civil society, and the independent judiciary as necessary to create a new conservative reality in the country. The PiS promised to defend traditional Polish values, advocating against immigration, abortion access, and LGBTQ rights. Bolsonaro celebrated Brazil's former military dictatorship, demonizing the nation's "corrupt elite" and bemoaning the loss of traditional "family values."²⁰ Such value-laden appeals served to mobilize public support for the backsliding leaders in both countries. In contrast, little evident ideology infused Zambia's and Senegal's backsliding, beyond generic calls for national strength and unity. The PF rose to power in Zambia through promises of nationalizing the economy and initiating constitutional reforms, then co-opted executive powers to consolidate party control. In Senegal, Sall's 2012 electoral victory was rooted in an anti-incumbent campaign, ousting a leader accused of undemocratic practices before initiating his own power grab in subsequent years. Ideology's role in some cases of backsliding but not others is an important signal indicating whether the backsliding was part of a wider, lasting sociopolitical polarization in the country or instead more of a one-time power play by a particular leader.

The Turnaround

Also crucial for understanding democratic recovery processes is identifying the primary sources of resistance to the backsliding as it happened and the key factors that led to the electoral loss by the backsliding leader and/or party.

Poland: Success of the Civic Coalition

In Poland's 2023 election, the PiS party lost its majority to the Civic Coalition (KO), led by the Civic Platform (PO). In its campaign, the PO capitalized on growing civil society opposition to PiS-led democratic backsliding. For years, pro-democracy public protests coordinated by civic organizations had been gaining steam, particularly among the active, liberal youth. The PO thus framed the election in part as a referendum on democracy itself, as an opportunity to save democracy by holding the PiS accountable for its autocratic acts. The PO's focus on democracy overlapped with growing popular pushback against the PiS's far-right policies—particularly around issues like abortion access and women's and LGBTQ rights—which were key issues in mobilizing young voters.

The PO's success in forming a broader electoral coalition was another key factor that enabled the party to overcome the deep polarization and garner sufficient undecided and former-PiS votes to win the election. During the campaign, PO leadership urged voters not simply to vote for their party, but to vote for their allied opposition groups too. This tactic appealed to former PiS members who wouldn't vote PO, as well as to undecided voters who were frustrated with the dominant two-party divide. The coalition was able to capture a new section of the Polish public and PiS's reliance on former strongholds in traditional, rural areas proved insufficient.²¹

Brazil: Lula Returns

In the second round of Brazil's 2022 presidential election, former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva ousted backsliding incumbent Jair Bolsonaro. A key factor in Bolsonaro's electoral loss was the coordinated civil society resistance to his illiberal presidency. Influential community leaders from across the political spectrum spoke out publicly against Bolsonaro and endorsed Lula's candidacy. In late 2022, for example, over 900,000 civil society activists—representing a wide range of civic groups and sectors—signed a “Letter to Brazilians in Defense of the Democratic Rule of Law,” outlining the harms of Bolsonaro's authoritarianism and urging voters to remove him from office.²² Lula bolstered this pro-democracy narrative, painting the election as a fight between an authoritarian regime and the survival of the country's democracy. He paired this with an appeal to his previous presidency (2003 to 2010), highlighting his inclusive, welfare-oriented policies and promising a return to the “good times.” Lula's campaign effectively navigated Brazil's fragmented political party system, creating a coalition spanning the center-right to the far-left, while Bolsonaro gained little ground beyond his core base.²³

In addition, regulatory institutions and foreign states played a role in the election's outcome and in the successful transition of power. The Brazilian Supreme Court and legislature worked throughout Bolsonaro's presidency to counter his efforts to undermine fair elections, ensuring that public electoral financing funds were protected and working to maintain transparency measures. Pro-democratic foreign governments pressured the Brazilian

government to uphold the electoral transfer of power. Most notably, senior U.S. officials, including then national security advisor Jake Sullivan and a group of former high-ranking U.S. military officials, exerted pressure on Bolsonaro's administration and the military, pushing back against his claims of electoral fraud and warning against a coup attempt.²⁴

Zambia: Hichilema's Moment

In Zambia's 2021 elections, Hakainde Hichilema of the UPND party ousted incumbent president Edgar Lungu of the PF party. The UPND also won a majority in the Zambian National Assembly, ending ten years of PF legislative control. The PF's governance failures weighed heavily in its 2021 electoral loss. After Sata's death in 2014, the PF was weakened by squabbles over party leadership. Zambians viewed the 2021 elections as a moment to respond to the PF's mismanagement of the nation's economy, including the accumulation of massive external debt. As public concern grew, the PF failed to address anxieties about economic corruption, and Hichilema capitalized on public sentiment to cast the election as a referendum on Lungu's performance. Amid this public dissatisfaction with the PF, Hichilema's campaign successfully expanded its appeal on the national level, uniting disparate ethnic and political groups by incorporating diverse politicians from across the political spectrum into its platform.²⁵

Zambian civil society's demands for transparency and democratic governance were also crucial to the electoral outcome. Among the most influential civil society actors were religious organizations. Entities like the Zambian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Council of Churches of Zambia, for example, repeatedly condemned Lungu's illiberalizing acts in the lead-up to the elections. Likewise, the Christian Churches Monitoring Group monitored the elections, contributing to the integrity of the process.²⁶ Support for a free and fair election also came from abroad. The European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States provided funding for domestic election monitoring efforts and put public pressure on the Zambian government to uphold the electoral process.²⁷

Senegal: Energy from the Young

On March 24, 2024, Bassirou Diomaye Faye of PASTEF bested Amadou Ba in Senegal's presidential election. Ba was selected to represent Macky Sall's political coalition, following Sall's unsuccessful attempt to extend his tenure. However, that attempt to undermine the election mobilized the Senegalese public, ultimately contributing to Faye's electoral victory. The widespread public protests in the immediate aftermath of Sall's delay of the election were important in pressuring the Constitutional Council to uphold the election. In addition, there was a strong showing by a wide range of political groups—from election monitoring groups to pro-democracy advocacy organizations—to condemn Sall's action. From abroad, foreign governments criticized the anti-democratic move and called for the elections to be held. Notably, then U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken spoke to Sall personally, calling on his government to restore the elections.²⁸

The strategic choices made by Faye’s campaign were also pivotal to the outcome. Faye’s platform appealed to Senegalese youth, responding to their concerns about the weak job market and sense that Senegal was subservient to foreign powers by promising to spend more state resources on young workers, to re-negotiate oil and gas contracts with other countries, and to broadly put Senegal first. To capture an even wider swath of the public, Faye capitalized on his connection to popular anti-establishment leader, Sonko—with the slogan of “Diomaye mooy Sonko” (which translates to “Diomaye is Sonko”).²⁹

Defeat of the Would-be Autocrats

Backsliding leaders are often able to win electoral victory after electoral victory. What led to their defeat in these four cases? In all four, two core factors were crucial: the resilience of civil society and its ability to inform citizens about the damage being done to democracy; and the ability of the political opposition to pursue smart tactics like forging coalitions and broadening their appeal beyond traditional supporters.

In Brazil, Bolsonaro exhausted and frustrated many citizens with his chaotic, turbulent governing style. This led Brazilians to unite in large-scale acts of defiance like the “Letter to Brazilians in Defense of the Democratic Rule of Law.” The coalition that resisted his rule effectively channeled their efforts into voter mobilization when the 2022 election came into view. In parallel, Lula managed to work his way back from his weak prior position by harking back to elements of his presidency, like generous social programs, that were attractive to many Brazilians. And he reached beyond his traditional supporters by choosing a center-right vice-presidential candidate.

In Poland, civic actors tapped into widespread anger among young people with the PiS’s anti-democratic actions and its anti-progressive social policies to energize pro-opposition voter mobilization. They succeeded in framing the election as a referendum on democracy and gaining electoral traction with that framing. The political opposition forged a new coalition that presented voters with a simple binary choice rather than a complex multiplicity of choices.

In Senegal, both civic actors and political opposition figures managed to highlight Sall’s anti-democratic agenda throughout his presidency, producing growing citizen disillusionment and anger with Sall. The opposition was able to overcome the imprisonment of the leading opposition voice, Sonko, by having a relatively young, dynamic figure step into his electoral shoes and carry forward his message of resistance. When Sall’s maneuvers to delay the presidential election were blocked by the courts, the opponents gained still further momentum. Mass protests broke out across the nation, and Senegalese pro-democracy organizations joined forces to call upon the government to restore the election.

In Zambia, civil society resilience was also crucial in the defeat of the Patriotic Front in the 2021 elections and the political opposition adeptly nationalized its traditionally ethnically

oriented appeal, broadening its political reach. In addition, economic failure by Lungu and his administration—especially mismanagement of Zambia’s crushing external debt load—contributed significantly to the opposition’s victory.

It is notable that judicial systems only inconsistently served as bulwarks against backsliding. Brazil’s Supreme Court did stand up to Bolsonaro, spearheading efforts to investigate and counter Bolsonaro’s attacks on the Brazilian electoral voting system. In Senegal, the Constitutional Court’s rejection of Sall’s move to delay the 2024 presidential election—which was a notable change from its prior pattern of acquiescence to Sall—was a pivotal move stymying Sall’s backsliding drive. In Poland, however, the PiS was able to undercut the judiciary. It enacted reforms such as lowering the judicial retirement age and denying previous judicial appointments, which enabled the party to force out sitting judges and to fill the courts with party loyalists. In Zambia, Lungu leveraged his constitutional powers to appoint allies to the Zambian Electoral Commission and Constitutional Court. Civil society organizations later accused the institutions of manipulating electoral policies to support Lungu.

International actors sometimes supported or lent weight to domestic resistance to backsliding. In Poland, the EU skirmished extensively with the PiS government over its rule-of-law violations, withholding funding until the new Polish government initiated judicial reforms. The United States exerted some diplomatic pressure on Sall not to extend his hold on power past the constitutional limit. The Biden administration engaged at senior levels with the Brazilian military in the run up to the 2022 election to discourage the possibility of a coup. International funding supported electoral integrity efforts in the Zambian elections.

Attempting Recovery

To provide the basis for some comparative analysis of the ongoing processes in the four case study countries, somewhat longer thumbnail sketches are presented here, focused on the main actions that the newly elected reformers have taken since coming to power. After these sketches, the analysis presents a synthesis of a common “recovery playbook” and a look at some of the hardest elements of attempting recovery.

Poland: Reforms Amid Continued Polarization

Since the Civic Coalition (KO) bested the PiS in Poland’s 2023 elections, the new government of Prime Minister Donald Tusk has focused much of its energies on the restoration of democratic rule of law within the country. However, the government has also sought to make progress on other policy fronts, ranging from foreign relations to domestic economic programs. Internationally, it has made a concerted effort to improve Poland’s relationship

with the European Union, participating in key EU events and spearheading EU efforts like the greenhouse gas reduction initiative. And in January 2025, Poland assumed the presidency of the EU, promising to take an active leadership role in sharp contrast with the PiS “Euroskeptic” approach to the EU.³⁰

Domestically, Tusk’s government has sought to advance its key campaign promise of social reforms, though efforts to eliminate stringent abortion restrictions and expand same-sex marriage rights have been slowed by pushback from the opposition-held parliament. The government’s economic reforms have been more fruitful, as Tusk’s administration has undertaken several projects to address the nation’s high inflation rate, to increase funding for public goods like healthcare, and to develop large infrastructure projects. The Poland-Belarus border remains a focal point, with national security concerns related to the influx of migrants leading Tusk’s government to increase securitization and limit migration at the border despite pushback from left-leaning groups at home and abroad.

Following years of PiS institutional democratic erosion, efforts to reform the judiciary, depoliticize the media landscape, and advance anti-corruption have been at the top of mind for the government. As Poland faced the prospect of the EU withholding funding over the rule-of-law violations of the PiS government, meeting EU standards was a high priority for Tusk’s administration after the elections. In February 2024, Justice Minister Adam Bodnar announced an “action plan” to restore judicial integrity in Poland and re-align with EU requirements.³¹ The government worked to prevent retribution against judges and resolve existing disciplinary actions against them. Subsequent reform proposals from Tusk’s team have targeted major PiS-co-opted institutions, including the Constitutional Tribunal, National Council of the Judiciary, and Supreme Court. And they have included proposals like de-politicizing appointments to the National Council of the Judiciary and preventing political actors from participating in the Constitutional Tribunal. However, PiS control over the presidential veto and backlash from PiS-controlled courts have prevented these major reforms from being enacted. And among the most critical of the ongoing questions facing the administration is the issue of “neo-judges”—the thousands of judges selected for their position under legally tenuous PiS rules since 2018. While their presence clearly skews the balance of courts, there are ongoing disagreements over whether to remove them, invalidate their previous rulings, verify them individually, force them to rerun, or leave them in place.³²

Another other major anti-backsliding initiative by Tusk’s government has been reform of the PiS-controlled national media landscape. Under the PiS government, entities like the Telewizja Polska national news service, Polish Radio, and the Polish Press Agency had fallen under the control of loyalists who shaped media content to advantage the PiS government. Upon assuming office in December 2024, Tusk quickly moved to dismiss the executives of these entities, appointing new managerial personnel. In the face of pushback from the PiS-led Constitutional Tribunal, however, Tusk instead declared the services bankrupt under commercial law.³³ This act gave Tusk the ability to liquidate and reconstruct the media organizations under new leadership.

Finally, anti-corruption investigations and guardrails have also been a pro-democracy priority of Tusk's administration. The government has investigated the activities of PiS leaders—such as the Justice Ministry's finding that PiS-parliamentarian Marcin Romanowski had misused the nation's Justice Fund for political purposes, or the investigative audits which discovered billions in illegally spent funds by members of the PiS government. In August 2024, the National Electoral Commission fined PiS for violations of campaign financing regulations the previous year. And in early 2025, prosecutors charged former PiS prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki with “abuse of power” for his attempts to skew voting policies in the 2020 elections. Tusk's government is also attempting to bolster anti-corruption guardrails, promoting the strengthening of domestic anti-corruption entities and joining the European Public Prosecutor's Office.³⁴

Although the KO-led government has marked a dramatic departure from the illiberal backsliding of its PiS predecessors, some of its own activities have been met with criticism from opposition forces and pro-democracy actors alike. The major pushback against the government has centered around its pointed efforts to undo PiS reforms, which critics have accused of overstepping the law. When Tusk decided to dissolve existing national news media organizations, for example, actors from across the political spectrum suggested that the move had circumvented legal restrictions.³⁵ And as the KO-led government has sought to unwind PiS judicial co-option, debates about the legality of its policies have arisen—running the gambit from civil society actors who find the “bending” of the law to be a necessary tool to restore rule of law to the PiS-co-opted courts that have ruled the government's actions unconstitutional.³⁶ Evaluating the legality of Tusk's reforms has proven difficult, due to the polarized legal dualism that has permeated the Polish judicial system.

Aside from fraught institutional reforms, criticism has also emerged in response to the government's methods of engagement. While the newly re-formed news organizations are no longer sources of PiS propaganda, for example, observers have noted that the national media does seem inclined toward a positive view of Tusk's government.³⁷ And while the administration's leaders articulate a clear commitment to democratic principles that was often absent under PiS rule, watchdogs have pointed out that government leaders have engaged in some polarizing rhetoric—such as Tusk's promise of a policy of “militant democracy.”³⁸

Despite these ongoing debates, Tusk's government has clearly proven to be a democratizing force, characterized by a strong commitment to the rules and norms of democracy. PiS opposition to many elements of this reformist agenda has been near constant. The most significant barrier to political reforms has been PiS President Andrzej Duda and his executive privileges. Duda has repeatedly wielded his veto power to block the government's reforms—from news network depoliticization efforts to amendments to the biased Constitutional Tribunal. The upcoming presidential elections, however, will determine whether Duda can continue this blockade. PiS allies within the judiciary have been another source of resistance against Tusk's government. The PiS-led Constitutional Tribunal has exercised its authority to negatively rule on media and judicial reform efforts. In February 2025, the head of the

tribunal even announced a criminal investigation into the KO-coalition, accusing it of leading a “systemic coup d’état.”³⁹ In addition to this institutional opposition, PiS leaders have engaged in persistent rhetorical attacks against the KO-led government, painting the coalition as a threat to democracy and mobilizing large protests against it.

In these contentious struggles between the government and the PiS, other international and domestic actors have played important roles in supporting pro-democratic reforms. The European Union, for example, exerted pressure on Poland to restore its democratic norms, initiating Article 7 proceedings in 2017 and withholding Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) funds in response to rule-of-law violations.⁴⁰ Such external pressure spurred the Polish government’s reform efforts, and the EU has incrementally reduced its punitive measures as Tusk’s government has worked to advance judicial reform efforts.

Domestic civil society actors have also stepped up to hold both PiS’s and Tusk’s governments accountable for their policies. The same pro-democracy NGOs who pushed back against PiS backsliding have continued to act as pro-democracy advocates as Tusk has pushed forward various reforms. For example, the Stefan Batory Foundation produced extensive research pertaining to democratic approaches to improving the Constitutional Tribunal and has helped draft judicial reform bill proposals.⁴¹ Such organizations have also filled important watchdog roles—when Tusk moved to liquidate media organizations, for example, the Stefan Batory Foundation and other pro-democracy groups criticized the move as legally fraught. Though these organizations support democratic reform, they have also been critical of certain unilateral actions taken by Tusk’s government in the name of achieving these ends.

Brazil: Uneasy Democratic Normalcy

When Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva returned to the Brazilian presidency after defeating Jair Bolsonaro in the 2022 elections, his government immediately directed its energies toward advancing a multifaceted policy agenda. Despite Bolsonaro’s illiberal leadership, Brazil retained its core democratic structures. So, alongside some focus on institutional pro-democracy reforms, issues like welfare, the economy, and the environment took center stage. From the outset, however, a key limitation for Lula’s presidency was the fact that he was elected in a broad coalition of ideologically varied parties and rules alongside a right-leaning Congress.

Early in his presidency, Lula emphasized the development and implementation of poverty-alleviating social programs. Many of these initiatives—like the prominent “Bolsa Família” welfare program—had originally been introduced during Lula’s first time in power but had been eliminated under Bolsonaro. Lula has also sought to navigate an increasingly fraught economy. His key campaign promises had included reducing inflation, strengthening the economy, and reforming the tax system. Once in power, Lula introduced measures like the April 2023 fiscal framework to stabilize public debt, the July 2023 tax system overhaul, and the May 2023 increase to the Brazilian minimum wage.⁴² Throughout 2023, Brazil’s

economy accelerated, which Lula touted as a presidential win. By early 2025, however, excitement over the nation's high levels of economic growth had become tempered by growing concerns over the nation's high inflation rate and the government's neglect of its own fiscal guidelines.⁴³

A key talking point for the Lula administration has been its environmental agenda. Lula's policies have targeted mining in indigenous and protected lands, promoted Amazon forest conservation efforts, and advanced green energy. While the pro-business, conservative sector of Brazil's Congress has blocked multiple environmental protection proposals, Lula's administration continues to emphasize its environmental priorities at home and abroad. Indeed, as Lula has sought to strengthen Brazil's position in the international realm, environmental leadership—such as hosting the United Nations' (UN) annual climate change meeting (COP30) in late 2025—has been one key angle. More generally, Lula has devoted significant time to fostering relationships with foreign governments. He has spent considerable time abroad in diplomatic meetings and visits, hosted many foreign ministers and leaders, and made a concerted effort to situate Brazil in central roles within multilateral forums—such as in the UN Security Council, MERCOSUR, BRICS, and the G20. All these efforts underpin a strategy to position Brazil as a nonaligned leader, with ties across a multipolar world.

Even though Lula's presidency has primarily been characterized by his socioeconomic efforts, his administration's shift away from Bolsonaro-era democratic erosion has involved some pro-democracy reforms. The conservative-dominated Congress and a lack of motivation to pursue democracy issues within Lula's own party have been barriers to more extensive re-democratizing changes. The most fundamental pro-democratic shifts under Lula have simply been the cessation of overtly anti-democratic rhetoric by the president and his senior team. While Bolsonaro eroded democratic norms with his illiberal attacks, Lula has engaged respectfully with many political opponents, normalized government relations with much of the media, and respected the independence of government institutions.

On an institutional level, Lula has also sought to at least partially reverse Bolsonaro's militarization of the government. At the outset of his administration, Lula fired multiple illiberal military leaders, dismissed many members of the military from their positions in the administration, and transitioned the national intelligence agency away from military purview.⁴⁴ Several of his attempts to demilitarize Brazilian politics and society, however, have been met with pushback. A proposed constitutional amendment, which would mandate that any active-duty member of the armed forces who decided to run for office would be automatically moved to the reserves, has stagnated in the conservative Congress. And an attempt to abolish Bolsonaro's civil-military school program, which installed retired military officials in administrative positions at public schools, has been subverted by several Brazilian state leaders.

Finally, Lula's government has facilitated extensive efforts to investigate and hold accountable people associated with rule-of-law violations by the Bolsonaro government. Many of these actions have been undertaken through alignment between Lula's executive branch

and the Brazilian justice system. Brazil's Superior Electoral Court (TSE), for example, was an important pro-democracy actor throughout the Bolsonaro period and has continued to operate as such under Lula. Justice Alexandre de Moraes, the president of the TSE, is considered one of the most powerful actors in Brazilian public life. He has spearheaded the court investigations into efforts to undermine the 2022 election—overseeing the charges against Bolsonaro and the January 8 rioters.

An important outcome of these investigations has been holding Bolsonaro accountable for several of his anti-democratic actions as president. In June 2023, the TSE ruled that Bolsonaro's false claims about Brazil's voting system during the 2022 presidential elections constituted an abuse of power and barred Bolsonaro from office until 2030. Then, in February 2025, stemming from a federal police investigation, Bolsonaro was charged with planning a violent coup to retain power in 2022, which involved a plot to assassinate both Lula and Moraes. In March 2025, the Brazilian Supreme Court ruled that Bolsonaro would stand trial for these coup charges.⁴⁵

Though Lula's administration has largely demonstrated a commitment to upholding democratic norms and institutions, several of its actions have raised concerns among pro-democracy actors. One of these issues has been the government's effort to counter online disinformation. Shortly after assuming the presidency, Lula initiated several efforts—nominally in defense of democracy—to fight hate speech and “fake news” on the internet. And in May 2023, his government unsuccessfully attempted to resurrect Bill 2630, a 2020 “fake news” bill proposal that would grant the government the ability to censor content on digital platforms, prohibit certain content, and mandate that digital platform companies share certain data and information with the government. The content restrictions and censorship policies that Brazil's government has advanced have been met with vocal pushback from companies, citizens, and freedom of speech activists alike.⁴⁶ Lula's engagement with autocratic foreign leaders has been another source of concern among pro-democracy actors—particularly his early support for President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela and his sympathy for the Russian government's narratives about its war with Ukraine.⁴⁷

Broadly, however, Lula's leadership has clearly moved Brazil back from the illiberal erosion that occurred during Bolsonaro's presidency. The mobilization of Brazilian civil society in response to Bolsonaro's anti-democratic rhetoric and actions has largely ceased as a sense of democratic normalcy has been reestablished.

However, Bolsonaro's loyal base and conservative political allies have adamantly continued to oppose Lula's administration. The most explicitly anti-democratic part of this opposition was the overt attacks by Bolsonaro supporters against the Brazilian government in early 2023. A week after Lula's inauguration in January of that year, a mob of Bolsonaro supporters who rejected the election results stormed the country's Congress, Supreme Court, and presidential palace. Amid this insurrection, Bolsonaro and his allies plotted to overturn

the election altogether, utilizing military force to retain power. These actions have been the subject of extensive investigations—from the civilian participants to the implicated high-level military leadership. As these investigations have taken place, Bolsonaro supporters continue to rally in the thousands to protest the government and call for the end of Lula’s tenure. Despite facing charges, Bolsonaro himself also continues to politically maneuver. In early 2025, for example, Bolsonaro ramped up his efforts to fend off coup charges, calling for “support from abroad” as his son, Eduardo, personally lobbied officials from Donald Trump’s administration in the United States to side with Bolsonaro against the Brazilian judiciary.⁴⁸

The institutional response from Bolsonaro allies has also been extensive. Conservative congressional opposition has stymied Lula’s legislative agenda on various issues, ranging from progressive, indigenous land rights bills to pro-democratic transparency laws. In what Lula has called a “kidnapped” budget, lawmakers also continue to leverage their discretion over earmarked spending to control a significant part of the federal budget.⁴⁹ Although this conservative majority in Congress has been a strong oppositional force against Lula’s agenda for the past two years, it also has seen setbacks. Bolsonaro’s Liberal Party (PL) has struggled in the face of the ban on Bolsonaro from running for office until 2030. As the 2026 elections draw nearer, the party has been torn between pivoting away from Bolsonaro as a figurehead and directing its energies toward backing his efforts to return to the political sphere. For his own part, Bolsonaro remains defiant of his political ban and even insisted in March 2025 that “I am a candidate.”⁵⁰

Zambia: Recovery with Question Marks

Since assuming the presidency of Zambia in 2021, Hakainde Hichilema has focused on several issues related to the nation’s economy. While Hichilema expressed a commitment early on to rebuilding and defending the nation’s democracy, the struggling economy—especially the external debt burden—was clearly the most pressing concern at the outset of his term. Working with the Official Creditor Committee led by China and France and supported by the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) Extended Credit Facility arrangement for Zambia, the government reached several restructuring deals between 2021 and 2024 that unlocked IMF bailout funds.⁵¹

Hichilema’s administration has also prioritized engagement in economic diplomacy, reasserting Zambia’s presence in the international sphere by developing trade agreements and infrastructure projects with various other countries. Regional partnerships have been a particular focus for Hichilema, but he has also worked to strengthen Zambia’s engagement with Washington while maintaining its positive relationship with China. This approach of nonalignment marks a departure from Lungu’s presidency, during which Zambia deepened its reliance on China.

The administration has also focused on bolstering Zambia's mining sector through policies aimed at increasing Zambia's copper production, such as investor-friendly tax policy reforms and investment incentives. And it has facilitated several major investment deals, bringing in partnerships with leading international mining companies.

Though these economic concerns dominated Hichilema's early agenda, his administration also took measures to counter the illiberal practices of Lungu's regime. For example, one of Hichilema's key campaign promises was to tackle governmental corruption. In 2021, he introduced a Joint Investigations Team comprised of several investigative agencies, including the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), to root out corruption. Investigations have resulted in the arrest of various officials from Lungu's administration and family, for crimes including defrauding the government, theft from public funds, and money laundering.⁵² However, corruption remains an ongoing issue in the Zambian government. In a notable moment in July 2024, for example, Hichilema fired the entire board of the Zambian ACC after a whistleblower accused the officials of taking payments from politicians in exchange for amnesty, raising concerns about the integrity of the ACC's previous decisions.

At the outset of its tenure, Hichilema's administration reduced several of the restrictions on civil society that were enacted under Lungu's regime. In December 2022, for example, Hichilema announced the repeal of the 1965 defamation provision in Zambia's penal code that Lungu's regime had exploited.⁵³ In January 2024, the administration approved the Access to Information Act to expand public access to governmental documents and information. Radio and television stations that had been banned under Lungu were permitted to resume operations. And the Supreme Court ruled in 2022 that the Lungu administration's closure of *The Post*—an opposition newspaper—had been an illegal act.

But despite these early pro-democracy reforms, Hichilema's government has increasingly engaged in illiberal behavior itself. Although the government repealed Zambia's defamation law, several journalists and opposition politicians have been arrested for defamation throughout Hichilema's tenure. Critics continue to face censorship under laws like the Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act of 2021—such as in 2023, when police arrested several opposition leaders for online posts which criticized the administration. And despite promises from Hichilema to reform the repressive Public Order Act of 1955, the administration has continued to employ the act to regulate opposition party gatherings.⁵⁴

Hichilema's administration has also made political moves that raise concerns about its commitment to democracy. For example, critics questioned the administration's removal of opposition lawmakers from the legislature, such as in 2022 when the UPND party suspended thirty PF parliamentarians over their protests about the budget.⁵⁵ Then, Hichilema's decision to follow the recommendation of the Judicial Complaints Commission and fire three constitutional court judges in late 2024 raised concerns about judicial independence. More recently, political opposition and civil society organizations have pushed back against Hichilema's March 2025 proposal to initiate the process to amend the nation's constitution. Hichilema's administration argues that the reforms would enshrine gender equality in the

government, but critics have condemned the move as politically motivated ahead of the 2026 elections and criticized the administration's lack of transparency in the process.⁵⁶

While Hichilema's electoral victory marked an important departure from Lungu's increasingly autocratic rule, the fading of the administration's early pro-democracy focus has been of increasing concern for pro-democracy activists and scholars. The repression of critics and opposition poses a risk to the nation's democratic progress. And as the 2026 Zambian elections draw closer, the government's adherence to the democratic processes will be an important test of the durability of Zambia's democratic recovery.

In response to these worrisome trends, Zambian civil society organizations have continued to press forward as democratic watchdogs. Religious organizations, in particular, are serving the same protective role as during the Lungu years. For example, the Zambian Conference of Catholic Bishops, alongside the Law Association of Zambia, responded to the arrest of opposition politicians in November 2023 with public warnings about restrictions on democratic space in Zambia and calls on Hichilema's government to stop repressing political dissent.⁵⁷ Other civil society groups have also continued to pressure the Hichilema administration to adhere to democratic norms. For example, in 2023, a coalition of NGOs released a joint statement calling on Hichilema to repeal the NGO Act that restricted civil society activities.⁵⁸

The response of political opposition actors to Hichilema's government, however, has proven far less robust. PF party efforts to counter the administration have primarily manifested in rhetorical attacks—such as persistent criticisms that accuse Hichilema's team of biased anti-corruption investigations, illiberal policies, and Western subservience. But no mobilized political response has taken shape. One barrier that the PF has faced since 2021 has been extensive internal conflict among party leadership. In 2023, different PF politicians clashed over the party presidency, holding contradicting internal elections and expelling members. And after Lungu announced that he intended to return to the political sphere, PF leadership announced his expulsion from the party in late 2024, citing “gross indiscipline.”⁵⁹ This extensive party infighting has left the PF fragmented. But even within the political sphere, the capacity of PF opponents to mount legal challenges against the Hichilema administration's actions is limited by their minority in the National Assembly.

Senegal: Early Recovery Momentum

Since Faye's March 2024 victory in Senegal's presidential election, much of his administration's efforts have been dedicated to establishing the governmental composition that would enable him to enact his agenda. One of his first acts as president was to select Ousmane Sonko as prime minister, and the pair have shared many elements of the nation's leadership since. However, although Faye won the presidency, the opposition United in Hope (BBY) coalition retained a majority in Senegal's parliament. And from the outset of Faye's term, the coalition leveraged this parliamentary control to block Faye's policy efforts. After months of legislative blockage, in mid-September, Faye dissolved the National Assembly and scheduled

snap elections for November 17. Despite opposition efforts to rally the wider Takku Wallu Senegal Coalition under former president Macky Sall, Faye's PASTEF party won a significant majority in the elections.

This shift in the parliamentary balance of power put Faye's administration in a stronger position to pursue its sociopolitical reform goals. The "Senegal 2050" national development plan, introduced in mid-October 2024, outlines many of these objectives. With strategic pillars including establishing a competitive economy, advancing environmental sustainability, strengthening human capital and social equity, and improving governance and African engagement, the milestones of the plan include increases in per capita income, life expectancy, education, employment, and economic sovereignty, as well as reductions in government debt, the cost of living, social inequality, and corruption, among others.⁶⁰

Despite legislative barriers, from the outset of his electoral campaign Faye has prioritized efforts to reassert Senegalese sovereignty by reducing the nation's economic reliance on other countries. In line with this goal, his government has audited and cancelled several of its fishing, oil, and gas agreements with foreign nations. Faye's administration has sought to stimulate Senegal's domestic economy. It cut basic commodity prices and later drafted finance laws which would include subsidy cuts and tax reforms. In June 2024, Senegal launched its first oil production project. And in subsequent months, Senegal continued to invest in oil development. The country's economic growth rose markedly by the end of 2024.

Since his inauguration, Faye has also emphasized a new approach to Senegalese foreign policy. He has traveled extensively in Africa, emphasizing the importance of Pan-Africanism and subregional integration in his approach to reviving Senegal's role as a regional peacemaker. His biggest diplomatic focus has been as a facilitator within the Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS), after Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger left the trade bloc in response to sanctions resulting from their military coups.⁶¹ A significant aspect of Faye's push for regional engagement has been his hardline stance against France—embodied in decisions like closing France's military bases in Senegal and his promise to move away from the CFA franc currency with its colonial origins—which aligns Faye with the positions of countries like Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.

In response to the democratic erosion led by his predecessor, Faye has also focused his energies on various pro-democracy policies. Fighting corruption was a key promise of his campaign and, shortly after assuming power, his administration began to enact transparency reforms. It published the reports from Senegal's anti-corruption institutions that had been withheld by the previous administration. It enacted a policy which mandated that appointed officials resign from all other elected positions, seeking to avoid conflicts of interest. In September 2024, Faye proposed four new transparency laws. And in February 2025, the government announced that it would investigate Macky Sall for bookkeeping irregularities under his administration.⁶² Faye's government has also set the groundwork for judicial reforms. It launched a national dialogue process to bring together a cross section of civil society to discuss and propose areas for judicial reform. In June 2024, the national dialogue

participants released their recommendations for the judicial overhaul. Whether their suggestions—which include the creation of a Constitutional Court and limitations on prosecutorial powers—will be translated into tangible steps is not yet certain.⁶³

In addition to these efforts to shore up the nation’s democratic institutions, a fundamental shift under Faye’s presidency has been the departure from the illiberal stance of his predecessor relating to basic freedoms. Sall’s government was repressive of opposition actors, silenced public criticism, and even sought to consolidate power by eliminating the electoral process to keep Sall in the presidency. By contrast, Faye has continuously emphasized his commitment to democratic principles and competition. In a clear contrast with Sall’s electoral malpractice, for example, during the November 2024 legislative elections Faye called for “restraint” from the different parties, condemned threats from both sides, and swore to uphold free and democratic elections.⁶⁴

Despite its stated commitment to democratic norms, Faye’s government has at times acted illiberally. Most notably, the administration has faced criticism regarding its treatment of media organizations and journalists who question the government. Much of the conflict between the government and the press centered around Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko. In June 2024, he publicly suggested that the unpaid taxes of media companies could be considered embezzlement. Subsequently, media organizations claimed that the government was freezing their bank accounts over this alleged nonpayment. In response, the Senegalese Council of Broadcasters and Publishers coordinated a blackout day across the country on August 13, during which most of the nation’s daily newspapers, radios, and television stations did not publish or broadcast.⁶⁵ The protest led Faye to promise to engage in dialogue with the press through a platform that would facilitate government-press interactions. However, instances of journalist censorship continued in subsequent months, with the police detaining some journalists for publishing “false news” critical of the government.⁶⁶ Overall, though, the sectors of Senegalese civil society and other independent actors that mobilized during the democratic backsliding of Macky Sall’s regime have largely been supportive of Faye’s presidency, celebrating it as a return to democratic standards.

While Faye’s government received a positive reception from much of Senegal’s public, its political opposition has mobilized to counter it. With a parliamentary majority, the opposition successfully challenged Faye’s team. Since losing that majority, however, the opposition has had fewer means to counter the new administration. Led by Macky Sall, political opposition figures have nevertheless continued to rhetorically attack the new administration—accusing it of undemocratic overreach in dissolving the National Assembly and of “catastrophic” inaction, economic mismanagement, and electoral fraud.⁶⁷

Figure 1. Democratic Recovery: Core Elements and Challenges

<u>Recovery Playbook</u>	<u>Challenges</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Restoring basic democratic norms and behavior at the top▪ Restoring civic freedoms▪ Pursuing anti-corruption▪ Reforming institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Grappling with political opposition▪ Difficulty of reforms▪ Uncertain political rewards of a recovery focus▪ The danger of illiberal slippage

Recovery Playbook

Just as there is a common set of elements of democratic backsliding by elected would-be autocrats, the common techniques utilized by re-democratizing leadership in different countries form a tentative “playbook” for democratic recovery after the defeat of such figures, with four main elements. Figure 1 shows these four elements and the four main challenges, discussed below.

Restoring basic democratic norms and behavior at the top: The first ‘recovery playbook’ technique is the most obvious and basic: re-establishing basic democratic norms and behaviors emanating from the top of the system. In many cases, the simple fact that the new leader ceases the illiberal behavior and messaging that had become common under the backsliding leader helps puts the country on a much more democratic path. In Brazil, for example, Lula has not emulated Bolsonaro’s explicitly anti-institutional attacks against the Supreme Court and opposition politicians. Throughout Senegal’s parliamentary election, Faye emphasized his promise to uphold a free and fair electoral process. His condemnation of threats of political violence and calls for actors from both parties to respect the democratic system was a far cry from former president Sall’s efforts to suspend the presidential election earlier in the year and helped restore faith in the elections.

Restoring civic freedoms: A second key element of the recovery process is the restoration of the media, civil society, and political freedoms. In some cases, progress is made when new leaders end the previous administration’s repressive tactics against critical media and civil society actors. For example, Brazil’s media landscape has improved since Lula’s government halted Bolsonaro’s practice of threatening and intimidating Brazilian journalists. In cases like

Poland and Zambia, new administrations accompany these behavioral shifts with specific policy reforms to improve civic freedoms. In Poland, the PiS government had co-opted the country's public broadcasting service. Upon assuming power, Tusk's government dismissed the PiS-loyal executives, liquidated the organization, and reconstructed the company under new leadership. In Zambia, Hichilema's government reversed the media restrictions that Lungu's government had implemented, permitting banned press outlets to begin operating once more.

Pursuing anti-corruption: Third, in each recovery case, re-democratizing governments have prioritized anti-corruption efforts, usually focused on investigations into the activities of the previous regime. Tusk's administration facilitated audits and investigative commissions to review issues such as the PiS-led government's use of funding, its surveillance techniques, and its electoral practices. In Brazil, the Superior Electoral Court investigated and charged Bolsonaro with abuse of power, concluding that his false claims that the voting system were flawed undermined the nation's democratic electoral process. Later, Bolsonaro and other political allies were charged with attempting to subvert the presidential election through a military coup. Re-democratizing governments also seek to further strengthen their nations' anti-corruption guardrails to prevent future illiberalism. For example, Hichilema's government developed the Joint Investigations Team in Zambia to identify and investigate instances of governmental corruption. In Senegal, Faye's administration has implemented internal anti-conflict of interest policies and drafted transparency and anti-corruption reform laws.

Reforming institutions: A fourth common element of the democratic recovery playbook is reforms of key governmental institutions. Often, re-democratizing leaders prioritize undoing the illiberal changes enacted by their predecessors in order to restore institutions to their pre-backsliding states. In Poland, the PiS government implemented judicial reforms that enabled the party to fill Polish courts with PiS-loyal "neo-judges." Since assuming power, Tusk's government has sought to reassert the independence of the judiciary, working alongside civil society organizations to develop reform proposals targeting key institutions such as the Constitutional Tribunal and National Council of the Judiciary. In Brazil, Lula has transitioned the national security apparatus away from the rampant militarization that had occurred under Bolsonaro. Pro-democracy leaders also seek to further fortify their nation's democratic institutions. In Senegal, for example, Faye pledged to strengthen the nation's independent judiciary, implementing a national dialogue process to solicit citizen input for reform options.

Variability

Within this "recovery playbook" variations exist, often stemming from differences in how each country experienced democratic backsliding. The most important variation in democratic recovery efforts across the cases is the degree to which the new government emphasizes

re-democratization at all. These differences correlate with the degree of institutionalization of the democratic backsliding. Where illiberal leaders did not produce significant changes to the nation's democratic institutions, democratic recovery tends to be less salient within the new administration's goals. For example, in Brazil, where Bolsonaro's illiberal, strongman rhetoric was accompanied by few regulatory and legal measures, pro-democracy efforts beyond the cessation of Bolsonaro's autocratic tendencies have not been a key priority. Instead, Lula's administration has spent most of its energies on concerns such as social welfare, economic reforms, and environmental programs. By contrast, the magnitude of institutional shifts that PiS enacted in Poland has made democratic recovery the central focus of Tusk's administration. Issues such as PiS control of the judiciary and EU democracy conditions for funding have put such rule-of-law reforms at the top of the docket.

Recovery efforts also naturally vary in their specific institutional foci, depending on differences in the institutional features of the prior backsliding. In Brazil and Poland, democratic erosion targeted the integrity of particular institutions. For Lula, the key institutional threat under Bolsonaro was the aggrandizement of the military and the planned military coup. In response, many of his government's anti-corruption investigations and reforms have focused on the military's role in the political sphere. By contrast, the degree of judicial backsliding in Poland has forced Tusk's government to prioritize strategies to unravel PiS control of the courts. In Senegal and Zambia, the overall risk to democracy was more severe and characterized by a wider repressive and sometimes violent assault on political opposition and civil society. In those cases, recovery efforts have focused less on any individual institution and more on reasserting basic democratic principles, such as free and fair elections and the prevention of political violence.

Challenges to Democratic Recovery

All four cases highlight how difficult and complex democratic recovery is. Four challenges stand out.

Grappling with political opposition: Even when backsliding leaders have suffered clear electoral defeats, the political forces represented by those leaders are usually able to assert significant pushback against democratic recovery. In some cases, those forces maintain a strong position in the legislature—or at least did so for a time. In both Brazil and Senegal, for example, opposition-held legislatures have been a barrier to the new leadership's reform efforts. In Poland, PiS members retain key roles within the executive and judicial branches. While Tusk holds the prime minister position, PiS's Andrzej Duda retains the presidency and has used its accompanying veto privilege to block media and judicial reform efforts.

Illiberal or autocratic forces also maintain many parts of their political base, despite electoral defeat, and employ aggressive political narratives to mobilize their supporters to work against

the new leadership. In Poland and Brazil, where the democratic backsliding was wrapped in a broad conservative ideological appeal, autocratic forces have been particularly effective at mobilizing civilian pushback. Most notably, on January 8, 2023, Bolsonaro supporters stormed the Brazilian National Congress, Supreme Court, and presidential palace in an attempted coup. In the backsliding cases without such overt ideological underpinnings, such as Senegal and Zambia, pushback tends to come in the form of accusations of bias and mismanagement on the part of the new ruling forces.

The dynamic of severe political polarization that is part of backsliding under elected would-be autocrats is difficult to overcome. The escalation of political confrontationalism during backsliding creates suspicion and hatred across political lines that are hard to reverse. If anything, the new push for democratic reforms inflames the scorched earth mindset of the former ruling forces now in opposition who feel existentially threatened by the idea of deep-reaching change. Backing away from hyperbolic political messaging is hard when the public has become used to shouting as a basic style of political discourse. Overcoming polarization appears to be especially difficult when the backsliding forces spoke and acted as an ideological movement as opposed to just a narrow political group. Continued polarization of society is thus more marked in Brazil and Poland than in Senegal and Zambia. The ideological narratives of Bolsonaro and the PiS rooted the negative polarizing dynamic more widely in the population than the more instrumental autocratic projects of Sall and Lungu.

Difficulty of reforms: Beyond the challenges presented by oppositional resistance, another challenge in pursuing democratic recovery is the fact that some institutional reforms are intrinsically complex, difficult endeavors. The attempt by Tusk's administration in Poland to unwind the compromised judiciary is a vivid example. Even among the many politicians and legal experts who would like to see PiS's distortions to the judiciary reversed, there is substantial disagreement over the correct way to handle the PiS neo-judges and the overlapping judicial authorities that currently exist within Poland's court system. The government faces thorny legal questions that it has not yet resolved, such as whether it should oust the neo-judges and whether it should uphold their prior rulings. In Zambia, unwinding the constitutional aggrandizement of executive power effected during the Lungu years has also proven complex, and has not yet been achieved. The more that backsliding was institutionalized, the greater are the institutional conundrums and complexities facing new pro-democratic reformers. Moreover, many of the institutional distortions introduced by backsliding leaders are particular to the institutional landscape of the country in question and thus reformers cannot easily draw upon solutions from other countries.

Uncertain political rewards of a recovery focus: Democratic recovery naturally seems like an urgent priority when a backsliding leader is defeated and a new government promising a more pro-democratic approach takes over. Yet after the quick wins of simply stopping the torrent of polarizing, anti-democratic messaging and behavior, maintaining a focus on longer-term, difficult processes of corrective institutional reforms is not easy. Other

priorities—especially pressing socioeconomic problems—naturally compete for attention. The potential political rewards for delivering on those can quickly feel more significant than those that may come from recovering judicial independence or depoliticizing state television. It is hard for a new government to maintain a focus on democracy recovery in the face of inevitably limited political capital and within a constrained electoral timeframe.

The danger of illiberal slippage: The administrations that succeeded the defeat of an elected backsliding government came in with an apparent commitment to democracy in each of the four cases. Yet, the danger of slipping into illiberal patterns is always present. In part, this is because of the nature of the power structures that these new leaders take over. Prior processes of executive aggrandizement leave successors with inordinately strong institutional powers. It can be tempting for leaders to retain and misuse these powers rather than back away from over-centralization. In Zambia, for example, the president has extensive influence over the legislative and judicial branches. During its tenure, the PF-led government employed various censorship laws and a constitutional amendment to further consolidate power in the executive. Since his election, Hichilema's early progress in reasserting democratic norms has slowed and pro-democracy actors are concerned with the administration's increasingly illiberal acts. His government has faced criticism for employing censorship laws against critics and abusing its executive power against institutional opposition. In Senegal, while Faye's administration has largely stepped away from the political and media repression that had characterized Sall's regime, it has been accused of continuing to employ government powers to curtail critical speech.

The illiberal temptation also arises because of the combination of the sense of righteousness about the new pro-democracy agenda and frustration with stubborn pushback from the ousted forces. Gauging the appropriate boundaries for corrective pro-democratic reforms can be tricky—not least because opposition actors often decry recovery efforts as undemocratic for tactical reasons. Notably, though, in each of the cases we examine, civil society actors have raised meaningful concerns about democratically questionable behavior on the part of the new leadership. In Poland, for example, Tusk's government elicited criticism when it liquidated the PiS-co-opted news service. In addition to widespread opposition condemnation, independent civil society organizations also suggested that the act may have circumvented the law. In Brazil, the administration and Superior Court's anti-disinformation efforts—undertaken in the name of defending democracy—have triggered criticism from nonpartisan scholars for posing a risk to freedoms of expression. In Zambia, Hichilema's government has faced serious accusations of selective targeting of opposition actors in its anti-corruption efforts. And Senegalese civil society groups have raised valid criticisms of the government's attacks on the media.

Conclusions

In the discouraging context of continued global democratic recession, some comfort can be taken from the fact that at least some cases of democratic openings or turnarounds are occurring alongside the many cases of democratic erosion. An important emergent category of such positive cases consists of those involving the electoral defeat of a political leader who was driving a process of democratic backsliding and the coming to power of new leadership publicly committed to democratic recovery.

It is heartening to recognize that some backsliding leaders can, in fact, be defeated electorally, despite their efforts to constrain political opposition, limit civic space, manipulate electoral processes, and bend governing institutions to serve their partisan interests. A critical finding in this regard is the central role that determined political opposition and equally determined independent civil society—especially when they are able to build broad, inclusive coalitions—play in making this possible. Institutional constraints on overweening power holders, like judicial institutions, are usually of secondary importance at best. Simply put, there is no substitute for energetic political and civic mobilization against democratic erosion. And despite whatever successes they have in amassing and manipulating power, some backsliding leaders do exhaust significant segments of the citizenry with their corruption and constant strategies of toxic polarization.

It is also heartening that democratic progress after the departure of backsliding leaders is possible. In all four of the cases analyzed in this study, democracy has advanced tangibly since the backsliding leadership left power. Basic political and civic freedoms have markedly improved, and some pro-democratic institutional reforms have been achieved. At the same time, the challenges are daunting. Breaking the cycle of polarization is difficult in the face of continued stubborn opposition from the prior ruling forces. Achieving the necessary deep-reaching institutional reforms takes years and presents vexing tactical choices. Maintaining a focus on a recovery agenda is not easy given other competing priorities, especially pressing socioeconomic needs. Avoiding the almost inevitable temptation of illiberal slippage by new power holders requires vigilance and continued pressure from civil society groups and others.

The role of external actors in such recovery processes—whether that of other governments, multilateral institutions, or international nongovernmental organizations genuinely committed to being supportive—is almost always greatly secondary to that of domestic political and civic actors. Yet they can nevertheless have a positive influence. They can extend diplomatic and economic benefits in response to clear pro-democratic moves on the part of new governments. They can help aggregate lessons of recovery—especially concerning complex institutional reforms like those related to the rule of law—and offer opportunities for leaders engaged in such processes to learn from each other and benefit from some cross-national solidarity. They can support anti-corruption efforts with transnational anti-corruption mechanisms and advocacy. They can avoid encouraging new reformist governments to think they can do no wrong. And they can help call attention to new illiberal slippage when it occurs.

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