Democratic backsliding in South Asia: Is terrorism to blame?

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Abstract

The literature on the decline of democracy and the causes of democratic backsliding primarily emphasize domestic factors as causal variables for the worsening quality of democracy. However, analysis on the extent to which external factors influence democratic backsliding is largely neglected. My paper attempts to grapple with this lacuna, by looking into the effects of terrorism, as a causal variable of democratic backsliding. I hypothesize that increased casualties out of terrorism result in change in the quality of democracy subsequently leading to backsliding. The study of democratic backsliding has mainly concentrated on Europe and Latin America, and to some extent, on South-east Asia. This research delves deep into the South Asian region to understand the impact of terrorism on the quality and stability of democracies and hence, forms my case study. All seven states that this region is comprised of – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka along with all cases of terrorism, within the period 1970-2017 come within the purview of this research. South Asia features within the top five regions of the IPE Global Terrorism Database as the acute sufferer of terrorism, both domestic and international. Operationalizing terrorism in terms of the count of casualties that resulted from various acts of terror, I specifically hypothesize that increased terrorism result in change in the quality of democracy subsequently leading to backsliding.

Keywords: democratic backsliding, terrorism, South Asia, Global Terrorism Database (GTD), case study

Introduction

Scholarship on the quality and stability of democracy has garnered increased attention in the light of the election of Donald Trump in 2016 as the President of the United States. The extensive literature on the decline of democracy and the causes of democratic backsliding primarily emphasize domestic factors as causal variables for the worsening quality of democracy. A comparative analysis of the common patterns of democratic breakdown or regression across different regions concentrate on factors like economic conditions, political and institutional aspects as well as social issues. However, analysis on the extent to which external factors influence democratic backsliding is largely neglected. Bunce (2018), Waldner and Lust (2018) and Runciman (2018) do point out the need to analyze the impact of exogenous factors for a better understanding of the issue of democratic rollback.

My paper attempts to grapple with this lacuna, by looking into the effects of terrorism as a causal variable of the decline of democracy. The study of democratic backsliding has mainly concentrated on Europe and Latin America, and to some extent, on South-east Asia. I think that the South Asian region is an intriguing theatre to understand the impact of terrorism on the quality and stability of democracies and hence, it serves as my case study. I hypothesize that increased terrorism tends to sow the seeds for democratic backsliding.

In the following sections of the paper, I review the existing literature on democratic backsliding, enumerating the very concept of backsliding and the conditions that foster democratic decline. In the light of democratic backsliding, I delve into the literature on terrorism. I delineate my hypothesis and a set of alternative explanations in this section. Analysis of the impact of terrorism in the South Asian region, comprised of seven countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) forms the case study section. In the final section, I talk about the limitations of this study and point out some future avenues of research.

Democratic Backsliding

A consensus on what we mean by democracy is imperative before democratic backsliding is to be understood. In common parlance, democracy is characterized as that kind of regime that conducts regular, multiparty elections under a civilian constitutional order. The elections, to be free and fair, and thereby democratic, require freedom to advocate,

contest and campaign. Additionally, it necessitates a fair and neutral electoral system, a credible mechanism of dispute resolution, smooth functioning of the mass media as well as independent vote monitoring (Diamond 2008). Democracy includes three elements – democratic electoral system conducting periodic free and fair elections, where the losing side cedes power; liberty of speech and association related directly to political contestation; and stable and non-corrupt administrative system along with the judiciary, which can manage electoral competition without fear or coercion (Huq 2017). For a democracy to persist, constitutionalism, compromise and respect for the rule of law are fundamental along with levels of development, inequality, economic performance, presence or absence of natural resources, state capacity, the strength of the civil society and friendly ties to the West (Diamond 2008; Levitsky and Way 2015). For a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of democratic backsliding, conceptualizing the quality of democracy is important as it affects operationalization, measurement and analysis of the phenomenon (Bermeo 2016; Guasti and Mansfeldová 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018). Democratic backsliding is defined as "the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy" (Bermeo 2016, p. 5). Waldner and Lust (2015, p. 3) view it as "changes that negatively affect competitive elections, liberties, and accountability".

Democratic backsliding manifests through erosion of faith in democratic governments among elites and citizens, erosion of support for democratic institutions (Haggard and Kaufman 1994). The concept of democratic backsliding is often equated with democratic regression, rollback, transition or breakdown. Tomini and Wagemann (2018) attempt to differentiate these concepts. In understanding the qualitative differences between democratic regression and democratic breakdown, they rely on the distinction proposed by Erdmann (2011) between *loss of quality* (a negative process concerning democracy resulting in a change within a democratic regime), *hybridization* (a change from a democratic to a hybrid regime) and *breakdown of democracy* (a change from a democratic to an authoritarian regime).

Increasingly, democracies around the world, especially those in central and eastern Europe, are under stress through erosion and decay. Democratic decline is characterized by decline in the stability of political institutions (politicization), decline in political participation and violation of the rule of law. All these factors affect the quality of democracy. The causes behind it include three elements:

concept/model of democracy, whether it is representative, participative, deliberative or liberal, is under stress; measurement of the quality of democracy through democratic indices or attitudinal surveys and identification of causes (internal political struggle, top-down strategic manipulation to foster political competition or external shocks) (Guasti and Mansfeldová 2018).

Waldner and Lust (2018) attempt to enrich the theoretical foundations of the study on democratic backsliding as they contend that the literature suffers from two theoretical challenges. First, the theories are inadequate to readily explain the phenomenon of backsliding and second, the theoretical debates, centered around the causes of democratic transitions, their breakdowns, authoritarian resilience and democratic consolidation, are far from resolved. However, the picture is not so grim. Methodological improvements in the study of democratic backsliding along with concept operationalization are evident in the works of Guasti and Mansfeldóva (2018) and Bermeo (2016).

By delineating the six variants of democratic backsliding – coups d'etat, executive coups, election-day vote fraud, promissory coups, executive aggrandizement, strategic harassment and manipulation, Bermeo (2016) argues that the first three variants have waned, while the latter three continue to pose a challenge to a healthier functioning of democracy. She warns that backsliding, being an incremental and ambiguous process, proves difficult to garner mass mobilization. It occurs in ways which seem rational, given the domestic and international context. However, she remains hopeful that with proper awareness, democratic decline can be checked.

The seed of authoritarianism is one of the aspects of democratic backsliding that is worth noting (Foa and Mounk 2017; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Democratic deconsolidation, characterized by citizens believing less in democratic values, and hence, attracted to authoritarian principles thereby voting for anti-system parties, feature as the fundamental explanation for democratic breakdown for Foa and Mounk (2017). Giving a detailed analysis of Poland and Venezuela, they argue that deconsolidation is concerned with the durability of democratic rule rather than its extent. Hence, democratic stability rests on how consolidated a democracy is as well as how much citizen trust and support it can garner. In this context, Arendt's (1951) book on totalitarianism seems relevant as she puts special emphasis on the role of propaganda in the birth and continuance of totalitarian regimes. Any study of the death and decline of democracy should pay heed to the factors that sow the seeds for the emergence of totalitarian-

ism. Moreover, in the post-Cold War world, the way propaganda is used as a tactic for garnering greater support by populist leaders needs further analysis.

Berman, Connolly, Cramer, Parker and Bunce enumerate several other factors that are necessary to be taken into account while studying democratic backsliding (2018 APSA Review Symposium). Any analysis of democratic decline must consist of a bottom-up approach – a perspective of citizens about the quality of democracy (Berman 2018; Bunce 2018). Connolly (2018) brings up the crucial Russian manipulation in the 2016 US Presidential election, along with the role of social movements in explaining democratic breakdown. The importance of leaders in fields other than politics is a concern for Cramer (2018). Parker (2018), on the other hand, emphasizes the fact of American exceptionalism. Finally, Bunce (2018) points out the significance of international influences in the explanation and analysis of democratic decline.

Recent works on democratic backsliding situate American democracy under the Trump administration (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Runciman 2018). To Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), causes like erosion of political norms, ineffective independent judiciary and free press coupled with democratically elected populist political leaders undermine the healthy functioning of democracy. They contend that Trump is devoid of mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance, the guardrails of democracy. Warning against US becoming an autocracy, the authors delineate four features that characterize authoritarian behavior – rejection of or weak commitment to democratic rules of the game, denial of legitimacy of political opponents, toleration or encouragement of violence and readiness to curtail civil liberties of the opponents, including the media. To them, political parties and leaders act as gatekeepers of democracy and are responsible for keeping authoritarian vibes at bay.

Broadly, the studies on democratic regression and breakdown have focused on conditions or processes. Structural explanations include economic crises or low economic performance (Boix and Stokes 2003; Lipset 1959; Przeworski 2000), weak or inappropriate institutional design (Bermeo 2016; Fish 2002; Fish 2006; Svolik 2015), ethnic tensions (Lijphart 2012; Rabushka and Shepsle 1972). Agency factors focus on public opinion and elite preferences, elite (mis)behavior (Bermeo 2003), and the role of the military (Brooker 2013).

It is thus evident from the preceding paragraphs that much of the literature on democratic decline is mired in analyzing the domestic factors that fuel such deterioration from a bottom-up perspective

and there is a stark absence of a top-down analysis of any external shocks or threats that may considerably influence backsliding. It is in this context that I situate terrorism as an explanatory variable that contributes to democratic backsliding.

Is Terrorism to Blame for Democratic Backsliding?

Undoubtedly, terrorism exerts immense political consequences. It represents one of the defining elements of politics on the world stage. Terrorism is a term used to describe violence or other harmful acts committed against civilians by groups of persons for political or ideological goals. As a form of unconventional warfare, terrorism is sometimes used when attempting to force political change. Most conceptualizations of terrorism include only those acts which are intended to create terror or fear or are perpetuated for an ideological goal and deliberately target non-combatants. The term carries a strong negative connotation. Schmid (2012, p. 86) defines terrorism as "fear-generating, coercive political violence... targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties." For this paper, terrorism is conceptualized as non-state violence employed outside of an armed conflict, which can be both domestic and international. I operationalize terrorism with the count of casualties that resulted from various acts of terror.

The impact of terrorism on domestic politics is an understudied research area (Williams, Koch, and Smith 2013). Less is known about the consequences of transnational terrorism beyond the context of either specific events like 9/11 (Jacobson 2003) or with respect to particular states (Berrebi and Klor 2006; Berrebi and Klor 2008; Holmes and De Piñeres 2002; Sandler and Siqueira 2006). Cross-national studies demonstrate that terrorism deeply affects individuals and governments. At the state level, Indridason (2008) contends that in the wake of terrorism, surplus coalitions and coalitions with a low degree of ideological polarization are more likely to form. Terrorism, as an external threat, creates an incentive to overcome internal disagreements towards forming larger and inclusive coalitions. Terror events tend to produce a rally effect among political parties (Chenoweth 2010). Gassebner, Jong-A-Pin, and Mierau (2011), with a sample of 150 democratic and nondemocratic states across 34 years, delineate that terrorism results in cabinet turnover. Scholars have also considered the influence of terrorism on government survival. According to this line of thought, politicians are blamed for failing to provide security to the citizens. To this end, politicians try to remain vigilant of terrorist threats and attempt to establish a stable coalition (Indridason 2008). Thus, terrorism is argued to significantly influence domestic politics.

Irrespective of its scope, the above discussed literature fails to account for the impact of terrorism on the quality of democracy, leading to democratic backsliding. It is problematic to assume that terrorism leads either to governmental survival or government failure. The various aspects where terrorism exerts an influence on leads to subtle variation in the level of democratic quality. My paper attempts to analyze this aspect by delineating how the nexus between terrorism and democratic rollback functions.

The nexus between democracy and terrorism is studied from several perspectives – structural approaches focus on the institutional environments of different states; strategic approaches deal with the coercive potential of terrorist tactics; organizational approaches, which deal with the competitive organizational environments that tend to fuel the emergence of terrorist groups; and political approaches concentrate on the patterns of specific grievances that people and groups have towards the states that govern them. Scholars of structural approach contend that political openness along with the protection of civil liberties and rule of law help to diminish terrorism by means of grievance redressal, peaceful political expression and subsequent lowering of the legitimacy of violent terrorist groups to function in a state (Magen 2018). Magen further points out that irrespective of regime type – whether a country is a democracy or authoritarian, those with low levels of political freedom are the largest sufferers of terrorist attacks compared to states that guarantee greater political freedom. The institutional analysis examines party systems, judicial practices, electoral rules (Aksoy 2012; Foster and Barnetson 2011; Li 2005; Young and Dugan 2011). In other words, scholars of this approach argue that higher levels of state capacity diminish terrorist scourge.

Democracies are in constant fear of terrorism as the concept is intertwined with increased immigration crisis, rise of populist nationalism, support for illiberal alternatives posing danger to the proper functioning of civil liberties and adherence to the rule of law (Echebarria-Echabe and Fernández-Guede 2006; Gould and Klor 2016; Mondak and Hurwitz 2012). Terrorism is mostly manifest in democracies with low levels of legitimacy, poor human rights

practices, feeble political and economic development and persistent conflict along ethnic or political cleavages (Chenoweth 2013).

Even though the scope of the terrorism-democracy nexus is wide, critics argue that the conditions and the causal pathways by which terrorism may foster democratic decline is largely understudied.

Three mechanisms demonstrate the effect of terrorism as a tactic on the strength of democracy. The first concerns the deployment of formal emergency powers; second hinges on changes in institutionalized coercive authority adopted as a response to perceived terrorist threats and third pertains to shifts in rhetoric employed in electoral campaigns along with shifts in the strategies of legitimation by elected leaders (Huq 2017). Any terrorist event triggers imposing emergency powers by the state resulting in limited political competition. In Germany, Russia and Turkey, exercise of emergency powers by the state in the wake of terrorism resulted in democratic decline. The very fear of terrorism leads governments to bring about reforms to state structure making shift from democracy easier to achieve. Such reconfiguration of state power poses a risk to democratic stability. Exogenous existential shocks like that of terrorism fuel policy and institutional change. When such change is hard to achieve via normal political channels, incumbent elected leaders align themselves with nondemocratic means of functioning. Indirectly, terrorism sow the seeds for populist government. According to Urbinati (2013, p. 137), successful populism tends to "change, and even shatter constitutional democracy" through the "centralization of power, weakening of checks and balances, disregard of political opposition, and the transformation of election [into] a plebiscite of the leader." Terrorist events, be it domestic or international, serve as a backdrop which is conducive to the rise of political parties and leaders that tend to diverge from the basic principles of democracy.

As pointed out, little attempt is made to understand whether there is an impact of terrorism on the different variants/levels of democracy. With respect to weak states, it may be argued that they provide the fertile grounds for terrorism, resulting in even weaker states, which characteristically undermines constitutional provisions, ultimately leading to backsliding. Given this context, I put forward the following hypothesis: *an increase in terrorism affects the quality of democracy resulting in backsliding*.

To assess the argument whether the impact of terrorism results in democratic decline, some rival explanations need to be considered. It is often argued that economic decline reverses democratization. Curvilinear associations are evident between the level of democracy, that of wealth and domestic and transnational terrorist violence (Chenoweth 2010; Diamond 2008; Haggard and Kaufman 1994). However, poor economic development cannot solely be responsible for democratic breakdown. Other cleavages like social, ethno-linguistic, religious or regional inequalities along with economic downturn consolidate and crystallize into political inequalities to create fertile grounds for democratic rollback. But it can be argued that existential external shocks like terrorism, solely, has the potential to bring about democratic backsliding.

Case Study: South Asia

South Asia is a region consisting of seven states – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In this paper, I use this region as a case study and so, all the seven states that it is comprised of are included in the analysis.

The various forms of democracies that exist in these states sow the seeds of democratic backsliding because of existing political polarization, mobilization of diverse groups, the role played by political leaders and the failure of democratic institutions to address new political demands and social conflicts. Croissant (2019) identifies 14 episodes of democratic backsliding in 10 democracies since the early 2000s. These include not only newly democratic states but older democracies like Sri Lanka and India. According to V-Dem Democracy Report (2021), India deteriorated from being an electoral democracy to an electoral autocracy with Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) scores declining from 0.57 in 2010 to 0.34 in 2020.

Moreover, the empirical evidence on episodes of democratic rollback since 2000, presented by Croissant and Haynes (2021), show that *executive aggrandizement* and *promissory coups* are the chief causes of backsliding in the Asia-Pacific region. They argue that a democracy continues to backslide once it starts to deteriorate. The authors of the special issue of *Democratization* (Volume 28, Issue 1, 2021) point out 7 factors that explain the diverse trajectories of democratization in this region. These factors are political parties; political cleavages and ideological polarizations; the strength of the civil society; political institutions of horizontal accountability; cultural foundations; (middle) class-oriented explanations; and 'external' or international factors (Croissant and Haynes 2021, p. 11). Out of these factors, I would like to draw our attention to the fact that 'external' or international factors like mechanisms of insti-

tutional diffusion, exogenous shocks and external actors are acknowledged as causes affecting the continuance of democracy as well as democratic rollback or backsliding. To Diamond (2021), 'Chinese ambition' is a significant roadblock for proper functioning of democratic institutions in this region. This is seconded by Fong's (2021) case study of Hong Kong.

Figure 1: Attacks and deaths from terrorism by region, 2002-2017
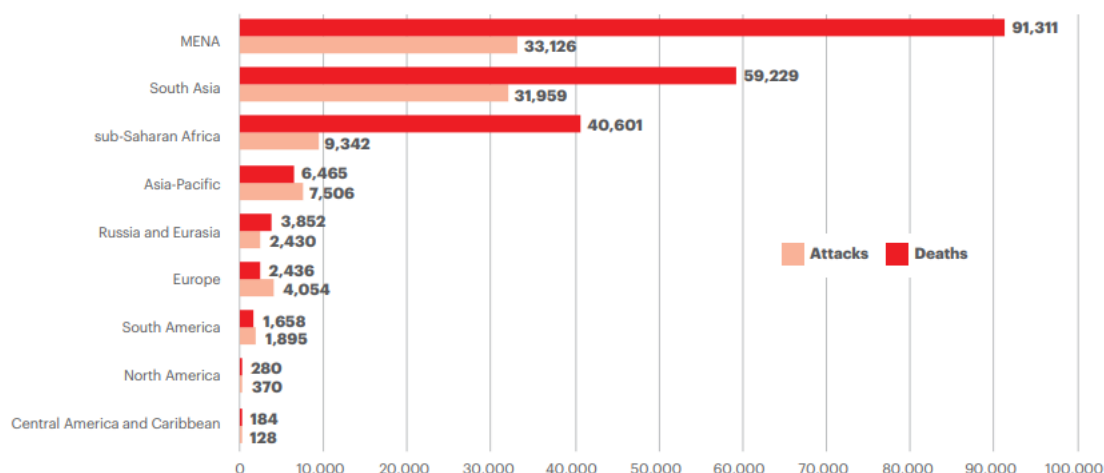
Source: IEP 2018, p. 34

To reiterate, even though international factors are taken into consideration, any explanation of terrorism as an external shock is absent from analysis of democratic backsliding in Asia. South Asia is not new to the challenges posed by terrorism and political violence. It features within the top five regions of the IPE Global Terrorism Database (GTD) (IEP 2018, p. 34) as the acute sufferer of terrorism, both domestic and international.

Violent groups have resorted to the strategies of indiscriminate violence to fulfill their objectives, ranging from national self-determination or separatism, both right and left-wing politics, and militant religious extremism. Factors like population, unemployment, inflation, poverty, inequality and political instability are corelated with terrorism in South Asia. Currently, this region is ripe with domestic political unrest and upheavals, an outcome of ethnic conflicts, religious fundamentalism, and strong political polarization (Akhmat et al. 2014; Malik 2009). To further analyze this situation, this research delves deep into the effects of terrorism as an exogenous shock that trigger democratic rollback in the South Asian states.

In 2017, South Asia is reported to suffer from the highest impact of terrorism on average, with the highest average score on the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) compared to any region in the past 16 years. Accounting for the highest number of total deaths, MENA, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa witnessed the most lethal terrorist attacks on average, with 2.75, 1.85 and 4.35 people killed per attack, respectively. Not surprisingly, South Asia's GTI score deteriorated from 2016 to 2017, as shown in the table below. Out of the seven countries in the region – Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India rank amongst the ten states most impacted by terrorism globally, with Afghanistan bypassing Iraq as the state with the most terror-related deaths. In 2017, the two deadliest attacks in South Asia were committed by the Khorasan Chapter of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan, killing 93 and 91 persons, respectively (IEP 2018, p. 11).

Figure 2: GTI score, rank change in score 2002-2017

Country	Overall Score	Regional Rank	Change 2002-2017	Change 2016-2017
Afghanistan	9.391	2	3.846	-0.012
Pakistan	8.181	5	2.158	-0.185
India	7.568	7	0.225	0.055
Bangladesh	5.697	25	0.463	-0.463
Nepal	5.295	33	-0.802	0.924
Sri Lanka	4.048	49	-1.589	1.156
Bhutan	0.019	135	0.019	-0.019
Regional average			**0.617**	**0.208**

Source: IEP 2018, p. 35

In this context, the 2019 Easter Sunday terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka are worth noting. It was a bloody day as three Christian churches along with three luxury hotels in the capital city of Colombo were targeted by ISIS in a series of coordinated suicide bombings. Immediately after the attacks, government ability to respond to such heinous acts and strategies to dissuade future terrorism in the state came to be questioned. Lack of coordination among the highest echelons of government – the Sri Lankan President and the Prime Minister came to the fore as the former was accused for not having any knowledge about the imminent threat, while the Prime Minister apologized and accepted responsibility (Grief, Anger and Recriminations 2019).

In his first national address since the attacks, President Maithripala Sirisena declared major changes in the state's security apparatus by bestowing additional powers to the police and security forces to detain and interrogate people. A curfew was also imposed. Moreover, the government temporarily blocked several social media networks, including Facebook and Instagram. Messaging services like WhatsApp and Viber also were restricted (Mashal, Bastians, and Gettleman 2019). Furthermore, a week after the bombings, decision to ban all face coverings in public came as a significant governmental response (Perrigo 2019).

The preceding paragraphs enumerate the impact that terrorism has on government functioning. It is costly to cater to democratic principles and norms in the wake of terrorism or when terrorism is considered as a persistent threat to the state. The above measures imposed by the Sri Lankan government reflect that terrorism ushers in democratic decline by curtailing democratic rights of the citizens like freedom of movement, freedom of the social media and even freedom of religion. Hence, it is imperative to look beyond the domestic factors and analyze exogenous factors like terrorism that trigger democratic rollback.

Conclusion

In the light of the above discussion, it is evident that any analysis of democratic backsliding in South Asia is incomplete without an analysis of the terrorist scourge that this region suffers from. Since the existing literature has not yet addressed this issue, this paper attempts to make a key contribution to the understanding of democratic backsliding, in general and particularly, in South Asia.

Moreover, this paper makes a timely contribution to the existing literature. The August 15, 2021 takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban demonstrates how critical the understanding of democratic

backsliding in South Asia is, given the terrorist threat that always looms over it. Two decades of United States' presence in Afghanistan, both militarily and for state-building purposes, has overwhelmingly failed to guarantee the democratic rollback that is currently happening in Afghanistan. Fleeing of the Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani along with other government officials and house arrest of former President, Hamid Karzai (Cole et al. 2021) cements the crumbling of the government as an institution that is tasked to ensure proper functioning of democracy. On August 26, 2021, the bombing at the Kabul International Airport left 13 U.S. service members and more than 150 Afghans dead (Thomas 2021). The Khorasan chapter of the Islamic State (ISIS-K), one of the prominent terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, has claimed responsibility for the attack. The role of the Haqqani network in the formation of Taliban's government on September 7, 2021 is also a cause of serious concern. Current images of Afghanistan demonstrate the gross human rights violations, repression of women, displacement of its citizens, subsequently leading to widespread migration and refugee problems in the neighboring states and United States, in particular. All these signify the rapid descent into chaos of the state with no short-term hope of restoration of democracy.

This paper can also serve as a basis for developing this topic further. One of the future avenues of research concerns the impact of different forms of terrorism on democratic backsliding. In other words, it is interesting to analyze whether there is a variation in which domestic and international terrorism influence democratic deterioration. Second, the influence of terrorism on specific aspects of democratic backsliding can be analyzed. Third, it is worth noting how the different levels of democracy respond to terrorism. Finally, empirical research on other regions which suffer from terrorism will be an interesting endeavor.

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