International Journal of Advanced Research and Multidisciplinary Trends (IJARMT)
An International Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal
Impact Factor: 7.2 Website: https://ijarmt.com ISSN No.: 3048-9458

Democratic Quality and Institutional Transformation in India, Turkey, and Brazil: A Comparative Study (2014–2026)

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Abstract

Democracy is not just about holding elections. It is about how governments function, how institutions behave, and how much freedom ordinary people actually enjoy in their day-to-day lives. This paper looks at three important democracies — India, Turkey, and Brazil — over the period from 2014 to 2026, and asks a simple but important question: have these countries become more democratic or less democratic in terms of actual governance and institutional quality? The study uses a comparative and qualitative approach, drawing from international democracy indices like V-Dem, Freedom House, and EIU Democracy Index, along with academic literature and case studies. The findings show that all three countries have experienced some degree of democratic backsliding during this period, though the nature and speed of that backsliding has been different in each case. Turkey moved quite fast toward a more centralized and authoritarian form of governance, especially after 2016. Brazil went through a sharp political crisis under Bolsonaro but showed some signs of recovery after 2022. India's case is more complex — elections remain competitive and voter participation is high, but there are growing concerns about press freedom, minority rights, and weakening of opposition institutions. The paper argues that electoral participation alone cannot be treated as proof of democratic health. Institutional quality, civil liberties, and judicial independence are equally important markers. The study contributes to the broader discussion on competitive authoritarianism and illiberal democracy, which are patterns being observed across many developing nations today. Practical policy suggestions are also offered at the end.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding, Institutional transformation, Comparative politics, India, Turkey, Brazil, Electoral democracy, Civil liberties

Introduction

When we think about democracy, the first thing that comes to mind is elections. We think of long queues at polling booths, colourful campaigns, and the excitement of counting day.

Elections are certainly a big part of democracy. But they are only one part. Real democracy is much more than that. It includes free press, independent judiciary, protection of minority rights, rule of law, and the freedom to speak and protest without fear. When these things start to weaken, democracy itself weakens — even if elections are still being held regularly.

In recent years, political scientists and international observers have been worried about something called 'democratic backsliding' — a situation where a country slowly moves away from democratic norms without any single dramatic event like a military coup. This is different from the older kind of democratic breakdown. In today's world, leaders who come to power

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through elections sometimes gradually reduce the space for opposition, control the media, weaken courts, and concentrate power in their own hands. Scholars like Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have called such systems 'competitive authoritarian regimes,' where the competition exists but is not fair. Others like Fareed Zakaria have used the term 'illiberal democracy' to describe countries that hold elections but restrict individual freedoms.

This paper takes three countries — India, Turkey, and Brazil — as case studies to understand how democratic quality and institutions have changed between 2014 and 2026. These three are interesting for several reasons. All three are large, diverse democracies with significant global influence. All three have had strong, populist leaders — Narendra Modi in India, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil — who came to power claiming to represent the 'real people' against a corrupt elite. And in all three countries, questions have been raised about the health of democratic institutions during and after their rule.

The main objective of this study is to compare these three cases and understand the similarities and differences in how democracy has been practised, challenged, and defended in each of them. The study is also interested in what lessons can be drawn for strengthening democracy not just in these three countries, but in other developing democracies around the world.

Literature Review

The academic discussion on democratic quality and its decline has been growing rapidly over the past two decades. One of the most important early contributions came from Robert Dahl (1971), who introduced the concept of 'polyarchy' — a system characterised by free and fair elections, freedom of expression, and inclusive political participation. Dahl's framework became the foundation for later work on what we expect from a proper democracy.

Larry Diamond (2015) was among the first to clearly describe the global 'democratic recession' that has been happening since the mid-2000s. He pointed out that not only were new democracies failing to consolidate, but even some established ones were showing signs of weakening. He identified the problem of 'electoral autocracy' — where countries appear democratic on the surface because elections are held, but in practice the political system is controlled by one dominant leader or party.

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), in their widely read book 'How Democracies Die,' argued that modern democracies are more likely to die slowly from within rather than through military coups. They emphasised two key norms that hold democracy together — mutual toleration (accepting the other side as a legitimate competitor) and institutional forbearance (not misusing legal powers to harm opponents). When leaders start breaking these norms, democracy gradually erodes.

Specifically on Turkey, researchers like Esen and Gumuscu (2016) have shown how the AKP government under Erdogan used democratic tools like referendums and elections to consolidate power while simultaneously weakening independent institutions. The 2016 coup attempt became a turning point when mass arrests of journalists, academics, judges, and military officers were carried out under emergency powers.

In the case of Brazil, scholars like Pereira and Melo (2012) had already warned about the fragility of Brazil's institutions even before Bolsonaro came to power. The Lava Jato (Operation

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Car Wash) corruption investigations in the 2010s exposed deep corruption in the political class but also led to polarisation. Hunter and Power (2019) analysed how Bolsonaro's election reflected a breakdown of the centrist political coalition that had governed Brazil for years, and raised concerns about his authoritarian tendencies and disregard for democratic norms.

India has received a lot of attention in recent comparative politics literature. Jaffrelot and Tillin (2017) have written about the ideological shift in Indian politics brought about by the BJP government, particularly the relationship between Hindu nationalism and democratic pluralism. Ganguly and Mukherji (2019) examined how India's federal institutions were under pressure, and how the weakening of opposition-controlled state governments and the centralisation of power at the national level were concerning signs.

The V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) project from the University of Gothenburg has produced extensive data-driven research on these trends. Their annual reports have consistently shown a global democratic decline, with special mention of India's shift from an 'electoral democracy' to a 'electoral autocracy' in their 2021 and subsequent reports — a classification that sparked much debate. Similar findings have come from Freedom House's annual 'Freedom in the World' reports.

However, there is a gap in the existing literature. Most studies either focus on one country or take a broad global view. A focused three-country comparison of India, Turkey, and Brazil — three non-Western, large democracies with similar populist trajectories but different outcomes — is relatively underexplored. This paper tries to fill that gap by doing a structured comparison across specific institutional dimensions.

Researc Methodology

This study follows a qualitative comparative method, which is a common approach in political science research when dealing with a small number of cases that are rich in detail. Instead of using large statistical datasets with hundreds of countries, this approach allows us to go deeper into each case and understand the context, the process, and the nuances that numbers alone cannot capture.

Three countries have been selected on the basis of what researchers call 'most similar systems design.' India, Turkey, and Brazil share several important characteristics: they are all large, multi-ethnic democracies; they all have federal or semi-federal constitutional structures; they all went through significant economic growth followed by slowdowns during the 2014–2026 period; and all three saw the rise of populist nationalist leaders who challenged existing political establishments. These similarities make them good candidates for comparison because we can better isolate the political and institutional variables that made their democratic trajectories different.

The primary data for this study comes from three internationally recognised democracy measurement tools. First, the V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) dataset, which provides detailed scores on multiple components of democracy including electoral, liberal, participatory, egalitarian, and deliberative dimensions. Second, Freedom House's annual 'Freedom in the World' report, which rates countries on political rights and civil liberties. Third, the Economist

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Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Democracy Index, which classifies countries into full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes.

Secondary sources include academic journal articles, books, and policy reports. News sources from reputed organisations such as The Guardian, BBC, The Hindu, Hürriyet Daily News, and Folha de São Paulo have also been consulted to provide factual context for specific events. The study focuses specifically on five institutional dimensions: (1) electoral integrity, (2) judicial independence, (3) press freedom, (4) civil society space, and (5) executive accountability. These five areas represent the core of what we mean by 'institutional transformation' in a democratic context.

Since this is a qualitative study, it does not claim to provide statistically generalisable conclusions. Instead, it aims to offer analytical insights that are useful for understanding broader patterns. The time period 2014–2026 was chosen because it covers major political shifts in all three countries and allows for a reasonably long-term view.

Results and Discussion

Turkey: The Fastest Transformation

Among the three countries studied, Turkey shows the most dramatic and rapid transformation away from democratic norms. When the AKP party came to power in 2002, many observers were actually hopeful that a moderate Islamist party could coexist peacefully with Turkey's secular democratic tradition. For several years, the AKP's early tenure did show some positive signs — economic growth, improvements in human rights to meet EU membership requirements, and greater inclusion of religious communities in public life.

However, by 2013–2014, the relationship between Erdogan's government and Turkey's civil society and secular institutions began to deteriorate significantly. The Gezi Park protests of 2013 were a turning point, when peaceful demonstrations were met with tear gas and mass arrests. The government began describing protesters as 'terrorists' and 'foreign agents,' a language that would become more common in subsequent years. Erdogan began concentrating more power in the presidency and marginalising the prime ministerial role.

The July 2016 coup attempt — still a matter of dispute regarding its exact origins — proved to be the single most consequential event for Turkish democracy in this entire period. Within weeks, over 150,000 people were detained, suspended, or investigated, including judges, military officers, academics, teachers, and journalists. According to Freedom House, Turkey's press freedom score fell dramatically in these years. Many independent newspapers were shut down and replaced by pro-government outlets. By 2017, a constitutional referendum changed Turkey from a parliamentary system to a presidential one, giving Erdogan vastly increased powers without adequate checks and balances.

By 2022–2023, the EIU Democracy Index had classified Turkey as a 'hybrid regime' — no longer even a 'flawed democracy.' The V-Dem data showed Turkey's liberal democracy index declining consistently from 2014 onwards. The 2023 elections, while technically competitive, took place in an environment where opposition candidates faced legal harassment and where state media heavily favoured the incumbent. Even though Erdogan narrowly won in a runoff, the process itself raised serious questions about fairness.

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What makes Turkey's case theoretically interesting is that this transformation happened largely through legal means — through legitimate constitutional changes, court decisions, and electoral majorities. This is exactly what scholars like Levitsky and Ziblatt warned about: democratic erosion that uses the tools of democracy itself.

Brazil: Crisis, Collapse, and Partial Recovery

Brazil's democratic trajectory between 2014 and 2026 looks like a sharp V-curve — a dramatic fall followed by a gradual recovery. The country entered this period already under stress. President Dilma Rousseff of the Workers' Party (PT) was facing economic troubles and a massive corruption scandal involving the state oil company Petrobras. The Lava Jato investigations, which began in 2014, eventually ensnared politicians from virtually every major party.

Rousseff's impeachment in 2016 was a deeply controversial moment. Her supporters argued it was a 'parliamentary coup' — that the charges against her (accounting irregularities in federal budgets) did not meet the constitutional threshold for impeachment. Her opponents saw it as a legitimate constitutional process. This controversy itself showed how polarised and weakened Brazil's political culture had become.

The election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 represented a sharp right-wing populist turn. Bolsonaro campaigned on anti-corruption rhetoric, military nostalgia, and social conservatism.

Once in office, he consistently attacked democratic institutions — questioning the reliability of Brazil's electronic voting machines (without evidence), insulting the Supreme Court, and making comments that were widely interpreted as encouraging a military intervention. His handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in one of the world's highest death tolls relative to population, also showed a troubling disregard for scientific advice and government accountability.

However, Brazil's story also shows the resilience of certain institutions. The Supreme Court under Chief Justice Luís Roberto Barroso pushed back consistently against Bolsonaro's attacks. The Superior Electoral Court (TSE) stood firm on defending the electronic voting system. Civil society, free press, and a large section of the military itself refused to support any unconstitutional moves. When Bolsonaro lost the 2022 election to Lula da Silva, his refusal to concede and the January 8, 2023 storming of the Three Powers Plaza by his supporters was alarming — but ultimately failed. The constitutional order survived.

This resilience is actually an important finding. Brazil's institutions, while imperfect and under strain, proved strong enough to prevent a complete collapse. This is partly because Brazil's democracy, even though it is only about four decades old (since the end of military rule in 1985), had developed enough institutional depth that a single leader could not simply dismantle it. By 2025–2026, under Lula's second presidency, Brazil was recovering democratic space — though corruption, inequality, and political polarisation remain serious challenges.

India: Elections Strong, Institutions Under Pressure

India's case is in many ways the most complex and also the most debated among researchers and observers. Unlike Turkey, India has not undergone a formal constitutional restructuring that concentrates all power in one office. Unlike Brazil, India has not seen a serious attempt to

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physically storm its democratic institutions. Yet the concern among many scholars and civil society groups is real — that democracy in India is changing in subtle but significant ways.

India's electoral democracy remains vibrant and competitive at multiple levels. The 2014 and 2019 general elections, which brought the BJP to power with massive majorities, were generally seen as free and fair in terms of voting mechanics. The 2024 elections showed a more competitive landscape, with the opposition INDIA alliance reducing the BJP's majority significantly. Voter turnout has remained high, and state-level politics continues to be lively, with opposition parties governing in several large states.

However, the V-Dem data and reports from organisations like Freedom House have consistently flagged concerns about aspects of democratic quality that go beyond elections. Press freedom is one of the most discussed issues. According to the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index, India has been ranked in the range of 140s to 160s out of 180 countries during this period, which is quite low. Several journalists have faced sedition charges, foreign funding restrictions on media organisations, and tax raids on critical outlets. This has had what press freedom advocates call a 'chilling effect' — even where there is no direct censorship, journalists practice self-censorship out of fear.

The situation of religious minorities, particularly Muslims, has attracted significant international attention. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019, the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, and various state-level laws targeting interfaith marriages and conversions have raised questions about whether India's constitutional commitment to secularism and equal citizenship is being maintained. Critics argue that these laws create a hierarchical citizenship where some groups feel less secure. Defenders argue that these are legitimate policy decisions made by a democratically elected government.

Judicial independence has also become a topic of concern. Several high-profile cases — including bail denials to opposition politicians, the extended detention of activists under draconian laws like UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act), and what critics say are selective applications of law — have raised questions. At the same time, Indian courts have in many cases shown independence, including the Supreme Court's landmark judgment in the electoral bonds case in 2024, which struck down a controversial political funding scheme. So the picture is mixed.

India's civil society space has also seen some changes. Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) rules have been used to cancel or restrict the foreign funding licenses of thousands of NGOs, including organisations like Amnesty International India, which had to shut its India operations in 2020. Critics see this as a way to silence dissent. The government's position is that these organisations were violating financial rules.

What the Indian case illustrates is that democratic backsliding does not always look the same. India has not become like Turkey or like Bolsonaro's Brazil. But the cumulative effect of restrictions on press, civil society, and minority rights means that the quality of democracy — beyond just the counting of votes — has become more contested. This is why the V-Dem report's classification of India as moving towards 'electoral autocracy' created such debate: it felt too strong to many, but it pointed to real trends that cannot simply be dismissed.

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Comparative Analysis: Common Patterns and Key Differences

Looking at all three countries together, several common patterns emerge. First, in all three cases, democratically elected leaders used the language of popular sovereignty and anti-elitism to justify actions that weakened institutional checks. Erdogan spoke of 'the people' versus the secular elite. Bolsonaro positioned himself against a corrupt political class. Modi's BJP consistently framed itself as representing the will of the majority against minority appeasement. This populist framing is a common feature of what Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) have called 'right-wing populism.'

Second, in all three countries, the media became a key battleground. Independent media was either pressured directly, bought out by business groups friendly to the government, or undermined financially. Social media became both a tool for mobilisation (for both ruling parties and opposition) and a space for misinformation and hate speech.

Third, all three countries show the importance of strong institutions and civil society in resisting democratic erosion. Brazil's resilience in the face of Bolsonaro's final challenge was largely because courts, electoral authorities, and parts of the civil society stood firm. In India, courts have occasionally pushed back. Even in Turkey, there are brave journalists, academics, and opposition politicians who continue to challenge authoritarianism at great personal risk.

The key differences, however, are equally important. Turkey's transformation has been the most complete and is perhaps the hardest to reverse because it involved formal constitutional changes. Brazil's democratic backsliding was severe but has shown more reversibility because its institutions were not fully captured. India sits somewhere in between — serious concerns exist but there is more institutional resilience than Turkey, and the electoral system remains genuinely competitive.

Table: Comparative Snapshot of Democratic Indicators (2014–2026)

Dimension	India	Turkey	Brazil
Electoral Integrity	Competitive but concerns about level playing field	Formally held but unfair environment	Competitive; improved post-2022
Judicial Independence	Partly independent; some cases of concern	Severely undermined post-2016	Largely held firm despite pressure
Press Freedom	Declining; high self-censorship	Very restricted; majority state-controlled	Some restrictions; recovering
Civil Society Space	Restrictions via FCRA; ngo crackdowns	Severely curtailed; mass arrests	Resilient; faced but survived pressure
Exec. Accountability	Parliament active; but oversight weakened	Presidential system; weak oversight	Congress and courts acountable in crises

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V-Dem Score Trend (2014–2024)	Declining	Sharp decline	Decline then recovery

Source: Compiled by author from V-Dem (2024), Freedom House (2024), EIU Democracy Index (2024).

Conclusion and Suggestions

This paper set out to compare the democratic quality and institutional health of India, Turkey, and Brazil between 2014 and 2026. The findings confirm the central argument: that electoral participation and the holding of regular elections, while necessary, are not sufficient conditions for a healthy democracy. In all three countries, the study found evidence of democratic stress — a narrowing of civil liberties, attacks on media freedom, pressure on judicial independence, and restriction of civil society space.

Turkey stands as the most severe case of democratic erosion in this study, having moved from a flawed democracy to what most indices now classify as a hybrid or authoritarian regime. The 2017 constitutional changes and the post-2016 purges were decisive moments that fundamentally altered the balance of power. Brazil experienced a serious populist challenge to democracy but ultimately showed that institutional resilience matters — when courts, electoral authorities, and civil society hold firm, democratic breakdowns can be prevented. India presents a more nuanced picture: elections remain competitive and institutions retain some independence, but consistent concerns about press freedom, minority rights, and civil society space suggest that the quality of democracy has declined even if its form remains intact.

The theoretical contribution of this paper is to highlight that 'democratic backsliding' is not a single phenomenon with one speed or one direction. It takes different shapes depending on the strength of pre-existing institutions, the nature of the political opposition, the role of civil society, and the international context. Understanding these differences is important for scholars, policymakers, and citizens.

Based on this study, the following practical suggestions are offered. First, parliaments and legislative bodies in all three countries need to be strengthened as independent voices rather than simply rubber-stamping executive decisions. Second, press freedom laws need genuine protection — not just on paper but in practice — because a free press is the first line of defence against government overreach. Third, civil society organisations that work on transparency, human rights, and accountability should not be treated as threats but as healthy parts of a democratic ecosystem. Fourth, international institutions and peer democracies should more actively engage with cases of democratic backsliding through diplomatic and normative pressure rather than ignoring them for strategic interests. Fifth, citizens — voters, students, journalists, professionals — are ultimately the guardians of democracy, and civic education must be treated as a national priority in all three countries.

Democracy is not a destination but a continuous practice. Countries can lose democratic quality and they can recover it too — as Brazil's partial recovery suggests. The important thing is that the commitment to democratic values, institutional accountability, and citizen participation remains alive in public discourse. The 'ballot box' is necessary but never enough on its own.

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