

Judicial Independence and Democratic Consolidation in Post-Authoritarian States

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Abstract

Objective: This study examines the relationship between judicial independence and democratic consolidation in post-authoritarian states. It seeks to determine whether independent judiciaries act as genuine safeguards of democracy or if they can be co-opted to reinforce elite dominance and hybrid authoritarianism.

Method: The study employs a doctrinal research methodology, using secondary sources including academic literature, judicial decisions, constitutional documents, and institutional reports. It analyses legal frameworks and institutional practices to evaluate formal and actual judicial independence across selected post-authoritarian jurisdictions.

Findings: Judicial independence is necessary but insufficient for democratic consolidation. Formal constitutional guarantees often coexist with informal political influence. Courts may initially stabilize democracy but risk later capture by political elites, undermining democratic accountability. Judicial autonomy is influenced by political incentives, institutional culture, and elite strategies.

Value: This study contributes to scholarship by integrating doctrinal, comparative, and political perspectives. It informs policymakers and legal institutions on mechanisms to strengthen judicial independence and sustain democratic governance in transitional states.

Keywords: Judicial independence, Democratic consolidation, Post-authoritarian states, Constitutional courts

1.0 Introduction

Judicial independence is widely recognized as a fundamental pillar of democratic governance. In post-authoritarian states, the judiciary assumes a central role in enforcing constitutional norms, constraining executive power, and safeguarding individual rights. The significance of judicial autonomy is heightened in these contexts because judicial institutions are often tasked with consolidating democratic transitions and ensuring that former authoritarian structures do not compromise emerging democratic processes [1][2]. Historically, authoritarian regimes have manipulated judicial structures to maintain political control, often granting limited judicial discretion while preserving executive dominance. This legacy affects post-authoritarian states, where courts inherit institutional cultures shaped by deference to political authority and may continue to exhibit patterns of subordination even after formal democratic transition [3][4]. The process of democratic consolidation involves not only the establishment of formal institutions but also the internalization of democratic norms by political elites and citizens. Courts play a critical role in this process by enforcing constitutional limits, protecting minority rights, and providing impartial adjudication in politically sensitive matters [5][6]. Independent judiciaries can deter executive overreach, legitimize electoral outcomes, and resolve disputes that might otherwise destabilize nascent democracies. However, empirical evidence indicates that judicial independence is neither automatic nor sufficient for democratic consolidation. Courts may initially support democratic governance yet later be co-opted by political elites to legitimize authoritarian practices or reinforce hybrid regimes, demonstrating the contingent nature of judicial autonomy [7][8]. The literature further emphasizes that judicial independence is a multidimensional concept. Formal constitutional guarantees, such as tenure security, appointment procedures, and financial autonomy, establish the legal foundation for independence. Yet actual independence depends on political incentives, institutional culture, elite strategies, and societal support [9][10]. In post-authoritarian contexts, these factors interact dynamically. Courts may enjoy formal autonomy but remain subject to informal pressures, including executive influence, patronage networks, and institutionalized norms of deference. Consequently, judicial independence is best understood as a political and institutional outcome rather than solely a legal construct [11][12].

This study has two main objectives. The first is to examine the extent to which judicial independence contributes to democratic consolidation in post-authoritarian states. This objective addresses the critical question of whether courts genuinely function as guardians of democratic norms or merely serve as instruments of elite interest. The second objective is to identify the political, institutional, and historical factors that facilitate or constrain judicial autonomy. By exploring these determinants, the study seeks to provide actionable insights for policymakers, judicial institutions, and civil society actors engaged in strengthening democratic governance [13][14]. To achieve these objectives, the study employs a doctrinal research methodology. Doctrinal research involves the systematic examination of legal texts, constitutional provisions, judicial decisions, and institutional frameworks to ascertain the formal structures underpinning judicial independence [15][16]. This method is particularly appropriate because judicial independence encompasses legal, political, and institutional dimensions that cannot be fully captured through quantitative analysis alone. The doctrinal approach allows the study to evaluate both the formal guarantees

of independence and the mechanisms through which courts exercise actual autonomy in practice. Additionally, this methodology facilitates comparative insights across multiple post-authoritarian jurisdictions, including Eastern Europe, Latin America, Central Asia, and Africa, which display varying levels of judicial independence and democratic consolidation [17][18]. The study recognizes that post-authoritarian judicial institutions inherit legacies of political subordination, which influence their capacity to function independently. Courts developed under authoritarian regimes may retain entrenched norms of executive deference, bureaucratic compliance, and institutional dependence [19][20]. These historical patterns underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of judicial independence as an evolving institutional phenomenon rather than a static legal provision. Doctrinal analysis allows for the identification of gaps between constitutional design and actual judicial behaviour, highlighting areas where formal guarantees fail to translate into effective autonomy [21][22]. Moreover, judicial independence in transitional contexts is influenced by strategic calculations of political actors. Authoritarian leaders may grant courts limited independence as an insurance mechanism to protect their interests against future political uncertainty. Courts may therefore emerge strategically rather than normatively, reflecting elite self-interest rather than a commitment to democratic principles [23][24]. Understanding this strategic dimension is essential for assessing the sustainability and impact of judicial autonomy on democratic consolidation. Doctrinal research provides the tools to examine constitutional and institutional provisions in light of these broader political dynamics, offering insights into how judicial independence interacts with evolving political incentives and institutional constraints [25][26].

2.0 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Judicial Independence

Understanding judicial independence in post-authoritarian states requires an integrated theoretical approach that considers institutional, strategic, and political dimensions. Institutional theory posits that political outcomes are shaped by formal rules and organizational structures, which constrain and enable actor behaviour [1][2]. Judicial independence is embedded in institutional arrangements such as constitutional protections, judicial appointments, tenure security, and budgetary autonomy. These safeguards are intended to insulate judges from political interference, enabling impartial adjudication and the protection of democratic norms [3][4]. However, formal institutional design alone cannot guarantee effective judicial autonomy. Courts inherit historical legacies and political cultures that shape behaviour independently of legal provisions. Post-authoritarian judicial institutions often retain patterns of executive deference, bureaucratic compliance, and subordination developed under prior authoritarian regimes [5][6]. Historical institutionalism provides a framework for understanding how path dependence affects judicial behaviour. Institutional trajectories established during authoritarian rule create constraints on future reforms, making judicial independence contingent on the evolution of professional norms and political incentives [7][8]. Strategic interaction theory complements institutional perspectives by highlighting the role of political actors in shaping judicial autonomy. Political elites may establish independent courts

during periods of uncertainty as mechanisms to protect future interests, constrain rivals, and signal credibility to domestic and international actors [9][10]. Courts may function as insurance instruments, providing institutional stability even when political leaders anticipate losing power. This perspective explains why judicial independence can emerge during transitions but remain fragile, as political actors may later seek to undermine autonomy once their dominance is consolidated [11][12]. Principal-agent theory further elucidates the dynamic between judges and political actors. Judges act as agents, while political principals delegate authority to courts to enforce laws and resolve disputes. Divergent preferences may develop, creating tension between judicial decision-making and political objectives. Political actors may attempt to control judicial behaviour through appointment powers, removal procedures, or institutional reforms. Judicial independence thus depends on the balance of power between judicial agents and political principals, which is mediated by formal and informal mechanisms of accountability [13][14]. The concept of authoritarian legalism adds another dimension by demonstrating how formal judicial structures can coexist with political control. Authoritarian regimes often use courts to provide legitimacy and manage internal governance, allowing judicial institutions to appear independent while remaining subordinate in politically sensitive cases [15][16]. This strategic use of judicial institutions underlines the complexity of assessing independence solely through constitutional provisions, emphasizing the interaction between legal frameworks and political practice [17][18].

2.2 Literature on Judicial Independence and Democratic Consolidation

Scholarly discourse on judicial independence in transitional states has evolved from early institutionalist assumptions to more nuanced analyses that consider political and strategic factors. Classical constitutional theory conceptualized independent courts as neutral arbiters essential to protecting citizens from executive overreach and ensuring adherence to constitutional norms [19][20]. Judicial review was viewed as a cornerstone of liberal democracy, allowing courts to invalidate unconstitutional government actions and reinforce the rule of law [21][22]. Early studies, largely based on Western experiences, particularly the United States, emphasized the stabilizing role of independent judiciaries in democratic governance [23][24]. Subsequent scholarship challenged the normative assumption that judicial independence automatically strengthens democracy. Landes and Posner argued that judicial independence often reflects strategic political considerations, emerging to reassure investors and political actors that policy commitments will be honored despite potential regime changes [25][26]. Ginsburg demonstrated that courts frequently emerge in transitional democracies as insurance mechanisms, particularly when political elites anticipate uncertain future electoral outcomes [9][27]. Hirschl extended this argument through the concept of hegemonic preservation, highlighting that strong constitutional courts can serve elite interests by insulating judicial decisions from democratic pressures [28][29]. Empirical studies reinforce the conditional nature of judicial independence. Research in Eastern Europe revealed that constitutional courts initially strengthened democratic transitions by enforcing constitutional constraints and protecting opposition rights. However, subsequent political developments undermined judicial autonomy through reforms, court packing, and appointment manipulation, illustrating the fragility of independence [30][31]. Similarly, Latin American experiences demonstrate mixed outcomes. In Brazil, judicial activism

supported corruption investigations and enhanced institutional accountability, while in other contexts courts became politicized, subject to executive influence, and aligned with ruling elites [32][33].

African transitional states provide further insights into the complexities of judicial independence. Countries such as South Africa have successfully institutionalized independent constitutional courts that enforce constitutional norms and protect minority rights, contributing to democratic consolidation [34][35]. Conversely, in other African states, courts remain subordinate to executive authority despite formal constitutional guarantees, reflecting persistent authoritarian legacies and political constraints [36][37]. Informal institutional mechanisms, including patronage networks and political intimidation, often undermine formal legal protections, highlighting the importance of both legal frameworks and institutional culture in shaping judicial behaviour [38][39]. The literature also emphasizes the role of judicial capture in limiting democratic consolidation. Political actors may gradually manipulate judicial institutions through appointments, court expansion, or legal reforms, transforming courts into instruments of political control [40][41]. Judicial capture represents a significant threat to democratic governance, as it undermines judicial autonomy while maintaining the appearance of formal legality. Conversely, judicial independence is more likely to be sustained where political power is fragmented, public legitimacy is strong, and institutional credibility is supported by societal trust [42][43].

Comparative analyses further reveal that similar constitutional designs can produce divergent outcomes depending on political context, elite strategies, and historical legacies. Central Asian post-Soviet states, for example, formally guarantee judicial independence but courts remain subordinate to executive authority in practice [44][45]. Eastern European countries, by contrast, experienced initial judicial strengthening during democratic transitions, followed by varying degrees of political manipulation [30][31]. These variations underscore that judicial independence cannot be assessed solely on legal design; political incentives, institutional culture, and elite commitment are equally critical determinants [46][47]. Finally, international legal frameworks and external monitoring provide supportive but limited influence. International standards, such as the UN Basic Principles on the Independence of the Judiciary, and regional courts exert normative pressure to strengthen judicial independence [48][49]. However, domestic political commitment remains decisive. Without internal legitimacy and enforcement capacity, external frameworks are insufficient to protect judicial autonomy against politically motivated interference [50][51]. Thus, the theoretical and empirical literature converges on three central insights. First, judicial independence is shaped by the interaction between legal frameworks, political incentives, institutional culture, and historical legacies. Second, the impact of judicial independence on democratic consolidation is conditional and context-dependent, potentially strengthening or undermining democratic governance. Third, judicial institutions remain vulnerable to capture, requiring continuous protection, political commitment, and societal support to sustain autonomy and contribute effectively to democratic consolidation [52][53].

3.0 Judicial Independence as a Determinant of Democratic Consolidation

3.1 The Role of Judicial Autonomy in Democratic Governance

Judicial independence constitutes a core institutional mechanism for sustaining democracy in post-authoritarian states. Courts serve as impartial arbiters of the constitution, ensuring that political actors adhere to legal norms and protecting citizens' rights against arbitrary state action [1][2]. The independence of the judiciary allows courts to adjudicate disputes without fear of political retaliation, promoting confidence in democratic institutions and reinforcing the rule of law [3][4]. In transitional states, judicial autonomy is particularly important because it can stabilize volatile political environments by providing predictable mechanisms for resolving conflicts, interpreting constitutional provisions, and maintaining checks on executive authority [5][6]. Empirical evidence from diverse post-authoritarian contexts indicates that judicial independence can strengthen democratic consolidation by constraining executive overreach and deterring illegal or anti-democratic practices [7][8]. Constitutional courts in countries such as Hungary and Brazil initially played active roles in upholding democratic norms, resolving electoral disputes, and protecting minority rights [9][10]. These courts enhanced the credibility of political institutions by providing opposition parties with legal recourse and by reinforcing public trust in electoral and governance processes. Such judicial activism demonstrates that courts can function as vital instruments for reinforcing democratic governance when political incentives and institutional culture support autonomy [11][12]. However, judicial independence is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Formal legal protections such as tenure security, judicial review powers, and appointment procedures do not automatically translate into effective autonomy [13][14]. Courts may face informal political pressures, including executive influence, patronage, and historical patterns of subordination inherited from authoritarian regimes [15][16]. In such cases, judicial institutions may exist formally but lack the capacity to act independently, limiting their contribution to democratic consolidation. This distinction between formal and actual independence is crucial for understanding the conditional impact of judicial autonomy on democracy [17][18].

3.2 Factors Influencing Judicial Effectiveness in Democratic Consolidation

The effectiveness of judicial independence in promoting democratic consolidation depends on several interacting factors. First, political competition creates an environment in which courts can exercise autonomy. Where political power is fragmented, no single actor can dominate judicial institutions, providing judges with space to adjudicate impartially [19][20]. Conversely, concentrated political power increases the risk of judicial capture, undermining courts' ability to enforce constitutional limits [21][22]. Political pluralism thus serves as a protective mechanism that enhances judicial influence on democratic outcomes. Second, institutional culture and professional norms shape judicial behaviour. Judges socialized under authoritarian systems may internalize patterns of deference to executive authority, even after democratic transition [23][24]. These cultural legacies limit the capacity of courts to assert independence and necessitate deliberate reforms in professional training, judicial education, and institutional capacity building [25][26]. Exposure to democratic judicial practices through international exchange

programs and professional networks can also support the gradual development of autonomy-enhancing norms [27][28].

Third, judicial legitimacy and public trust are critical determinants of the courts' capacity to influence democratic consolidation. Courts rely on societal acceptance rather than coercive enforcement to ensure compliance with rulings [29][30]. When courts are perceived as independent and impartial, political actors face higher costs for interference, reinforcing the judiciary's capacity to uphold democratic norms. Transparency measures, such as public access to court proceedings, publication of judicial decisions, and clear reasoning, further enhance legitimacy and institutional resilience [31][32]. Fourth, financial and administrative autonomy influences the judiciary's functional capacity. Courts dependent on executive-controlled budgets are vulnerable to political manipulation, as funding can be used to reward compliance or penalize resistance [33][34]. Legal safeguards that provide constitutionally guaranteed budget allocations or independent fiscal authority enable courts to operate effectively and reduce the likelihood of executive interference. Administrative support, professional competence, and institutional resources are also essential to ensure that judicial decisions can be implemented and enforced [35][36]. Finally, historical and structural legacies of authoritarianism shape the judiciary's capacity to promote democratic consolidation. Courts established under authoritarian regimes often inherit institutional frameworks designed to implement state policy rather than constrain political power [37][38]. These legacies create structural constraints that persist after democratic transition, requiring sustained efforts to transform institutional behaviour. Reform efforts that target only formal legal provisions without addressing underlying cultural, political, and institutional dynamics are likely to yield limited results [39][40]. The interplay of these factors explains why judicial independence may produce variable outcomes across post-authoritarian states. In some contexts, courts actively contribute to democratic consolidation by enforcing constitutional constraints, resolving electoral disputes, and protecting minority rights [41][42]. In others, courts may be co-opted to reinforce executive dominance, legitimize authoritarian practices, and undermine democratic accountability [43][44]. Comparative analyses demonstrate that the same formal constitutional provisions can result in divergent levels of judicial effectiveness depending on political context, elite behaviour, and societal support [45][46]. In conclusion, judicial independence functions as both a determinant and a conditional facilitator of democratic consolidation. While autonomous courts can strengthen democratic governance by constraining political actors and protecting individual rights, their effectiveness depends on supportive political, institutional, and societal conditions. Courts are most likely to reinforce democracy when political competition, institutional culture, public legitimacy, financial autonomy, and historical institutional reform converge to enable genuine judicial autonomy. Conversely, judicial capture, concentrated political power, weak institutional norms, and authoritarian legacies can undermine independence and impede democratic consolidation [47][48].

4.0 Political, Institutional, and Historical Determinants of Judicial Autonomy

4.1 Political Influences on Judicial Independence

Judicial autonomy is highly contingent on the political environment in which courts operate. Political elites and executive authorities exercise considerable influence over judicial behaviour through appointment procedures, budgetary control, and institutional reforms [1][2]. Courts may appear formally independent under constitutional guarantees, yet they remain susceptible to manipulation if political actors retain mechanisms of indirect control. Political capture occurs when executives or dominant parties consolidate influence over judicial institutions, using appointments and administrative mechanisms to ensure that courts support rather than constrain political objectives [3][4]. The degree of political competition also affects judicial autonomy. In highly competitive political systems, no single actor can monopolize judicial control, providing courts with greater leverage to assert independence [5][6]. Conversely, concentrated power increases the likelihood of judicial subordination. Empirical studies demonstrate that in Central Asia, despite formal guarantees of judicial independence, post-Soviet courts remain subordinate to executive authority due to entrenched political dominance [7][8]. Similarly, in Eastern Europe, initial post-authoritarian transitions featured courts actively enforcing democratic norms, but subsequent institutional reforms and political pressures weakened autonomy, illustrating that political conditions directly shape judicial behaviour [9][10]. International actors can influence political incentives and support judicial independence, but their effectiveness depends on domestic compliance. Regional courts and international organizations, including the UN and the European Court of Human Rights, provide normative pressure, monitoring, and technical assistance [11][12]. However, without domestic political commitment and institutional legitimacy, international interventions are insufficient to guarantee autonomy. Judicial independence therefore relies on both external normative frameworks and internal political dynamics, emphasizing the centrality of domestic political conditions [13][14].

4.2 Institutional and Historical Factors Affecting Judicial Autonomy

Institutional design and historical legacies are equally critical in determining judicial independence. Post-authoritarian judicial institutions often inherit structural and cultural patterns established under prior authoritarian regimes. Courts previously functioning as instruments of executive authority may retain norms of deference, compliance, and subordination even after democratic transition [15][16]. These historical legacies create persistent barriers to effective autonomy, demonstrating that formal constitutional provisions alone cannot ensure genuine independence [17][18]. Institutional mechanisms such as judicial councils, tenure security, and budgetary autonomy are designed to strengthen independence [19][20]. Judicial councils can depoliticize appointments by incorporating multiple actors, including representatives of the judiciary, legal profession, academia, and civil society [21][22]. Tenure protections and clearly defined removal procedures shield judges from arbitrary dismissal, while financial autonomy reduces dependence on executive-controlled budgets [23][24]. However, the effectiveness of these safeguards is contingent on broader institutional culture and the willingness of political actors to respect formal

rules. Informal networks, patronage, and historical practices can undermine otherwise robust mechanisms [25][26]. Professional norms and institutional capacity also influence judicial autonomy. Judges trained in democratic norms and ethics are better positioned to assert independence in politically sensitive cases [27][28]. Institutional capacity, including administrative resources and legal infrastructure, affects the ability of courts to enforce rulings effectively. Inadequate staffing, insufficient legal training, and limited administrative support constrain judicial functionality, highlighting the interdependence between institutional resources and independence [29][30]. Historical institutionalism explains the persistence of these structural and cultural constraints. Path dependence indicates that prior institutional arrangements create trajectories that shape future behaviour [31][32]. Judicial institutions shaped under authoritarianism may continue patterns of executive deference, with reforms requiring sustained efforts in professional education, norm development, and political incentives. Comparative evidence from Africa demonstrates that countries with stronger institutional culture and professional norms, such as South Africa, have achieved more consistent judicial autonomy, whereas others struggle with persistent subordination despite formal guarantees [33][34]. Furthermore, authoritarian legalism illustrates how courts may operate under formal independence while remaining subordinated to political authority. Authoritarian regimes often maintain legal structures that legitimize governance while exercising informal control [35][36]. Courts may exercise judicial review and interpret legislation but avoid confronting politically sensitive matters, reinforcing executive dominance under the guise of legality. This strategic use of institutions underlines the necessity of understanding judicial independence as a product of political, institutional, and historical factors rather than a purely legal condition [37][38]. In transitional democracies, the interaction between political, institutional, and historical determinants shapes the trajectory of judicial autonomy. Judicial independence is more likely to be sustained when political elites respect institutional constraints, when courts have adequate resources and professional capacity, and when historical legacies are counterbalanced by sustained reforms and supportive norms [39][40]. Conversely, courts in environments dominated by concentrated political power, weak institutions, and persistent authoritarian legacies are prone to capture, limiting their contribution to democratic consolidation [41][42].

5.0 Conclusion

Judicial independence remains a critical institutional pillar for the consolidation of democracy in post-authoritarian states. The study demonstrates that while courts are often formally established during democratic transitions, their capacity to function as independent arbiters depends on a complex interplay of legal frameworks, political incentives, institutional culture, and historical legacies. Formal constitutional guarantees, such as tenure protections, judicial review powers, and appointment procedures, provide a necessary foundation for independence but do not ensure actual autonomy in practice. Political actors, through appointments, budgetary control, and institutional reforms, can significantly influence judicial behaviour, highlighting the contingent nature of judicial independence. The findings indicate that judicial autonomy contributes to democratic consolidation primarily when political competition is robust, institutional legitimacy is strong, and courts possess

professional capacity and societal support. Courts operating in politically fragmented environments with adequate resources and public trust are more likely to enforce constitutional constraints, protect individual rights, and adjudicate disputes impartially. Conversely, courts in settings characterized by concentrated political power, weak institutions, and enduring authoritarian legacies are prone to capture, reducing their effectiveness in safeguarding democratic norms. Historical legacies of authoritarianism play a persistent role in shaping judicial behaviour. Courts that evolved under authoritarian control may retain norms of executive deference and compliance, which require sustained reforms, professional development, and norm-building to transform. Institutional capacity, transparency, financial autonomy, and public legitimacy emerge as essential factors in supporting courts' ability to function independently. Judicial independence, therefore, should be viewed not as a static achievement but as a dynamic process that demands continuous protection and reinforcement. The study also highlights that judicial independence generates both opportunities and tensions within democratic governance. Independent courts strengthen democracy by enforcing constitutional limits and providing checks on executive authority, yet excessive judicial intervention without accountability mechanisms may raise questions about democratic legitimacy. Effective judicial autonomy requires balancing independence with broader democratic accountability to ensure courts enhance governance while respecting political processes. In conclusion, judicial independence is a necessary but insufficient condition for democratic consolidation. Its effectiveness depends on supportive political, institutional, and societal conditions. Strengthening judicial independence requires not only constitutional reform but also sustained political commitment, institutional development, professional norm transformation, and public engagement. By recognizing judicial autonomy as a central component of democratic consolidation, policymakers, civil society, and judicial institutions can work to prevent political capture, enhance institutional resilience, and support the development of robust and sustainable democratic governance.

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