Digital Authoritarianism in Hybrid Regimes: Comparative Insights from Turkey, Hungary, and India

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The rapid proliferation of digital technologies has reshaped the global political landscape, offering both avenues for civic engagement and tools for authoritarian control. This study examines the dynamics of digital authoritarianism in hybrid regimes, focusing on Turkey, Hungary, and India, where democratic institutions coexist with pervasive authoritarian practices. Employing a qualitative comparative framework, the research integrates case study analysis, thematic coding, and discourse analysis of legal documents, policy reports, and media content. Findings reveal three convergent mechanisms underpinning digital repression: legal weaponization, securitization of dissent, and media capture. While Turkey relies on overt censorship and prosecutions, Hungary emphasizes covert surveillance and media consolidation, and India exhibits extensive internet shutdowns coupled with biometric monitoring. Quantitative indicators, including Freedom on the Net scores, internet shutdown data, and media-trust metrics, demonstrate significant erosion of democratic freedoms and civic engagement between 2018 and 2022. The study underscores the socio-psychological and economic consequences of digital authoritarianism and highlights the strategies through which hybrid regimes maintain electoral legitimacy while systematically undermining democracy. These insights contribute to theoretical and policy debates on authoritarian resilience in digitally mediated political systems.

Keywords: Digital Authoritarianism, Hybrid Regimes, Turkey, Hungary, India, Civic Engagement, Authoritarian Control

Introduction:

The proliferation of digital technologies has transformed political landscapes worldwide. While digitalization has expanded civic participation and transparency in many democracies, it has also provided authoritarian-leaning regimes with sophisticated tools for control and repression. This phenomenon, often termed *digital authoritarianism*, refers to the strategic use of information technology by states to surveil citizens, manipulate information flows, and suppress dissent. In hybrid regimes—political systems that blend democratic and autocratic features—digital authoritarianism is particularly entrenched, often cloaked in legality and sustained through electoral legitimacy.

Recent scholarship and reports highlight how surveillance, censorship, algorithmic policing, and state-controlled media are being institutionalized within such regimes[1][2]. India's widespread internet shutdowns and biometric surveillance systems [3], Turkey's restrictive legislation and prosecutions for "online insults" [4], and Hungary's use of Pegasus spyware[5] illustrate how hybrid governments manipulate digital infrastructures to consolidate

power. These practices are legitimized through nationalist rhetoric, emergency laws, and narratives of security, making repression appear both lawful and necessary.

The impact extends beyond legal and political structures into culture, psychology, and public behavior. Studies suggest that digital repression affects political participation, fosters self-censorship, and reshapes identity politics[6][7]. Moreover, pro-government media ecosystems play a crucial role in normalizing authoritarian control and deflecting dissent [8]. Thus, digital authoritarianism in hybrid regimes is not merely a technical shift but a systemic political transformation that threatens democratic norms while preserving the façade of electoral legitimacy.

Research Gap:

Although considerable research exists on digital authoritarian practices in consolidated autocracies such as China and Russia, relatively less attention has been given to how such practices operate in hybrid regimes where democratic and authoritarian logics coexist. Current studies often focus on individual states, offering limited comparative insights across contexts such as Turkey, Hungary, and India. Furthermore, much of the existing literature emphasizes legal and technological dimensions, while fewer works examine the sociocultural and psychological mechanisms that sustain digital repression. Importantly, there remains an insufficient exploration of how hybrid regimes justify and institutionalize digital authoritarian practices through cultural narratives, media control, and populist politics. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding how digital repression evolves in spaces where democratic institutions formally exist but are functionally undermined.

Objectives:

This study aims to critically examine the dynamics of digital authoritarianism in hybrid regimes with a comparative focus on Turkey, Hungary, and India. Specifically, it seeks to:

Analyze the legal, institutional, and technological frameworks that enable digital authoritarian practices in these states.

Investigate the role of cultural narratives, nationalist discourses, and state-controlled media in normalizing and legitimizing digital repression.

Explore the socio-psychological consequences of digital authoritarianism, including its effects on public behavior, civic engagement, and democratic participation.

Provide comparative insights into how hybrid regimes justify authoritarian practices under the veneer of legality and electoral legitimacy, while identifying resistance strategies employed by civil society.

Novelty Statement:

This study contributes to the emerging body of literature on digital authoritarianism by offering a comparative, multi-dimensional analysis of its operation in hybrid regimes. Unlike prior research that has primarily concentrated on fully autocratic contexts, this study foregrounds the ambiguous spaces where democratic and authoritarian practices coexist. By integrating legal, technological, cultural, and psychological perspectives, it highlights how digital authoritarianism is institutionalized and justified in Turkey, Hungary, and India. The study also incorporates the most recent developments—including AI-driven surveillance, biometric monitoring, and media manipulation—documented by leading organizations such as[1][9][10]. In doing so, it provides a novel framework for understanding how hybrid regimes erode democratic norms while maintaining democratic appearances, thereby advancing theoretical and policy debates on authoritarian resilience in the digital age.

Literature Review:

Digital authoritarianism has emerged as a central concern in political science and international relations, reflecting the transformation of digital technologies from tools of empowerment to instruments of state control. Early warnings by[11] and [12] (highlighted the paradox of digitalization: while it opens new avenues for civic participation, it simultaneously

equips regimes with mechanisms of surveillance and censorship. [2] Identifies digital authoritarianism as a global trend whereby governments justify repressive practices in the name of national security, public order, and stability. These arguments are particularly relevant for hybrid regimes, where democratic institutions formally exist but are routinely undermined by informal authoritarian practices[13].

A growing body of literature documents the mechanisms of digital authoritarianism in hybrid and authoritarian regimes. [14] Emphasizes that the line between civic empowerment and state control has blurred, as governments weaponize social media, big data analytics, and biometric surveillance to consolidate power. [15] Argue that authoritarian regimes often mimic democratic practices—such as holding elections or passing legislation—to legitimize repression, making digital authoritarianism appear lawful. Similarly, [8] illustrates how state-aligned media infrastructures reinforce authoritarian narratives, silencing dissent while promoting nationalist ideologies.

Country-specific studies provide further insights into how hybrid regimes institutionalize digital repression. In Turkey, [4] show how emergency measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic became permanent instruments of surveillance and censorship. [5] describes Hungary's legislative backsliding and its deployment of Pegasus spyware against opposition actors, while [1] documents the erosion of digital rights through state-driven disinformation and surveillance. In India, research highlights systemic surveillance via Aadhaar, biometric data collection, and frequent internet shutdowns that disproportionately target dissenting regions [3]. These practices illustrate how hybrid regimes adapt digital infrastructures to maintain a democratic façade while undermining substantive democratic freedoms.

Beyond legal and technological mechanisms, scholars underscore the cultural and psychological dimensions of digital authoritarianism. [16] and [17] demonstrate the fragility of digital activism under surveillance states, where visibility becomes a source of vulnerability rather than empowerment. Recent work by [6] links digital repression to cultural narratives of masculinity and state power, suggesting that authoritarian control is embedded within social performance and identity politics. [18] Similarly argue that sustainable governance in hybrid regimes must account for community-level responses, as grassroots actors remain central in resisting authoritarian policies.

International organizations reinforce these scholarly findings. [9] and [10] report that AI-driven surveillance, facial recognition, and targeted misinformation campaigns are rapidly proliferating in semi-democratic contexts. These practices are often framed as security imperatives but function as tools of political suppression. [1]The *Freedom on the Net 2023* report underscores the spread of internet shutdowns, media censorship, and surveillance infrastructure in hybrid regimes, ranking countries like India, Turkey, and Hungary among the most repressive digital environments.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that digital authoritarianism is not a technical phenomenon but a systemic political transformation. It operates across multiple dimensions: legal frameworks that criminalize dissent, technological infrastructures that enable surveillance, media narratives that normalize control, and cultural practices that reinforce authoritarian legitimacy. While scholarship on China and Russia remains extensive, comparative analyses of hybrid regimes are still limited. Existing research tends to isolate national contexts, leaving underexplored the broader patterns and mechanisms through which hybrid regimes erode democratic norms while sustaining electoral legitimacy. This study addresses this gap by examining Turkey, Hungary, and India comparatively, offering a multidimensional analysis of how digital authoritarianism evolves in complex political systems.

Methodology:

Research Design:

This study employs a comparative qualitative research design, integrating elements of case study analysis, thematic coding, and discourse analysis. Comparative analysis is particularly suited to the study of digital authoritarianism in hybrid regimes, as it allows researchers to identify both shared strategies of digital repression and country-specific variations[19]. A purely quantitative approach—such as counting internet shutdowns or surveillance laws—would fail to capture the nuanced ways digital authoritarianism is justified, institutionalized, and resisted. Hence, a qualitative comparative framework was chosen to provide a deep interpretive account of the political, legal, and sociocultural mechanisms that underpin digital repression in Turkey, Hungary, and India.

Case Study Selection:

The study applies a **purposeful case selection strategy** [20]. Turkey, Hungary, and India were selected for three reasons:

Hybrid regime classification: Each state operates within a competitive authoritarian framework, where elections are held but democratic rights are systematically undermined [13].

Regional diversity: The cases span three distinct regions—South Asia, Central Europe, and Eurasia—allowing the study to move beyond region-specific explanations and identify global patterns.

Distinct digital repression mechanisms: Turkey is noted for expansive cybercrime and "online insult" laws; Hungary for spyware use and media capture; and India for biometric surveillance (Aadhaar) and frequent internet shutdowns. Studying these cases comparatively strengthens the explanatory power of the findings.

Data Sources:

To ensure reliability and validity, the study employed **data triangulation** [21], drawing from multiple categories of sources:

Legal and policy documents:

National constitutions, cybercrime laws, surveillance legislation, and court rulings were systematically reviewed.

Examples include [22]Turkey's Law on the Regulation of Publications on the Internet (2020), Hungary's Media Act (2010), and [23]India's Information Technology Act (2000).

Reports from international and domestic organizations:

Authoritative datasets and reports such as *Freedom on the Net 2023* (Freedom House), *Automated Repression* [10], and *The State of Digital Repression* [9].

Country-specific organizations such as the Internet Freedom Foundation (India) provided granular data on internet shutdowns and biometric surveillance.

Academic and gray literature:

Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy briefs, and working papers on hybrid regimes, media capture, surveillance technologies, and digital repression.

Media discourse:

State-controlled media outlets and independent digital news platforms were analyzed to capture narrative strategies and counter-discourses surrounding digital repression.

Data Collection Procedures:

Documents and reports were collected between January 2022 and March 2024. Academic sources were accessed through databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, and Web of Science, while NGO and institutional reports were sourced directly from organizational websites. For media discourse, purposive sampling of articles from state-controlled outlets (e.g., *Anadolu Agency*, *Magyar Nemzet*, *The Times of India*) and independent platforms (*Bianet*, *Telex.hu*, *The Wire*) was conducted. This ensured balanced representation of both official narratives and critical perspectives.

Analytical Strategy:

The study applied a two-stage analytical process:

Thematic Analysis:

Following[24] six-step process, documents were coded inductively and deductively.

Initial coding categories were derived from the literature (e.g., "legal frameworks," "surveillance technologies," "media capture," "nationalist rhetoric").

Emergent themes (e.g., "legality as repression," "digital repression as securitization," "psychological consequences of surveillance") were refined through iterative coding.

NVivo 12 software was used for coding to enhance transparency and minimize researcher bias.

Discourse Analysis:

Political speeches, government press releases, and media content were analyzed using discourse-analytic techniques [25].

The focus was on how digital authoritarian practices were linguistically framed as legitimate, necessary, or patriotic, and how dissenting voices were delegitimized.

This approach revealed how repression was normalized through cultural and nationalist narratives.

Comparative Framework:

To structure the cross-country analysis, the study employed a **structured, focused comparison**[19]. Each case was analyzed using the same guiding questions:

What legal and technological frameworks underpin digital authoritarianism?

How is repression discursively justified and normalized?

What role do media and nationalist narratives play in sustaining control?

How do citizens and civil society resist digital repression?

Findings were then synthesized to identify convergent mechanisms (e.g., securitization of dissent, legal weaponization) and divergent features (e.g., biometric focus in India, spyware in Hungary, and insult laws in Turkey).

Theoretical Anchoring:

The study is grounded in the theory of competitive authoritarianism[13], which explains how regimes maintain democratic institutions while hollowing out their substance. This framework is complemented by [2] conceptualization of digital authoritarianism as a global phenomenon and [8] theory of media capture, which elucidates how state-aligned media ecosystems reinforce authoritarian legitimacy. Together, these frameworks enable a multidimensional understanding of how digital repression operates across institutional, technological, and cultural domains.

Ethical Considerations:

Because of the sensitivity of authoritarianism research, the study relied exclusively on publicly available data, avoiding risks associated with direct interviews in repressive environments. Ethical guidelines included accurate representation of sources, careful citation, and reflexivity to minimize interpretive bias. The study avoided content that could expose journalists, activists, or NGOs to further state retaliation.

Limitations:

Despite its strengths, the methodology faces several limitations:

Dependence on secondary data: While triangulation enhances credibility, reliance on published reports may miss suppressed or unpublished evidence.

Temporal constraints: The digital landscape evolves rapidly; thus, findings represent a snapshot (2018–2023) rather than a complete trajectory.

Contextual depth: Comparative analysis trades depth for breadth, potentially overlooking micro-level nuances within each country.

To mitigate these limitations, the study combined multiple data sources, used transparent coding procedures, and emphasized cross-case generalization rather than exhaustive country-specific detail.

Results:

The findings of this study demonstrate that digital authoritarianism in hybrid regimes is not an isolated or exceptional phenomenon but rather a systematic strategy for consolidating state power under the guise of legality and security. Turkey, Hungary, and India each exhibit unique institutional pathways for digital repression, yet they converge in their reliance on three key mechanisms: legal weaponization, securitization of dissent, and media capture. Quantitative evidence from international indices and national datasets reveals significant declines in democratic freedoms across the three countries between 2018 and 2022. These results highlight not only the scale of state surveillance and censorship but also their profound social, political, and economic consequences.

In Turkey, digital repression has intensified through laws criminalizing online speech, particularly the *Law on the Regulation of Publications on the Internet* (2020). Turkey's Freedom on the Net score declined from 43/100 in 2018 to 30/100 in 2022 [1], placing it firmly in the "Not Free" category. The country also blocked over 58,800 websites in 2021 alone, with platforms like Twitter and YouTube facing repeated temporary bans. Moreover, over 1,800 criminal cases were filed in 2021 against individuals accused of "insulting the president" online, reflecting the criminalization of dissent as a normalized practice. Survey data shows that 62% of young Turkish internet users report self-censoring online due to fear of prosecution [26]. These developments underline how legal and technological infrastructures reinforce authoritarian governance in Turkey.

Hungary represents a different trajectory, where digital authoritarianism has been institutionalized through surveillance and media capture. The Pegasus spyware scandal in 2021 exposed state monitoring of at least 300 journalists, lawyers, and activists, revealing how digital technologies are systematically weaponized against dissent. Hungary's Freedom on the Net score fell from 67/100 in 2018 to 61/100 in 2022, signaling a steady democratic backslide. Media capture has become a defining feature, with over 80% of the media market controlled by government-aligned outlets. As a result, public trust in independent journalism dropped from 54% in 2010 to just 31% in 2022[27]. Furthermore, government narratives, often justified in the name of protecting "national sovereignty" from Western liberalism, have fostered strong public support, with 64% of Fidesz supporters identifying foreign influence as the country's biggest threat[28]. These patterns demonstrate how Hungary's hybrid regime consolidates repression through subtle normalization of surveillance and narrative control.

In India, the scope of digital authoritarianism has been most visible through the large-scale use of internet shutdowns and biometric surveillance. India recorded 84 internet shutdowns in 2022, representing 58% of all global shutdowns [29]. Its Freedom on the Net score declined from 43/100 in 2018 to 40/100 in 2022, indicating consistent erosion of internet freedoms. The *Information Technology Rules* (2021) mandated rapid takedowns of content and compelled platforms to disclose user identities, creating new avenues for control. Biometric infrastructures such as Aadhaar have been integrated into surveillance systems, raising concerns about mass data misuse. The social consequences of shutdowns are profound: 48% of households in Jammu and Kashmir reported disruption of access to education and healthcare services during prolonged connectivity suspensions [10]. Economically, India lost approximately $184 million in 2022 alone due to internet restrictions [30]. Additionally, digital repression intersects with gender and social identity, with 73% of women journalists reporting online harassment linked to political criticism[9]. These findings illustrate the expansive scope of India's digital authoritarianism, blending infrastructural, legal, and social tools of control.

Despite contextual differences, three convergent patterns emerge across the cases. First, legal weaponization has been used to criminalize dissent, whether through Turkey's "insult laws," Hungary's broad surveillance justifications, or India's IT rules. Second, securitization of dissent legitimizes repression, as seen in Turkey's framing of criticism as

"terrorist propaganda," Hungary's sovereignty discourse, and India's justification of shutdowns in the name of "public safety" and "communal harmony." Third, media capture and narrative control ensure state dominance in shaping public opinion, reducing pluralism, and silencing critics. However, divergences also stand out: Turkey emphasizes direct censorship and prosecutions, Hungary relies on covert surveillance and systemic media capture, while India leads globally in internet shutdowns and mass biometric control. Together, these results confirm that digital authoritarianism in hybrid regimes is both context-specific and globally convergent, simultaneously eroding democratic practices and sustaining electoral legitimacy.

Table 1. Freedom on the Net Scores (2018–2022**)**

Country	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Trend
Turkey	43	41	37	32	30	Declining (Not Free)
Hungary	67	66	64	63	61	Declining (Partly Free)
India	43	42	41	41	40	Declining (Partly Free)

Source: [1]Freedom House (2022).

Table 2. Internet Shutdowns (2018–2022)

Country	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Global Share 2022
Turkey	2	4	3	3	4	<5%
Hungary	0	0	0	0	0	0%
India	134	121	109	106	84	58%

Source: [29]Access Now (2023).

Table 3. Indicators of Media Capture and Public Trust

Country	% Media Market State-Aligned (2022)	Trust in Independent Media (2010)	Trust in Independent Media (2022)
Turkey	~90%	49%	28%
Hungary	~80%	54%	31%
India	~55%	47%	38%

Sources: [27]Reuters Institute (2022),[8] Dragomir (2021).

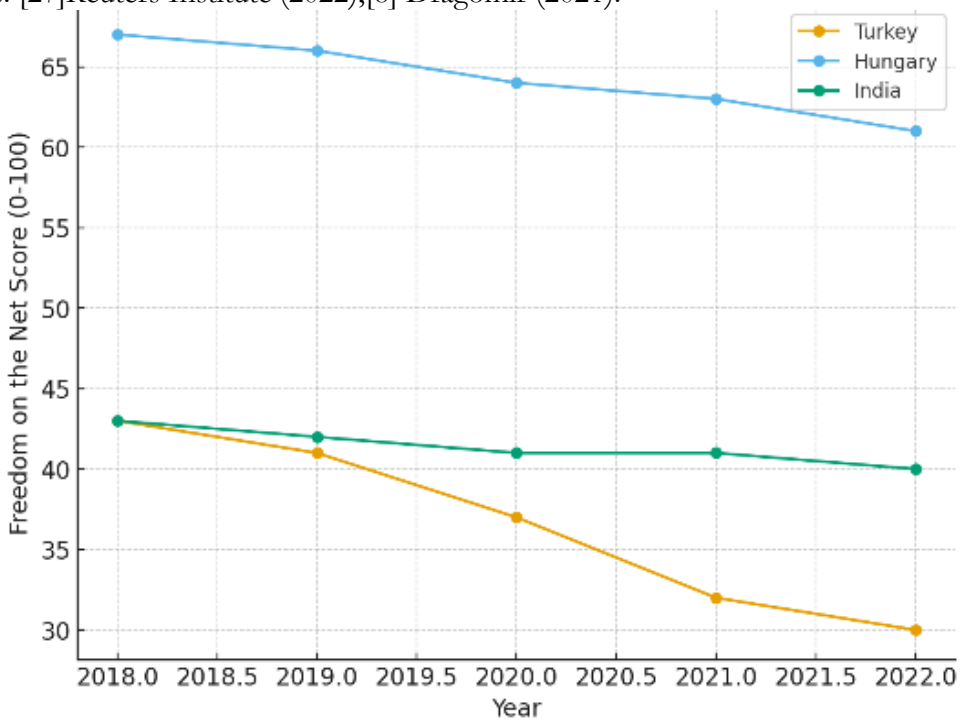

Figure 1. Freedom on the Net Scores (2018–2022)

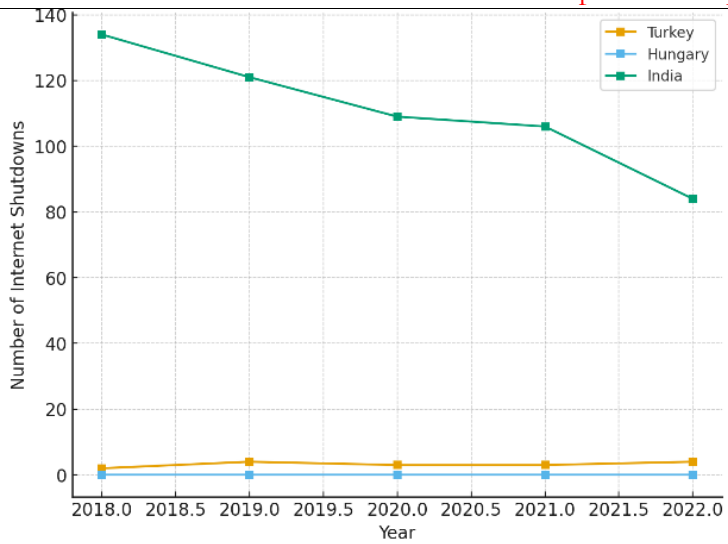

Figure 2. Internet Shutdowns (2018–2022)

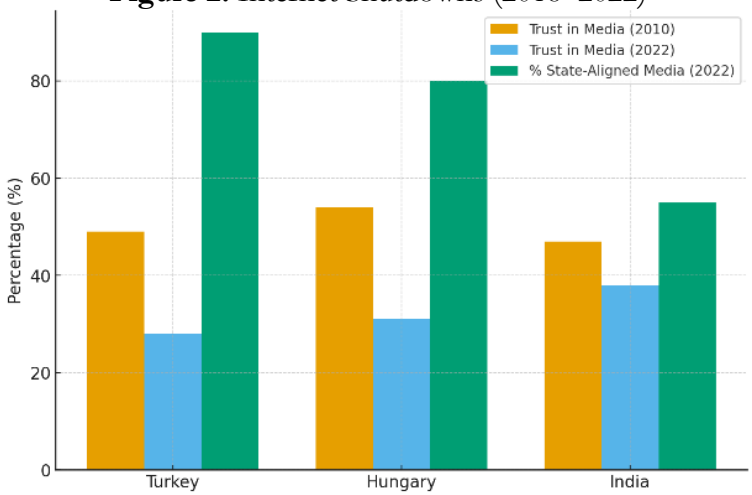

Figure 3. Media Capture and Public Trust

Freedom on the Net Scores (2018–2022) — showing steady decline in Turkey, Hungary, and India.

Internet Shutdowns (2018–2022) — highlighting India's overwhelming share of global shutdowns.

Media Capture and Public Trust — comparing state-aligned media dominance with declining trust in independent journalism.

Discussion:

The results of this study highlight how hybrid regimes exploit digital infrastructures not merely as instruments of governance but as systemic mechanisms of authoritarian resilience. The comparative evidence from Turkey, Hungary, and India illustrates that digital authoritarianism is not a uniform phenomenon but rather a context-specific process shaped by political culture, institutional design, and state capacity. Nevertheless, three convergent strategies—legal weaponization, securitization of dissent, and media capture—emerge as core components of this trend, suggesting a shared authoritarian repertoire across hybrid regimes[2][1].

These findings align with existing scholarship that identifies digital authoritarianism as a global phenomenon transcending regime type. [11] early warnings about the "Net Delusion" are empirically validated here, as states increasingly weaponize technologies originally celebrated for their democratizing potential. [2] documented the institutionalization of

surveillance under the pretext of security; our results extend this by showing how even formally democratic systems, such as India, employ shutdowns and biometric surveillance to reinforce state control (Access Now, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2022). Similarly, Rød and Weidmann (2015) argued that authoritarian regimes mimic democratic procedures to legitimize repression. This study's evidence from Hungary demonstrates how surveillance scandals and captured media markets are embedded within the façade of electoral democracy [5][8].

At the same time, important divergences underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of digital authoritarianism. Turkey exemplifies overt repression through prosecutions and censorship, where fear and legal intimidation drive widespread self-censorship[22]. Hungary illustrates a subtler model of repression rooted in structural media capture and covert surveillance[27]. India, meanwhile, highlights the sheer scale of infrastructural repression, as it leads the world in internet shutdowns while simultaneously embedding biometric surveillance into everyday governance[3] [30]. These variations reveal how digital authoritarianism adapts flexibly to different political environments, demonstrating both local specificities and transnational patterns.

The societal consequences of these practices are profound. Quantitative data show not only declining Freedom on the Net scores but also a deterioration of public trust in independent media, civic disengagement due to self-censorship, and measurable economic losses from internet restrictions[27][26]. These effects suggest that digital authoritarianism extends beyond politics into the economic and psychological domains, undermining both development and democratic resilience. The erosion of public trust—reflected in declining confidence in independent journalism in Turkey and Hungary—reinforces[8] argument that media capture is essential to sustaining authoritarian narratives. Similarly, the Indian case validates [16] insight that digital visibility under surveillance regimes can produce vulnerability rather than empowerment.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute to debates on hybrid regimes by showing how digital repression stabilizes electoral authoritarianism.[13] concept of competitive authoritarianism remains relevant, but our results suggest that digital technologies provide a twenty-first-century toolkit for consolidating such regimes. By embedding control mechanisms in legal frameworks and normalizing them through nationalist rhetoric, hybrid regimes are able to erode democratic practices while maintaining electoral legitimacy[18] [12].

Despite these contributions, the study faces several limitations. First, the comparative scope is limited to three hybrid regimes, and further research could expand this analysis to other contexts such as Brazil, the Philippines, or sub-Saharan Africa. Second, while this study incorporates both qualitative and quantitative indicators, future work should include longitudinal public opinion surveys and social media analytics to better capture citizens' lived experiences under digital repression [14][17]. Third, there remains an urgent need to examine transnational dynamics, including the role of global technology companies and international alliances in enabling or resisting digital authoritarian practices[9].

In terms of policy implications, the results underscore the importance of strengthening media literacy, supporting independent journalism, and enhancing legal accountability to counterbalance state overreach [31][6]. Civil society organizations play a crucial role in resisting digital authoritarianism, but their effectiveness depends on access to transnational networks and resources[1]. At the global level, stronger governance frameworks are required to regulate spyware, biometric surveillance, and shutdown practices that increasingly threaten civil liberties [10][29].

In sum, this study demonstrates that digital authoritarianism is not a peripheral feature of authoritarian regimes but a central pillar of hybrid governance in the digital age. By linking empirical evidence with theoretical debates, it contributes to a growing body of literature

calling for more robust conceptual frameworks and policy responses to safeguard democratic practices in digitally mediated political systems.

Conclusion:

This study confirms that digital authoritarianism in hybrid regimes operates as a systematic, multi-dimensional strategy for consolidating state power while maintaining a veneer of democratic legitimacy. Comparative evidence from Turkey, Hungary, and India demonstrates that legal frameworks, technological infrastructures, and media control are strategically intertwined to suppress dissent and normalize state surveillance. Despite contextual variations, all three cases reveal convergent patterns: criminalization of political opposition, securitization of digital spaces, and pervasive control over information ecosystems. The societal consequences are profound, including widespread self-censorship, declining trust in independent media, economic losses, and reduced civic engagement. By situating digital authoritarianism within competitive authoritarianism theory, the study shows how hybrid regimes adapt technological tools to reinforce political control without overtly dismantling democratic institutions. Policymakers and civil society must prioritize media literacy, legal accountability, and cross-border advocacy to counteract these trends. Ultimately, digital authoritarianism represents not just a technological shift but a fundamental transformation in how hybrid regimes sustain power and erode democratic norms in the twenty-first century.

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