

Research Article

Democratic Formalism: Institutional Legitimacy, Rights Erosion, and the Crisis of Contemporary Democracy

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Abstract

Contemporary democratic decline increasingly occurs without the visible collapse of democratic institutions. Elections continue to be conducted, constitutions remain formally operative, legislatures function, and courts retain their institutional presence. Yet beneath this procedural continuity, democracy may experience gradual erosion through declining public trust, weakened accountability, institutional capture, reduced citizen participation, and the concentration of power within formally constitutional structures. Existing theories of democratic erosion, backsliding, and authoritarianization explain many dimensions of this transformation but often focus on institutional breakdown, executive overreach, or the reversal of democratic norms. This article proposes *Democratic Formalism Theory (DFT)* as an integrated framework for explaining how democratic systems can preserve formal institutional appearances while progressively losing substantive democratic qualities. DFT argues that contemporary democratic decline is not necessarily characterized by the destruction of democratic institutions but by their transformation into symbolic structures that maintain legitimacy through procedural continuity while weakening accountability, representation, transparency, and citizen empowerment. The theory identifies a *Democratic Formalism Cycle* consisting of six interconnected stages: democratic dissatisfaction, narrative construction, legitimacy challenge and mobilization, extra-constitutional power concentration, institutional hollowing, and democratic simulation. Through this cycle, democratic institutions may gradually become instruments for preserving authority rather than mechanisms for ensuring popular sovereignty. The article further examines how constitutional displacement, narrative manipulation, international pressures, terrorism and extremism, digital technologies, and the paradoxical use of rights against democratic values contribute to democratic formalism. By integrating institutional, sociological, political, and international dimensions, DFT provides a broader conceptual framework for understanding why some democracies survive institutionally while declining substantively. The theory contributes to contemporary democratic studies by shifting analytical attention from institutional survival alone toward the relationship between democratic form, democratic substance, and public legitimacy.

Keywords

Democratic Formalism Theory, Democratic Erosion, Democratic Backsliding, Institutional Hollowing, Democratic Legitimacy, Political Narratives, Constitutional Displacement, Democratic Simulation

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1. Introduction

Democracy has traditionally been understood as a political system based on popular sovereignty, competitive elections, constitutional governance, accountability, and protection of fundamental rights. Classical democratic theories emphasized the importance of institutions that translate citizen preferences into political authority and constrain the exercise of power. However, contemporary democratic transformations reveal a more complex reality. In many countries, democratic institutions remain formally intact while their substantive functions gradually weaken. Elections continue, constitutions remain in force, and legislatures operate, yet citizens increasingly experience declining influence, reduced accountability, and diminished trust in political institutions. [12, 31].

This phenomenon presents a theoretical challenge. Conventional approaches often associate democratic decline with military coups, constitutional suspension, authoritarian takeovers, or the abolition of democratic institutions. Such approaches are less effective in explaining situations where democratic structures survive but democratic substance deteriorates. Modern political actors frequently maintain democratic procedures because institutional continuity provides domestic and international legitimacy. Rather than eliminating democratic forms, they may reshape institutions to consolidate authority, restrict accountability, and control political narratives. [1].

The concept of democratic erosion has provided important insights into gradual democratic decline. Scholars have examined executive aggrandizement, institutional weakening, attacks on judicial independence, electoral manipulation, and the decline of democratic norms. However, many existing frameworks remain focused on specific institutional mechanisms rather than explaining the broader transformation through which democracy can retain its appearance while losing its essential characteristics.

This article introduces *Democratic Formalism Theory* (DFT) to address this analytical gap. Democratic formalism refers to a condition in which democratic institutions continue to exist formally but increasingly lose their substantive democratic functions. The central argument of DFT is that democracy requires more than institutional presence; it requires meaningful accountability, citizen participation, transparency, protection of rights, and public trust. When these elements decline while democratic procedures remain visible, democracy enters a condition of formal survival but substantive weakening.

DFT does not argue that democratic institutions become irrelevant. Rather, it explains how institutions can be gradually transformed from mechanisms of public accountability into structures that provide legitimacy to concentrated power. The theory therefore focuses on the gap between *democratic appearance and democratic reality*.

The article develops this argument through the concept of the *Democratic Formalism Cycle*. The cycle demonstrates

how democratic dissatisfaction can be politically constructed, how narratives can delegitimize existing institutions, how legitimacy crises can justify exceptional measures, and how institutions can gradually become hollowed out while maintaining formal democratic characteristics. The final stage, democratic simulation, represents a political environment where democratic procedures continue but their capacity to reflect popular sovereignty becomes substantially weakened.

The importance of this framework extends beyond individual cases. Contemporary democracies operate within complex domestic and international environments shaped by technological transformation, geopolitical competition, security threats, economic inequality, and changing patterns of political communication. These factors create new vulnerabilities that cannot be adequately explained through traditional institutional analysis alone.

By integrating institutional, societal, technological, and international dimensions, Democratic Formalism Theory provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing democratic transformation in the twenty-first century. It shifts the central question from “*Do democratic institutions exist?*” to “*Do democratic institutions continue to perform their democratic purposes?*”

2. Methodology

This article employs a *theoretical and conceptual research methodology*. The objective is not to test a single causal hypothesis through quantitative analysis but to develop an integrated analytical framework capable of explaining contemporary democratic transformation.

The study adopts a qualitative approach based on conceptual synthesis and theoretical development. It examines existing scholarship on democracy, democratic erosion, authoritarian transformation, political legitimacy, institutional theory, constitutionalism, and political communication. Major theoretical contributions from scholars such as Weber, Habermas, Putnam, Fukuyama [16, 18, 39], and contemporary democratic theorists are incorporated to establish the conceptual foundation of DFT. [16-18, 32, 39].

The methodology follows three analytical steps. First, it reviews existing theories of democratic decline to identify their explanatory strengths and limitations. While these theories effectively explain institutional attacks, executive dominance, and authoritarian tendencies, they often provide limited explanation of democratic systems that preserve formal structures while weakening substantive democratic practices.

Second, the study develops the concept of democratic formalism by examining the relationship between democratic institutions and democratic outcomes. The analysis distinguishes between *institutional form* and *institutional function*, arguing that the existence of democratic structures does not automatically guarantee democratic governance.

Third, the article constructs the Democratic Formalism Cycle as an analytical model linking different stages of democratic transformation. The cycle explains how political dissatisfaction, legitimacy crises, narrative strategies, institutional manipulation, and social fragmentation interact to produce democratic simulation.

The methodology therefore combines theoretical interpretation with comparative institutional reasoning. It recognizes democracy as both an institutional arrangement and a social relationship based on trust, participation, accountability, and legitimacy. The framework developed in this article is intended to provide an analytical tool for examining diverse democratic experiences rather than a prediction model limited to specific countries or regions.

3. Theoretical Framework: Democratic Formalism Theory

3.1. Conceptual Foundation of Democratic Formalism

Democratic Formalism Theory (DFT) is based on the proposition that democracy consists of two interconnected but distinct dimensions: democratic form and democratic substance. Democratic form refers to the visible institutional arrangements of democracy, including elections, constitutions, legislatures, political parties, and judicial structures. Democratic substance refers to the deeper principles that give these institutions meaning, including accountability, transparency, participation, equality, rights protection, institutional independence, and public trust. [7, 12, 31].

A democratic system becomes vulnerable when formal structures continue to exist while substantive democratic values decline. In such circumstances, democratic institutions may serve primarily as symbols of legitimacy rather than effective mechanisms of citizen empowerment. Democratic formalism therefore describes a condition where democratic procedures remain operational but increasingly become disconnected from their original purpose of ensuring popular sovereignty.

The theory differs from conventional concepts of authoritarianism because democratic formalism does not necessarily require the elimination of democratic institutions. Instead, it explains how political actors may preserve elections, constitutions, and representative institutions while altering their functions. The result is a political system where democracy survives as a framework of appearance but weakens as a system of accountability.

The central assumption of DFT is that the survival of democratic institutions cannot be measured only by their existence. The quality of democracy depends on whether institutions continue to perform their intended democratic functions. A parliament that exists but cannot effectively oversee the execu-

tive, an election that occurs but lacks meaningful competition, or a judiciary that operates formally but lacks independence represent conditions where democratic form and democratic substance diverge.

3.2. Democracy as Institutional Trust

Democracy depends not only on rules and procedures but also on relationships of trust between citizens and institutions. Weber's analysis of legitimate authority emphasizes that political systems require acceptance of authority beyond mere coercion [39]. Habermas [18] similarly argues that democratic legitimacy emerges through communication, participation, and public reasoning. Putnam [32] highlights the importance of social capital and institutional performance in sustaining democratic confidence, while Fukuyama [17] emphasizes the role of capable and accountable institutions in political development. [16-19, 32, 39].

Building on these perspectives, DFT argues that legitimacy is the bridge between democratic form and democratic substance. When institutions lose public trust, democratic procedures may continue but their legitimacy gradually weakens. This creates opportunities for political actors to manipulate dissatisfaction, redefine public narratives, and justify concentration of power.

Thus, democratic decline is not always an institutional collapse; it may begin as a crisis of confidence. A democracy can remain procedurally functional while becoming socially detached from citizens.

3.3. The Democratic Formalism Cycle

DFT proposes a six-stage cycle explaining how democratic systems may transform from substantive democracy into democratic simulation.

3.3.1. Stage I: Democratic Dissatisfaction

The process begins with dissatisfaction arising from economic inequality, corruption, governance failures, social exclusion, insecurity, or declining institutional performance. Dissatisfaction itself is not a threat to democracy; democratic systems naturally contain disagreement and criticism. The danger emerges when dissatisfaction becomes disconnected from institutional reform and is transformed into rejection of democratic processes themselves.

3.3.2. Stage II: Narrative Construction

Political actors construct narratives that explain dissatisfaction and identify responsible actors. These narratives may present existing institutions as ineffective, corrupt, illegitimate, or incapable of protecting national interests. Through political communication, media influence, and digital platforms, complex social problems can be simplified into emotionally powerful explanations.

Narrative construction becomes significant because political legitimacy is often shaped not only by institutional performance but also by public interpretation of events. Control over narratives can therefore influence perceptions of legitimacy.

3.3.3. Stage III: Legitimacy Challenge and Mobilization

Once democratic institutions are portrayed as failing, political mobilization emerges around demands for exceptional solutions. Citizens experiencing frustration may support actors who promise stability, efficiency, or renewal. The political competition gradually shifts from disagreement over policies toward conflict over the legitimacy of institutions themselves.

At this stage, democratic mechanisms may be used to challenge democracy's own foundations. Electoral mandates, popular movements, or constitutional arguments can become instruments for weakening institutional constraints.

3.3.4. Stage IV: Extra-Constitutional Power Concentration

The next stage involves the expansion of executive or dominant political power beyond traditional institutional limits. This may occur through constitutional amendments, emergency measures, administrative control, selective enforcement of laws, or weakening of oversight mechanisms.

Importantly, power concentration often occurs through formally legal procedures. This distinguishes democratic formalism from traditional authoritarian transformation, where institutional destruction is usually more visible.

3.3.5. Stage V: Institutional Hollowing

Institutional hollowing represents the gradual weakening of democratic institutions without their formal disappearance. Elections continue, legislatures remain active, and courts continue functioning, but their independence, effectiveness, and accountability decline.

Institutions become increasingly symbolic rather than substantive. Their existence provides democratic legitimacy while their ability to constrain power diminishes.

3.3.6. Stage VI: Democratic Simulation

The final stage is democratic simulation, where democratic procedures continue but operate primarily as demonstrations of legitimacy rather than mechanisms of genuine representation and accountability. [34].

In a simulated democracy, citizens may still vote, institutions may still function formally, and constitutional language may remain intact. However, meaningful competition, accountability, and participation become substantially limited.

Democratic simulation represents the highest level of democratic formalism because the gap between democratic appearance and democratic reality becomes institutionalized.

4. Literature Review: from Democratic Erosion to Democratic Formalism

4.1. Democratic Decline and Existing Explanations

The study of democratic decline has expanded significantly in recent decades. Earlier explanations emphasized democratic breakdown through military coups, revolutions, or direct authoritarian replacement. However, contemporary democratic decline increasingly occurs through gradual institutional transformation within formally democratic systems. [14, 26].

Recent scholarship reinforces the need to examine democratic decline as a multidimensional and often incremental process. The V-Dem Institute's *Democracy Report 2025* documents the continuing expansion of autocratization and identifies institutional, electoral, and expressive freedoms as important dimensions of contemporary democratic decline [41]. International IDEA's *Global State of Democracy 2024* similarly reports deterioration in electoral credibility, representation, and rights across a substantial number of countries, while highlighting declining electoral participation and growing disputes over electoral outcomes [42]. Comparative analysis by Carothers and Hartnett [43] further cautions against reducing democratic backsliding to popular dissatisfaction with socioeconomic performance, emphasizing instead the importance of political leaders, institutional constraints, and the capacity of democratic institutions to resist predatory exercises of power. Together, these recent contributions reinforce the argument that democratic decline cannot be adequately understood through a single institutional or socioeconomic explanation.

Recent scholarship demonstrates that elected governments may weaken democratic norms and institutional constraints without openly abandoning democratic procedures. Bermeo [9] identifies executive aggrandizement and strategic institutional manipulation as central mechanisms of democratic backsliding, while Levitsky and Ziblatt [25] show how elected leaders can undermine democratic institutions from within. This literature has significantly advanced understanding of how democracies deteriorate through constitutional and institutional means. [9, 24, 25].

However, existing democratic erosion literature primarily focuses on the mechanisms through which institutions are weakened. Democratic Formalism Theory (DFT) extends this discussion by examining a broader transformation: the divergence between democratic institutions as formal structures and their capacity to perform substantive democratic functions.

4.2. Democratic Legitimacy, Institutional Performance, and Democratic Substance

Democratic stability depends not only on institutional design but also on legitimacy, public trust, and perceptions of

institutional fairness. Dalton [13] highlights declining confidence in representative institutions, while Norris [29] demonstrates that citizens may continue supporting democratic ideals despite dissatisfaction with democratic performance. Rosanvallon [33] further explains how citizens increasingly engage in forms of political oversight beyond traditional representative mechanisms. [13, 29, 33].

Human rights scholarship similarly emphasizes that democracy extends beyond elections to include equality, freedom, public reasoning, participation, and effective rights protection [15, 36]. These perspectives demonstrate that democratic quality depends on the relationship between institutions and citizens rather than merely on the existence of formal procedures.

DFT builds upon this understanding by introducing the concept of *institutional-substantive divergence*: a condition in which democratic institutions remain formally operational while their ability to ensure accountability, representation, and rights protection progressively declines.

4.3. Contemporary Pressures on Democratic Governance

Contemporary democracies operate within an increasingly complex environment shaped by globalization, geopolitical competition, and technological transformation. Held [20] argues that political authority increasingly extends beyond traditional territorial boundaries, while Ikenberry [22] highlights pressures on the international liberal order arising from geopolitical rivalry. [20, 22].

Digital technologies have further transformed democratic communication and participation. Although they create opportunities for engagement and transparency, they also generate vulnerabilities through misinformation, surveillance, polarization, and algorithmic influence [10, 21, 40].

Existing scholarship provides valuable explanations of individual dimensions of democratic vulnerability, including institutional decline, legitimacy crises, technological disruption, and geopolitical pressures. However, these dimensions are often examined separately. DFT integrates them into a unified framework by explaining how multiple pressures interact to widen the gap between democratic form and democratic substance.

Building on research on democratic legitimacy, governance ethics, political narratives, and institutional accountability [2-5], DFT argues that contemporary democratic transformation occurs when formal democratic structures remain intact while their substantive democratic purposes become progressively weakened.

Recent scholarship reinforces the need to move beyond conventional accounts of democratic erosion and backsliding toward a more nuanced examination of the relationship between democratic institutions and their substantive performance. Nord et al. [41] document the continuing global expansion of autocratization and the weakening of democratic

institutions, while International IDEA [42] highlights growing challenges to the legitimacy and integrity of elections under conditions of increasing political uncertainty. Carothers and Hartnett [43], meanwhile, caution against overly linear or simplified interpretations of democratic backsliding and emphasize the importance of distinguishing among different pathways and forms of democratic decline. Together, these contributions demonstrate that democratic erosion can occur within formally democratic institutional settings and may involve the gradual weakening of accountability, institutional checks, political competition, and citizens' effective political rights.

Nevertheless, an important analytical gap remains. Much of the existing literature focuses on the processes through which democracy erodes, backsliding occurs, or authoritarian practices emerge within formally democratic systems. Less attention has been devoted to the specific condition in which democratic institutions and procedures continue to exist and retain their formal legitimacy while their substantive democratic functions are progressively weakened. The persistence of elections, legislatures, constitutions, courts, rights provisions, and other democratic institutions does not necessarily demonstrate the continued vitality of substantive democracy. Institutions may remain operational in formal terms while becoming increasingly detached from accountability, transparency, meaningful participation, effective rights protection, and public trust.

The development of Democratic Formalism Theory (DFT) builds cumulatively on the author's earlier conceptual and empirical research [2-5]. These studies provide the intellectual foundation for the present theoretical formulation by examining interconnected dimensions of democratic practice, institutional legitimacy, governance, rights, accountability, and the relationship between formal institutions and substantive political outcomes. Their inclusion is therefore not merely supplementary or illustrative; they represent the cumulative body of research from which the DFT framework has emerged. At the same time, DFT is situated within and extends the broader scholarship on democratic erosion, democratic backsliding, authoritarianism, institutional change, and political legitimacy.

Accordingly, DFT shifts analytical attention from democratic erosion alone to the divergence between democratic form and democratic substance. It conceptualizes a condition in which democratic institutions may remain formally intact while their substantive functions are progressively hollowed out, producing an appearance of democratic continuity alongside declining accountability, participation, rights protection, institutional integrity, and public trust. The theory therefore seeks to explain not only how democracy erodes, but also how democratic appearance, formal institutional continuity, and legally sanctioned procedures can themselves become mechanisms through which substantive democratic decline is normalized, legitimized, and sustained. This theoretical gap provides the basis for the subsequent discussion of Democratic Formalism and its constituent mechanisms.

5. From Democratic Erosion to Democratic Formalism

Democratic erosion describes the gradual weakening of democratic norms, institutions, and accountability mechanisms. However, erosion alone does not fully explain situations where democratic institutions continue to exist while their democratic effectiveness declines. Democratic Formalism Theory addresses this intermediate condition. [14, 24, 26].

The central distinction is that *democratic erosion is a process, whereas democratic formalism is a condition resulting from the institutionalization of that process*. During democratic erosion, institutions may still retain significant capacity for correction. Democratic formalism emerges when institutional weakening becomes embedded and democratic procedures increasingly function as symbols of legitimacy rather than effective mechanisms of accountability.

In democratic formalism, elections continue, constitutions remain operative, and representative institutions survive. However, their substantive functions may decline as accountability mechanisms weaken, political competition becomes constrained, and citizens lose confidence in institutional responsiveness. [24, 30].

This transformation occurs because modern political legitimacy remains closely associated with democratic forms. Even governments that restrict accountability often preserve elections, constitutional language, and representative structures because these provide domestic acceptance and international recognition. The result is not the disappearance of democracy but a transformation in which democratic appearance becomes increasingly separated from democratic performance. [24, 30].

DFT therefore shifts analytical attention from whether democratic institutions exist to whether they continue to fulfil their democratic purposes. Democracy is understood not merely as an institutional arrangement but as a continuing relationship between citizens and governing institutions based on trust, accountability, participation, and rights protection.

DFT is distinct from adjacent concepts such as competitive or electoral authoritarianism, hybrid regimes, and illiberal or façade democracy. Competitive or electoral authoritarianism generally refers to regimes in which elections and formal democratic institutions persist but incumbents systematically constrain meaningful political competition, while hybrid-regime approaches emphasize the coexistence of democratic and authoritarian features. Illiberal or façade democracy, in turn, highlights the weakening of liberal rights, pluralism, accountability, and institutional constraints beneath the appearance of democratic rule. DFT does not seek to replace these concepts; rather, it focuses on the *process of divergence between democratic form and democratic substance* through which formally democratic institutions may remain operational while their substantive functions: accountability, participation, rights protection, transparency, and public trust, are progressively hollowed out. Thus, whereas these adjacent concepts primarily characterize particular regime types or configurations, DFT

provides an analytical framework for explaining how institutional formalism emerges and how democratic simulation can develop even before a political system fully consolidates into an authoritarian or hybrid regime.

6. Institutional Hollowing: the Core Mechanism of Democratic Formalism

Institutional hollowing is the principal mechanism through which democratic formalism develops. It refers to the gradual decline of institutional capacity, independence, and accountability while institutions continue to exist formally.

In democratic systems, institutions perform essential functions: regulating political competition, constraining power, protecting rights, and enabling citizen participation. Hollowing occurs when these functions weaken even though institutional structures remain visible. [12, 31].

The process may occur through executive dominance, weakened legislative oversight, reduced judicial independence, politicized administration, or declining public confidence in electoral institutions. These changes do not necessarily eliminate institutions; rather, they alter their practical role. [9, 24, 30].

A hollow institution retains its formal characteristics but loses substantive democratic capacity. A legislature may continue operating while exercising limited oversight. Courts may continue functioning while facing constraints on independence. Elections may continue regularly while offering reduced competition or declining public trust. [24, 30].

Institutional hollowing is difficult to identify because traditional indicators of democratic collapse may remain absent. Elections are not suspended, constitutions are not abolished, and institutions are not formally dissolved. Instead, democratic decline occurs through gradual changes in institutional behavior, political incentives, and citizen expectations. [14, 26].

Within DFT, institutional hollowing represents the transition point between democratic erosion and democratic simulation. Once institutions become primarily symbolic, democratic procedures may continue without effectively performing the functions that justify their existence.

6.1. Constitutional Displacement and the Transformation of Democratic Authority

Constitutions represent the fundamental framework through which democratic societies organize power, protect rights, and establish institutional limits. However, constitutional existence alone does not guarantee constitutional governance. Democratic Formalism Theory introduces the concept of constitutional displacement to explain situations where constitutional principles remain formally recognized but are gradually displaced by political practices that weaken constitutional restraint. [19].

Constitutional displacement occurs when the practical exercise of power moves away from constitutional principles while maintaining constitutional language. This may happen through frequent amendments, selective interpretation, emergency provisions, institutional restructuring, or informal political practices that alter the balance of power.

A constitution can therefore become a source of symbolic legitimacy rather than an effective limitation on authority. Political actors may refer to constitutional values while simultaneously weakening constitutional checks and balances.

This distinction between constitutional text and constitutional practice is essential. Democratic governance requires not only written rules but also adherence to constitutional norms. When constitutional principles lose practical authority, democratic institutions become increasingly vulnerable to concentration of power. [19].

Constitutional displacement also affects citizens' relationship with democracy. When constitutional promises of equality, participation, and rights protection are repeatedly disconnected from political reality, public trust declines. This legitimacy deficit creates conditions in which alternative political narratives become more influential.

Within the Democratic Formalism Cycle, constitutional displacement represents a transition between power concentration and institutional hollowing. It transforms constitutional democracy from a system of limitations on power into a framework that may provide legitimacy to concentrated authority.

6.2. Narrative Manipulation and the Politics of Legitimacy

Democratic politics is shaped not only by institutions but also by ideas, interpretations, and public narratives. Political actors compete not only for power but also for control over how citizens understand political reality. Democratic Formalism Theory identifies narrative manipulation as a critical mechanism through which democratic legitimacy can be reshaped. [28].

Narrative manipulation involves constructing simplified explanations of complex political challenges and presenting them as justification for institutional transformation. Economic difficulties, corruption, insecurity, social divisions, or governance failures may be interpreted through narratives that identify particular groups, institutions, or democratic processes as the source of national problems. [27, 28].

Such narratives become powerful because political legitimacy depends partly on public perception. Citizens do not evaluate institutions only through objective performance; they interpret events through competing political explanations.

Narrative manipulation often follows several patterns. Existing democratic institutions may be portrayed as inefficient or corrupt. Opposition forces may be represented as obstacles to stability. Restrictions on accountability may be justified as necessary for national security, development, or social order.

Exceptional political measures may then appear legitimate because they are framed as solutions to perceived crises. [27, 28].

Digital communication technologies have intensified these dynamics by accelerating the spread of political narratives and increasing the ability to target specific audiences. Information environments characterized by polarization and misinformation can weaken shared understandings of democratic reality. [10, 21, 37].

DFT does not argue that all political narratives are manipulative. Democratic competition naturally involves disagreement over values and policies. The concern arises when narratives systematically undermine democratic institutions while presenting institutional weakening as democratic renewal.

Through narrative manipulation, dissatisfaction is converted into legitimacy challenges. This process prepares the ground for political mobilization, power concentration, and eventual democratic simulation.

6.3. International Aggression, External Influence, and Democratic Vulnerability

Democracy does not develop in isolation from the international environment. Contemporary states operate within a complex global system where geopolitical competition, economic dependence, security concerns, and external influence increasingly affect domestic political stability. Democratic Formalism Theory extends democratic analysis beyond internal institutional processes by examining how international pressures can contribute to democratic vulnerability. [20, 22, 23].

Classical democratic theories generally treat democracy as a domestically organized political system. However, globalization has created conditions where external actors can influence domestic political choices, institutional capacity, and public narratives. Foreign intervention, economic dependency, strategic competition, information warfare, and transnational security concerns may affect democratic resilience. [20, 23].

External pressure does not automatically produce democratic decline. Democratic institutions with strong legitimacy, accountability, and public trust can often manage international challenges effectively. Vulnerability emerges when domestic institutions already experience legitimacy deficits or institutional weakness. In such situations, external pressures may intensify existing divisions and accelerate democratic formalism.

International competition can influence democracy through multiple channels. Economic dependency may limit policy autonomy; security threats may justify expanded executive authority; geopolitical rivalry may encourage political polarization; and external information campaigns may manipulate public narratives. These pressures can create environments where exceptional measures appear necessary and institu-

tional constraints are portrayed as obstacles to national interest. [22, 23].

Within the Democratic Formalism Cycle, international pressures often interact with domestic dissatisfaction and narrative construction. Political actors may use external threats to justify concentration of power, weaken accountability mechanisms, or restrict public debate. The language of sovereignty, security, and national survival can therefore become a tool for transforming democratic institutions while preserving their formal appearance.

DFT emphasizes that democratic resilience requires not only institutional strength but also sovereignty with responsibility, the capacity of states to protect democratic autonomy while engaging effectively with the international system.

6.4. Terrorism, Extremism, and the Political Economy of Conflict

Terrorism and violent extremism are commonly understood as security challenges requiring military or law-enforcement responses. Democratic Formalism Theory argues that they must also be examined as forces that reshape democratic governance. Their significance lies not only in the violence they produce but also in their impact on legitimacy, institutional authority, rights protection, and citizen-state relationships. [11, 35].

Extremism frequently emerges where societies experience political exclusion, economic inequality, weak governance, identity conflicts, or legitimacy deficits. When citizens lose confidence in democratic institutions, extremist groups may exploit dissatisfaction by presenting themselves as alternatives to ineffective political systems. [8, 11].

At the same time, responses to terrorism can create democratic vulnerabilities. Governments facing security threats may introduce extraordinary measures that expand executive authority, limit civil liberties, or reduce institutional oversight. Although security protection is a legitimate responsibility of the state, excessive securitization may weaken democratic principles.

DFT identifies a paradox: threats against democracy may generate conditions that unintentionally weaken democracy from within. When fear becomes a dominant political instrument, citizens may accept restrictions on rights and accountability in exchange for promises of security.

The political economy of conflict further complicates this process. Economic interests, resource competition, external support networks, and geopolitical strategies can prolong conflicts and create environments where democratic institutions struggle to function effectively.

Therefore, terrorism and extremism must be analyzed not only as security problems but also as challenges to democratic legitimacy. Effective democratic responses require balancing security with accountability, ensuring that measures designed to protect democracy do not contribute to democratic formalism.

6.5. Mobism and the Rise of Informal Power

One of the emerging challenges to contemporary democracy is the rise of *mobism*, the exercise of political influence through collective pressure, intimidation, or informal coercion outside established institutional channels.

Democracy depends on the principle that political disagreement should be managed through institutions such as elections, legislatures, courts, and public deliberation. Mobism challenges this principle by replacing institutional procedures with immediate collective action driven by emotion, identity, or perceived injustice. [12, 31].

Mobism can emerge in societies where citizens lose confidence in formal institutions. When people believe that courts, governments, or political representatives cannot deliver justice, informal forms of power may appear legitimate. Digital platforms can accelerate this process by enabling rapid mobilization and emotional amplification. [38].

However, mob-based politics creates serious democratic risks. It can undermine due process, weaken minority protections, and replace reasoned debate with social pressure. Both governments and opposition movements may use mobism to bypass institutional constraints.

Within DFT, mobism represents a symptom of institutional legitimacy failure. It reflects a condition where citizens increasingly seek political outcomes outside formal democratic mechanisms because institutional channels are perceived as ineffective.

A resilient democracy must therefore strengthen institutions so that citizens do not view informal coercion as a substitute for democratic participation.

6.6. Digital Technologies and Democratic Transformation

Digital technologies have fundamentally transformed political communication, participation, and governance. They provide significant opportunities for democratic engagement by increasing access to information, expanding citizen participation, and enabling new forms of political organization. However, they also create new vulnerabilities that may contribute to democratic formalism. [10, 38].

Digital platforms can facilitate misinformation, polarization, political manipulation, and targeted influence campaigns. The speed and emotional intensity of online communication often reward simplified narratives over complex democratic discussion. As a result, public debate may become increasingly fragmented. [21, 37, 40].

The relationship between technology and democracy is therefore ambivalent. Digital tools do not inherently strengthen or weaken democracy; their impact depends on institutional capacity, regulatory frameworks, media literacy, and ethical political practices.

DFT argues that digital environments can intensify existing democratic weaknesses. Where institutions already suffer

from declining trust, digital platforms may accelerate narrative manipulation and legitimacy crises. Political actors can use technology to create perceptions of overwhelming public support, undermine opponents, and normalize institutional changes.

Artificial intelligence and advanced communication technologies further increase these challenges by expanding the capacity for information production and political persuasion. Democratic systems must therefore develop mechanisms that protect information integrity while preserving freedom of expression.

The challenge is not technological advancement itself but the relationship between technology and democratic institutions. Without accountability and transparency, digital democracy may become another area where democratic form survives while democratic substance declines.

6.7. The Rights Against Rights Paradox

One of the distinctive conceptual contributions of Democratic Formalism Theory is the *Rights Against Rights Paradox* [6]. Democratic systems are founded upon the protection of fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, political participation, association, and individual liberty. However, rights may become vulnerable when their exercise is detached from the institutional and ethical conditions necessary for protecting the rights of all citizens.

The paradox emerges when claims presented as individual or collective rights are used to justify actions that weaken equal citizenship, institutional accountability, or democratic principles. For example, demands for unrestricted political action may be employed to legitimize intimidation, misinformation, exclusion, or attacks on democratic institutions. In such circumstances, the language of rights may be used against the broader rights framework that sustains democratic society.

This argument does not suggest that democratic societies should restrict rights whenever disagreement occurs. On the contrary, the protection of rights and open debate remains essential to democracy. The challenge is to maintain a balance between individual freedoms and the institutional responsibilities that allow those freedoms to exist equally for all.

DFT argues that democratic formalism may emerge when rights are separated from democratic responsibility. Rights without accountability, equality, and institutional safeguards can become instruments of political domination rather than mechanisms of human freedom.

The Rights Against Rights Paradox therefore emphasizes that rights cannot be understood independently from the democratic ecosystem in which they operate. Sustainable rights protection requires institutions, public trust, equality before the law, and responsible political participation. When these foundations weaken, the language of rights may paradoxically contribute to democratic decline.

7. Democratic Formalism Theory: An Integrated Framework for Explaining Contemporary Democratic Transformation

Contemporary democratic decline increasingly occurs without the dramatic collapse of democratic institutions. Elections continue, constitutions remain operational, legislatures function, and courts retain formal authority. However, beneath this institutional continuity, democracy may gradually weaken through declining legitimacy, reduced accountability, institutional dependence, narrative manipulation, and diminished citizen participation.

Democratic Formalism Theory (DFT) explains this transformation by distinguishing between *democratic form* and *democratic substance*. Democratic form consists of visible institutional arrangements, including elections, constitutions, legislatures, and legal structures. Democratic substance consists of the principles that give these institutions meaning, including accountability, transparency, participation, rights protection, equality, institutional independence, and public trust.

DFT challenges the assumption that institutional survival automatically represents democratic resilience. A political system may preserve democratic procedures while gradually transforming them into mechanisms that maintain legitimacy without ensuring meaningful citizen influence over political power.

DFT explains this transformation through six interconnected stages:

7.1. Democratic Dissatisfaction

The process begins with genuine or perceived dissatisfaction arising from governance failures, inequality, corruption, insecurity, exclusion, or declining institutional performance. Dissatisfaction is not inherently anti-democratic; criticism and demands for reform are essential components of democracy. The danger emerges when dissatisfaction is redirected from institutional improvement toward rejection of democratic processes themselves.

7.2. Narrative Construction

Political actors interpret dissatisfaction through competing narratives that simplify complex social problems and identify responsible institutions, groups, or opponents. These narratives influence public perceptions of legitimacy and may weaken confidence in democratic institutions.

7.3. Legitimacy Challenge and Mobilization

Narrative construction produces challenges to institutional legitimacy. Political movements emerge around demands for transformation, renewal, or exceptional solutions. Democratic

mechanisms, including electoral mandates and constitutional arguments, may then be used to justify weakening institutional constraints.

7.4. Extra-Constitutional Power Concentration

Power concentration occurs when political authority expands beyond established democratic limitations. This may occur through legal amendments, administrative restructuring, emergency measures, or selective institutional practices.

The defining feature of democratic formalism is that power concentration often occurs without openly abandoning constitutional procedures. Formal legality remains, while substantive accountability declines.

7.5. Institutional Hollowing

Institutional hollowing refers to the gradual weakening of democratic institutions from within. Institutions continue to exist but lose independence, effectiveness, or public confidence.

The external appearance of democracy remains intact, while institutional capacity to constrain power declines. This creates a widening gap between institutional existence and democratic performance.

7.6. Democratic Simulation

The final stage is democratic simulation, where democratic procedures continue primarily as symbols of legitimacy. Elections, constitutions, and representative institutions remain visible, but their ability to ensure meaningful participation and accountability becomes limited.

Democratic simulation does not represent the complete disappearance of democracy. Rather, it represents a condition where democratic appearance becomes stronger than democratic substance.

8. Theoretical Contribution of Democratic Formalism Theory

Democratic Formalism Theory contributes to democratic studies in five important ways.

First, it explains democratic decline without requiring institutional collapse. Many contemporary political systems cannot be adequately classified as either democratic or authoritarian. They exist in an intermediate condition where democratic institutions survive while their democratic functions weaken.

Second, DFT integrates institutional and sociological approaches by demonstrating that democracy depends not only on formal arrangements but also on legitimacy, trust, political narratives, and social acceptance. Institutions remain effective only when citizens perceive them as meaningful and accountable.

Third, DFT highlights the importance of symbolic politics

in contemporary governance. Because democratic legitimacy remains politically valuable, actors seeking greater control may preserve democratic language and structures while altering their practical functions.

Fourth, DFT connects domestic and international dimensions of democratic transformation. Security pressures, geopolitical competition, economic dependency, and technological change may intensify existing institutional vulnerabilities.

Finally, DFT proposes a broader framework for evaluating democratic quality. Democracy should not be assessed only by whether democratic institutions exist, but also by whether those institutions continue to protect rights, ensure accountability, and enable meaningful citizen participation.

9. Conclusion

Democracy in the twenty-first century faces a distinctive challenge. Unlike earlier periods when democratic breakdown often involved visible institutional destruction, contemporary democratic decline frequently occurs through gradual transformation within existing democratic structures. Elections continue, constitutions remain, and institutions survive; however, their democratic meaning may progressively weaken.

Democratic Formalism Theory explains this phenomenon by showing that democracy requires more than institutional continuity. Democratic governance depends on the relationship between democratic institutions and the substantive values they are designed to protect: accountability, participation, transparency, rights protection, institutional independence, and public trust.

The Democratic Formalism Cycle demonstrates how dissatisfaction, narrative construction, legitimacy challenges, power concentration, institutional hollowing, and democratic simulation interact to transform democratic systems. Through this process, institutions may continue to exist while becoming increasingly disconnected from their democratic purpose.

The theory also demonstrates that contemporary democratic challenges are multidimensional. Constitutional practices, political narratives, international pressures, terrorism, extremism, mobism, digital technologies, and competing interpretations of rights all influence democratic resilience. Addressing democratic decline therefore requires more than preserving institutions; it requires rebuilding trust between citizens and democratic authorities.

The central argument of Democratic Formalism Theory is that democracy cannot be measured only by the survival of democratic structures. A democracy survives when its institutions continue to protect citizen sovereignty, maintain accountability, and preserve public confidence.

Therefore, the fundamental question for contemporary democracy is not merely:

“Do democratic institutions exist?”

The more important question is:

“Do democratic institutions still perform their democratic functions?”

The answer determines whether a political system represents a living democracy or merely a democratic simulation.

Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
DFT	Democratic Formalism Theory
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

Author Contributions

Zahurul Alam: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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