The Elections Trap: Why Authoritarians Always Want You to Vote

In my first year of studies at Sciences Po, among the many definitions of democracy, the one that struck me the most was Giovanni Sartori's. He defined democracy as a political system in which political parties lose elections, and not always the same ones.

What appealed to me in this short, almost minimalist definition was its lack of moral, teleological, or normative references. It was concise, clear, no-frills, and implacable. For a student burdened by the heavy Soviet intellectual legacy, who found no comfort in the literature of the "end of history" and the supposed inevitable triumph of liberal democracy worldwide—which had started to feel just as oppressive and irritating—this definition was refreshing. It helped me stay grounded and focus on the essential: as long as those in power can be replaced through elections, we are living in a democracy. Full stop.

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After Georgia's fraudulent parliamentary elections of October 2024, and the non-recognition of the

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results by opposition parties and Western countries, the Georgian Dream regime—which transitioned in record time from a hybrid regime to a consolidated authoritarian one—is now planning to hold mayoral and municipal council elections across the country on 4 October of this year.

Since the last legislative elections—already deemed neither free nor competitive—the Georgian regime has adopted an impressive array of repressive measures, including the arrest of the majority of opposition party leaders, and has passed draconian laws, effectively destroying any chance of a level playing field.

The question of boycotting the upcoming local elections, therefore, arises with particular urgency. A majority of opposition parties—eight out of ten—have announced a boycott, while two (For Georgia and Lelo) have confirmed that they will participate.

Should one take part in elections known to be lost in advance, in a game where the dice are loaded? The Georgian opposition is currently engaged in intense internal debate on this very question.

Elections: A Fool's Trap?

During those same student years, a group of my classmates—positioning themselves on the far left of the political spectrum—were openly hostile to the institution of voting and often repeated the old rhyming slogan of the 1960s leftists, anarchists, and Situationists: "*Élections, piège à cons!*" ("Elections, a fool's trap!"). For them, real change could only come through revolution. Elections, in their view, merely perpetuated the bourgeois-capitalist system, deceiving the people and effectively stripping them of power. They diverted popular energy toward superficial, cosmetic changes while the structures of domination remained intact.

Pierre Bourdieu, the iconic sociologist of those years, explained that the working classes were above all culturally and ideologically dominated, and that the most effective form of violence was soft violence, one of whose key elements was the acceptance of existing institutions, including the vote itself. This acceptance, in turn, only reinforced the alienation of citizens, making elections, ultimately, an unlikely instrument for real transformation.

The Sixties and Seventies passed without revolution. A few far-left militant groups took the path of violence—*Rote Armee Fraktion* (RAF) in Germany, *Brigate Rosse* in Italy, *Action Directe* in France—but they failed to seriously destabilize liberal representative democracy in Europe. After the end of the Cold War, with the democratization of the former Eastern Bloc, the collapse of military dictatorships in Latin America, and the end of apartheid in South Africa, many believed that democracy would soon triumph everywhere.

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But this victory was short-lived. From the 2000s onward, authoritarianism and repressive regimes began gradually regaining ground. One important detail, however, is that today, according to *The Economist*'s Democracy Index, published annually, "highly autocratic," "authoritarian," and "hybrid" regimes make up the vast majority of states worldwide—yet elections are held almost everywhere, even in the harshest dictatorships.

With the exception of Saudi Arabia, which remains an absolute monarchy, and Eritrea (a bizarre, hermetically closed regime), all authoritarian systems organize elections—often with great fanfare. The situations vary: from North Korea, where only one candidate is allowed to run, to Russia, where

only Kremlin-approved candidates can compete, to China and the Central Asian republics, where elections are purely symbolic and appear as a sort of celebration. But elections, referendums, plebiscites—they are now everywhere.

Why Autocrats Love the Ballot Box

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In fact, authoritarian leaders love elections. In an authoritarian context, elections are not meant to be lost, as Sartori once put it, but quite the opposite. When elections no longer pose any threat to the ruling regime—so thoroughly has it learned to control the process well before the actual voting day—their organization offers many advantages.

When the opposition has been silenced, its leaders are in prison or forced into exile, the media is under pressure, the regime has full control over both local and central electoral commissions and when the ruling party enjoys not only lavish financial support from businessmen enriched through public contracts but also has access to state resources to buy votes with cash, public sector jobs, or a wide range of social services and welfare benefits—then elections are no longer a risk, but an asset.

Beyond material rewards and the commodification of the vote, authoritarian regimes can also rely on intimidation and coercion to influence voters. This can involve the mobilization of law enforcement bodies, intelligence services, or criminal groups to whom the state delegates repressive tasks in exchange for impunity or sentence reductions. We described these practices of the Georgian Dream party in the June 2024 issue of *GEOpolitics*.

The cynicism of certain autocrats extends to criticizing the electoral processes of free countries, accusing them of lacking democracy.

In 2020, Russian media and officials (Sergey Lavrov, Dmitry Peskov, Vladimir Putin) criticized the highly competitive U.S. presidential election, portraying American democracy as dysfunctional, divided, and hypocritical, especially in contrast to Russia's so-called "stability."

Even more absurdly, Putin—elected, as everyone knows, in a flawless, free, and transparent vote (!)—has begun questioning the legitimacy of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who remains Ukraine's president despite the expiration of his term. Given the state of war, occupation of territory, and massive displacement of the population, it is objectively impossible to organize elections in Ukraine.

We thus find ourselves in a situation both absurd and deeply ironic: the world's foremost symbol of authoritarianism, Vladimir Putin, questions the electoral legitimacy of the *de facto* leader of the free world, doing so with the clear aim of undermining that leader's international standing. Even more troubling is the fact that this brazen posture by Putin received endorsement from none other than the President of the United States. That grim reality speaks volumes about the current state of global affairs, though we will leave that discussion for another time.

Elections Can Solve Many Problems for the Authoritarians

> ***Dictators want information and legitimacy from elections, but they fear losing control or triggering mass mobilization.***

A few years ago, a Japanese political scientist, Masaaki Higashijima, in his book, *The Dictator's Di-*

lemma at the Ballot Box (2022), explained why authoritarian rulers hold elections—and how they use them not to democratize but to strengthen their grip on power. What he calls the "Dictator's Dilemma" is that dictators want information and legitimacy from elections, but they fear losing control or triggering mass mobilization. That is why they employ electoral manipulation (fraud, repression, co-optation) and economic maneuvering (patronage and selective redistribution) to mitigate risks while benefiting from the façade of electoral legitimacy. Higashijima's main contribution is that he challenges the idea that elections are always liberalizing in nature; instead, they can entrench autocracy.

What objectives do authoritarian regimes pursue while organizing elections? Far from being mere window dressing, elections in authoritarian contexts serve to consolidate power, legitimize authority, and maintain control.

First of all, they seek legitimacy, both domestically and internationally. Of course, this legitimacy cannot be complete and universal. However, authoritarian regimes recognize that their elections will be identified by like-minded regimes, which already comprise a significant portion of the international community. For some time now, authoritarian governments have established their own election observation missions, whose sole purpose is to validate elections conducted with irregularities. For example, the Russian Federation, along with several Central Asian countries, established a sort of "anti-ODIHR" composed exclusively of observers (parliamentarians, members of GONGOs, and diplomats) from non-democratic states. I had the opportunity to witness their activities during the 2005 Tajik elections while serving as a member of the OSCE observation mission. Their report, as usual, was the complete opposite of that of the ODIHR.

Sometimes, authoritarian countries go even further and invite observers from democratic countries, but ones who represent populist or radical parties (from both the left and the right). Figures from Germany's *AfD*, Austria's *FPÖ*, France's *Rassemblement National*, Italy's *Lega Nord*, and Hungary's *Fidesz* regularly "observe" elections in Russia and even in territories illegally occupied by the Russian Federation (such as Crimea, for example). Likewise, radical left-wing parties such as France's *La France Insoumise* and Germany's *Die Linke* openly support the "democratic nature" of elections in Venezuela, Cuba, and similar regimes.

To be fully honest, the often ambiguous and carefully worded conclusions of ODIHR reports can be exploited by authoritarian or hybrid regimes, which selectively cite them to claim that their elections were legitimate. Even partial acknowledgment by observers is enough for such regimes to argue that international assessments are inconsistent—and therefore politically motivated. They point out that while some observers raise concerns, others offer praise, and for their narrative, that contradiction is more than enough.

This strategy is particularly effective for domestic consumption, which remains a top priority. The aim is to convince the public that a genuine majority elected the regime. Endorsements from select international observers or congratulatory messages from foreign leaders help reinforce this perception. What matters most is that a critical portion of the public believes the regime has broad support—or at least accepts its claim to authority. This perception also works to demoralize the opposition, draining its energy and will to resist.

> ***The regime also needs elections for elite control and co-optation. Elections allow authoritarian rulers to distribute power selectively, monitor loyalty, and rotate elites within the system.***

The regime also needs elections for elite control

and co-optation. Elections allow authoritarian rulers to distribute power selectively, monitor loyalty, and rotate elites within the system. Candidates from the regime party or tolerated opposition compete for access to resources or local influence. New figures can be promoted and co-opted. The regime, although authoritarian, needs to renew its faces and talking heads and remove the most corrupt, hated, or scandal-prone figures. Even the most hardline authoritarian regimes see some internal changes and purges, and new personalities are promoted through elections. The same happens with dissenters within the regime's circles, who can be filtered out or marginalized through internal party politics and electoral outcomes. The succession of ultraconservative and moderate leaders at the helm of the Islamic Republic of Iran over the past 30 years (Khatami–Ahmadinejad–Rouhani–Raisi–Pezeshkian) illustrates the regime's ability to adapt to both international and domestic environments, and to periodically renew its political elites—without ever affecting the "core of the reactor" composed of the elite military forces, the Revolutionary Guards, and the religious leadership.

Thus, Irakli Gharibashvili—once Bidzina Ivanishvili's most loyal lieutenant, a former personal assistant and house employee elevated to Prime Minister, who consistently addressed Ivanishvili before even acknowledging the public during media appearances—has vanished from the political scene, along with his cabinet ministers and top officials. In their place, a new cohort emerged during the October 2024 elections, with more expected to rise in the upcoming electoral cycle. It is entirely plausible that Tbilisi's current mayor, Kakha Kaladze, may also exit politics, paving the way for a fresh Georgian Dream aspirant heavyweight to take his place.

In an authoritarian context, elections also serve to monitor and manage the population, acting as a form of mass survey. Turnout rates and voting patterns provide valuable insights into support, dissent, or apathy among different regions or social groups. The Iranian presidential elections of 2024, held after the worst mass repressions of 2022 (the movement Women, Life, Freedom), despite the efforts of the government to monetize citizen participation or the use of threat to force people to cast their ballots, showed the lowest participation ever since the establishment of the Islamic Republic (39.9%) and this includes fraud. Through the elections, even when they are flawed, the ruling party learns about the true support among the overall population. Areas with low turnout or opposition votes may later face targeted repression or increased propaganda efforts.

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Elections in non-democratic states also serve as a form of political theater, demonstrating the dominance of the ruling party and its leader, as well as the weakness and impotence of the opposition. In some countries, the vote is an actual "popular celebration" or holiday, a practice I have observed in Central Asian states, which is inherited from the Soviet Union. A French philosopher, Guy Debord, in his *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), argued that elections were nothing more than a ritualized performance, a simulation of popular participation. Of course, Debord's target was not specifically non-Western dictatorships; he was a critic of modern mass politics in general. However, his reflection on voting as playing a role in a theater, where the script has already been written, applies most bluntly to authoritarian contexts.

And now we come to perhaps one of the most – if not the most – important objectives that an au-

thoritarian regime seeks to obtain: to divide and tame the opposition.

> ***Authoritarian regimes often use elections not to foster genuine competition but to divide, neutralize, or co-opt the opposition.***

Authoritarian regimes often use elections not to foster genuine competition but to divide, neutralize, or co-opt the opposition. One common tactic is to permit a few carefully selected opposition parties or candidates to run, creating the illusion of pluralism, while genuine challengers are excluded through disqualification, intimidation, or imprisonment. In Russia, for example, parties like *the Communist Party*, *A Just Russia (Spravedlivaya Rossiya)*, and the *Liberal Democratic Party* (LDPR) serve this function—presenting a controlled alternative without posing any real threat to power.

The Georgian Dream has adopted similar strategies, drawing inspiration from more entrenched authoritarian systems. In the past, it supported the rise of loyal opposition parties such as the Alliance of Patriots, a far-right, openly pro-Russian group that just cleared the electoral threshold with 5.01% of the vote in 2016. That party was later supplanted by People's Power, another far-right, anti-Western formation whose leadership curiously overlaps with Georgian Dream's own political bureau. In fact, members of People's Power have run on Georgian Dream's party list and consistently endorse its policies and decisions.

Another example is the European Socialists party, led by Pridon Injia, a relic of post-Soviet politics and former Telecommunications Minister under Eduard Shevardnadze, widely associated with corruption. Despite its misleading name, the party openly opposes both European integration and socialist values. Like People's Power, it owes its parliamentary presence to inclusion on the Georgian Dream's electoral list. These so-called opposition parties serve not to challenge the ruling party, but to fragment the opposition space, muddy the political waters, and give authoritarian rule a façade of democratic legitimacy.

The aforementioned parties function as *de facto* subsidiaries of the Georgian Dream, frequently serving as instruments for carrying out political tasks the ruling party prefers to distance itself from. More noteworthy, however, is the stance taken by genuinely oppositional parties regarding participation in elections.

To Boycott, Or Not - This Is the Question

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Not only do dictators have dilemmas regarding elections. The dilemma of the opposition forces is even more dire. Indeed, opposition parties know that victory in an election organized by an authoritarian—or even hybrid—state is virtually impossible. My Serbian friends have been telling me since at least 2020 that they no longer believe power can change hands in Belgrade through electoral means. What the Georgian Dream did during the 2024 elections, and even more so since then, leaves no illusion about the possibility of an opposition victory in the upcoming municipal elections. The regime has already crossed red lines and will stop at nothing, including the outright falsification of results as seen in Venezuela last year. The Georgian Dream cannot afford to lose even a mid-sized city, let alone the capital, where the opposition clearly enjoys a strong majority. Participating in this election would mean certain defeat and, on

top of that, contribute to the re-legitimization of the regime through participation.

It must also be understood that participation in this electoral farce would divide the opposition, as the majority of the parties remain firmly committed to the decision to boycott.

But let us consider the other side of the dilemma. Non-participation in the elections would grant the ruling party near-total control over local institutions. Opposition parties would lose the seats they currently hold in municipal councils. These positions not only provide a platform for elected officials to criticize the ruling majority's decisions and expose nepotism, corruption, and opacity in local administration, but also constitute a source of income for opposition politicians.

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Opposition parties in Georgia suffer from a chronic lack of financial resources as the authorities severely restrict the ability of companies or individuals to make donations. Many political parties survive solely upon the public funding to which they are entitled based on their electoral performance. As stable organizations—with offices, staff, logistical and communications teams—they depend upon elections for their very existence. Giving this up would significantly weaken them.

A boycott of the elections by opposition parties would also be exploited by the Georgian Dream to portray them as weak and cowardly, incapable of truly confronting the ruling party. State media would depict boycotting parties as disorganized, afraid, or irrelevant, reinforcing the regime's narrative and demoralizing opposition supporters.

The partisans of participation in uneven playing field elections claim that there are few successful boycott examples, and they are right. Election boycotts in authoritarian or hybrid regimes rarely achieve their intended goals, such as delegitimizing the regime, triggering international pressure, or provoking reform. Authoritarian regimes do not require the same level of legitimacy as democracies; instead, they often manufacture legitimacy through controlled media and symbolic rituals. Boycotts can backfire, allowing regimes to fill parliaments with loyalists and claim a "landslide" without real opposition. International reactions are often muted, especially when geopolitical or economic interests dominate. When they are not, they rarely go as far as heavy sanctions or banning the country from all international fora. One should not forget that authoritarian regimes can easily find sponsors and supporters in Russia, China, Iran, etc.

In Venezuela (2005, 2018), Egypt (2014, 2018), and Russia (on several occasions, notably in 2018), the boycotts had no effect. On the contrary, the ruling regimes achieved astronomical scores, such as Al-Sissi's 97% in 2018, despite continued repression. In Albania, the opposition boycotted the local elections in 2019, but Edi Rama remains Prime Minister and has been at the helm of a fourth cabinet since 2013.

On the other hand, the cases where boycotts had some impact are rare. One can recall the Serbian example of 2000 when the Milošević regime was toppled. Still, the boycott had been helped by mass protests since 1996, economic collapse, NATO bombings due to the war crimes committed by the regime in Kosovo, and important elite defections (especially from the nationalist camp, who tradi-

tionally supported Milošević). The boycott was just one phase in a broader, multi-pronged resistance strategy. Two other non-European examples also come to mind: those of Bangladesh in 1996, when the legislative elections, boycotted by the main opposition party, had a very low participation rate, and the mass protest that followed immediately after the polls forced the government, whose legitimacy was severely affected, to resign. A partial success was also reached in Zimbabwe during Mugabe's attempt to rig the presidential elections in 2008. The opposition boycotted the second round of the presidential elections and started mass protests against the incumbent. As a result, and with South Africa's Thabo Mbeki's mediation, a compromise agreement was reached and Mugabe accepted nominating Tsvangirai, his rival, as Prime Minister.

What Makes a Boycott Work: Beyond Abstention

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Success is possible, but the decision to boycott alone does not guarantee it; in fact, it often has the opposite effect. A successful boycott must consist of two phases. The first takes place before the election. Opposition parties must campaign just as actively as they would if they were running in the election. But this time, the goal is not to secure votes for themselves, but to mobilize the highest possible number of citizens to boycott the rigged election organized by the regime. The abstention rate measures success.

But that is only part of the story. If the opposition's action (as unified as possible) ends on election night, then the boycott will not be effective. After the vote, the dynamic and momentum generated during the boycott campaign must be transformed into mass protest: strikes, rallies, calls to the international community demanding new elections under radically different conditions—with a revised electoral law, election commissions free from ruling party control, and a strong presence of both international and domestic observers.

The Logic of Participation in Rigged Elections: Survival, Strategy, or Self-Interest?

Some opposition parties will choose to participate. Here, we are not referring to fake opposition parties, but to those who sincerely want the regime to end, yet do not believe that a boycott can achieve that goal. For tactical reasons, they cannot admit that they have no real chance of success—otherwise, they would be unable to mobilize protest voters, who, if they know the fight was lost in advance, would simply stay home on election day. Instead, they will claim that victory is possible, at least in major cities or the capital.

In reality, the objective of such an approach is different. The party that accepts its subordinate position from the outset in an authoritarian-controlled election seeks above all to preserve its organizational structure, finances, and electoral machinery so that it can be utilized when better days come. The leadership of such a party may believe

that strategic patience is needed and that the time to go on the offensive will come when the circumstances are more favorable—for example, when the international focus shifts away from other crises, when the authoritarian regime's external backer (such as Russia) is weakened, or when there is an economic, societal, or political crisis at home.

Another, less openly stated objective may be to capitalize on the absence of other opposition parties from the election by attempting to win over their voter base, or at least a segment of it. Even without realistic chances of winning, such a party might aim to position itself as the leading opposition force, both in the eyes of international observers and the domestic electorate. While this ambition is largely self-serving, it is not uncommon in the competitive world of politics. However, achieving it would be difficult, as pro-boycott forces would likely launch strong attacks against the participating party, branding it as "collaborationist," a "traitor to unity," or dismissing it as merely a "systemic opposition."

If the anti-boycott party's main priority is organizational survival, then it has every incentive to participate—even in an election whose outcome is heavily skewed by an authoritarian regime—while maintaining a visibly critical and confrontational stance toward those in power.

Still, just as successful boycotts are rare, so too are effective non-boycott strategies, especially given the long and often discouraging nature of struggles against authoritarianism. One example is Russia's *Yabloko* party, which continues to run in elections despite facing impossible odds. Similarly, elements of Türkiye's *Republican People's Party* (CHP), particularly under the leadership of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, have opted to remain in the political process even after the 2024 arrests of Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu and other elected CHP officials.

In the few instances where opposition forces managed to prevail after years of contesting unfair elections, their success was typically catalyzed by major crises, mounting regime fatigue, strong international pressure, or exceptional internal unity. For example, in Mexico, the opposition *National Action Party* (PAN) finally broke the *Institutional Revolutionary Party*'s (PRI) 71-year grip on power in 2000, when Vicente Fox won the presidency. This breakthrough was made possible by internal reforms—spurred by pressure from the growing middle class and independent media—most notably the increasing autonomy of the electoral commission. Public exhaustion with PRI corruption also played a critical role. A similar political shift occurred in Malaysia, where an entrenched ruling party lost power after six decades of dominance.

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Between Strategy and Survival

Elections in authoritarian regimes are not just hollow rituals—they are strategic tools, wielded to consolidate power, fragment dissent, and simulate legitimacy at home and abroad. They offer little risk and much reward to the rulers while posing impossible dilemmas to the ruled. For opposition forces, every electoral cycle becomes a test not of victory, but of strategic survival.

In Georgia, as in many other hybrid or authoritarian regimes, the choice between boycott and participation is not merely tactical—it is existential. A boycott without a plan leads to marginalization; participation without illusions requires an almost ascetic discipline and long-term resilience. Both

options carry immense risks, and neither offers immediate rewards.

> ***The opposition cannot afford to enter into this trap blindly. Whether choosing to boycott or participate, the decision must be anchored in strategy, not despair or division.***

Yet, one thing is clear: the opposition cannot afford to enter into this trap blindly. Whether choosing to boycott or participate, the decision must be anchored in strategy, not despair or division. Boycotts must mobilize, not retreat; participation must challenge, not normalize. The goal is not to win the rigged game, but to change the rules entirely.

Sartori's dictum—that democracy is the regime in which parties lose elections—remains a powerful benchmark. Today, its absence defines much of the world in which we live. However, even in authoritarian contexts, elections are moments when regimes reveal their vulnerabilities and expose their fears. They are opportunities, not because they offer fair competition, but because they can reveal the cracks beneath the surface of manufactured unanimity.

The task of the opposition, then, is not simply to play or to quit the game—but to expose it for what it is, to defy it where possible, and to organize for the day when elections, once again, may mean choice ■