

Democratic Blending

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J. Mauricio Gaona's concept of Democratic Blending ("amalgama democrática") describes a modern form of authoritarianism in which democratic institutions are not immediately destroyed but gradually transformed into tools for concentrating political power¹.

Unlike traditional twentieth-century dictatorships, which often emerged through military coups, censorship, and the suspension of constitutions, modern authoritarian regimes can rise through elections, constitutions, courts, and legal procedures themselves.

According to Gaona, contemporary authoritarian leaders frequently maintain the external appearance of democracy while weakening its institutional foundations from within. Elections continue to be held, legislatures function, courts remain formally active, and constitutions are still invoked as sources of legitimacy. However, the substance of constitutional democracy progressively erodes as checks and balances are subordinated to executive power.

Gaona argues that democratic blending is fundamentally an institutional mutation: the same Constitution that initially allows a leader to reach power gradually becomes the obstacle that must be overcome in order to remain in power indefinitely. The central target of this transformation is the principle of separation of powers. Once courts, legislatures, electoral institutions, and oversight bodies lose independence, constitutional democracy becomes vulnerable to authoritarian consolidation disguised as legality.

He describes the process in three stages. *First stage*: populism - "I am the savior". During this phase, a political leader emerges in the context of social frustration, economic instability, corruption, insecurity, inequality, or institutional distrust.

The populist leader constructs a simplified narrative that divides society into victims and enemies, presenting himself as the only figure capable of rescuing the nation. Complex structural problems are reduced to emotionally powerful explanations, and public frustration is redirected toward political elites, institutions, the press, foreign actors, or opposition groups.

At this stage, the leader relies heavily on democratic mechanisms. Elections, public debate, social mobilization, and media visibility are used to gain legitimacy and electoral victory. Gaona argues that populism seeks above all to alter the voter's perception of reality by offering emotionally compelling interpretations rather than institutional solutions. The leader promises simple answers to deeply complex national problems and frames political opposition as moral betrayal rather than democratic disagreement.

Second stage: constitutional authoritarianism - "I am the people". Once in office, the leader increasingly claims to embody the only legitimate will of the nation. Opposition parties, courts, journalists, and institutional critics are portrayed as enemies obstructing the popular mandate. At this point, constitutional democracy begins to weaken more visibly.

According to Gaona, authoritarian leaders frequently use constitutional powers themselves to consolidate institutional control. Judicial appointments, constitutional reinterpretations, emergency decrees, executive expansion, and control over electoral systems become mechanisms for reducing institutional resistance while maintaining formal legality. The Constitution is not abolished; instead, it is reinterpreted in ways that favor executive authority.

One defining characteristic of constitutional authoritarianism is the systematic weakening of independent institutions. Courts lose autonomy through politically strategic appointments. Legislatures become subordinated to executive influence. Public institutions are pressured through budgetary or administrative control. The press is delegitimized as corrupt, partisan, or anti-national. In many cases, governments justify these measures by claiming to defend democracy, protect national stability, or overcome institutional "blockages."

A recurring feature of democratic blending is the use of blame as a political instrument. When promised reforms fail or governance problems persist, responsibility is shifted toward external actors: the opposition, the media, economic elites, foreign governments, institutional resistance, or even the Constitution itself. Constitutional limits are increasingly presented not as safeguards of liberty, but as obstacles preventing the government from fulfilling the will of the people.

Third stage: constitutional dictatorship - "I am the Constitution". At this point, the distinction between the ruler's political will and constitutional authority effectively disappears. The leader no longer governs within constitutional limits; rather, constitutional interpretation becomes dependent on the leader's own authority and political objectives.

Gaona argues that this transformation does not necessarily require the open abolition of democratic institutions. Instead, authoritarianism consolidates itself through legal and constitutional mechanisms that preserve democratic appearances while emptying institutions of their independent function. Elections may continue, but under unequal conditions. Courts may remain formally active, but without genuine independence. Constitutions may still exist but no longer operate as effective limits on executive power.

In this framework, democratic blending becomes a form of authoritarianism achieved through legality rather than direct rupture. The law itself becomes the instrument of concentration of power. What once functioned as constitutional restraint is transformed into constitutional justification.

Gaona identifies several Latin American examples that illustrate different forms of democratic blending: In *Venezuela*, he argues that institutional control was consolidated through judicial appointments, constitutional reinterpretations, and the weakening of legislative opposition under Nicolás Maduro. The Constituent Assembly and the courts were used to expand executive authority while restricting opposition participation and press freedom.

¹ For a discussion of Democratic Blending Theory and its implications, see J. Mauricio Gaona, *La Constitución Soy Yo: Cuando la norma es el arma que*

desmantela la democracia (Crítica, Editorial Planeta Colombiana S.A., 2026, pp. 126-144).

In *Nicaragua*, Daniel Ortega's government used legislation, judicial mechanisms, and administrative pressure to dismantle independent journalism and political opposition. Laws regulating cybercrime and foreign influence were used to criminalize dissent and silence critical media organizations.

In Honduras, Gaona points to the judicial reinterpretation of constitutional prohibitions on presidential reelection during the administration of Juan Orlando Hernández. The courts effectively removed constitutional barriers that had previously prohibited immediate reelection.

In *El Salvador*, critics cited by Gaona argue that constitutional reinterpretation enabled presidential reelection despite longstanding constitutional traditions favoring alternation in power. Supporters framed these measures as expressions of democratic legitimacy and governmental efficiency, while critics viewed them as signs of institutional erosion.

In *Colombia*, Gaona argues that democratic blending emerges when constitutional limits and institutional opposition are portrayed as obstacles to social change. Attacks on the press, political opponents, and constitutional checks reflect a growing clash between executive ambition and constitutional restraint.

President Petro invoked an alleged humanitarian and climate emergency in La Guajira to govern by decree, bypassing ordinary legislative debate. Yet the constitutional principle of separation of powers held firm: the Constitutional Court of Colombia invalidated the measure, ruling that the circumstances cited were neither urgent nor unforeseen.

Two years later, after advancing a proposal for a National Constituent Assembly, Petro announced a 23.7% minimum-wage increase while financing government spending through ten-year public debt issued at a 13.4% interest rate—widely criticized as approaching usury—underscoring the tension between political ambition and fiscal sustainability.

Core Warning

The central warning of Gaona's theory is that democracy rarely collapses overnight. Modern authoritarianism advances incrementally through legal procedures, constitutional reinterpretations, institutional weakening, and political normalization. Democratic Blending does not immediately abolish democratic institutions; it gradually converts them into instruments for preserving and consolidating political power.

For Gaona, the ultimate safeguard against constitutional dictatorship is the separation of powers. Independent courts, a free press, effective political opposition, and constitutional limits are not obstacles to democracy but the conditions that sustain it. Once these restraints are weakened or removed, democracy may survive in form while authoritarianism governs in practice.

Global Significance

Democratic Blending provides a powerful framework for understanding how authoritarianism can emerge within democratic systems without suspending elections, abolishing constitutions, or dismantling institutions outright. It challenges the traditional view of dictatorship as the result of coups or sudden constitutional rupture, highlighting instead the gradual and often legal erosion of democratic constraints².

Its significance lies in exposing the fragility of constitutional democracy. Elections alone cannot guarantee democratic governance when judicial independence, press freedom, political pluralism, and institutional checks are progressively undermined³. The concept therefore offers a valuable comparative lens for analyzing democratic backsliding across diverse political systems and regions.

At its core, Democratic Blending demonstrates how institutions designed to limit power can, over time, be repurposed to concentrate it⁴.

Contemporary Relevance

The relevance of Democratic Blending extends beyond domestic constitutional politics. In an increasingly interconnected world, authoritarian and tyrannical regimes invest heavily in international lobbying, strategic communications, influence operations, and diplomatic advocacy to strengthen their legitimacy abroad while reducing scrutiny of their internal practices.

Equally important is the often-ambivalent response of democratic states. Despite their professed commitment to constitutionalism, human rights, and democratic governance, many maintain close political, economic, and commercial ties with authoritarian governments when strategic or economic interests prevail. This tension reveals a persistent gap between democratic principles and foreign-policy practice.

Democratic erosion, therefore, cannot be understood solely as a domestic process. It is frequently reinforced by international networks of political recognition, economic cooperation, and institutional tolerance that lower the costs of authoritarian behavior.

The enduring value of Democratic Blending lies in its ability to identify early signs of institutional degradation before they become normalized.

Democracies are most vulnerable when the concentration of power is justified in the name of necessity, reform, security, or popular will—and when domestic and international actors alike choose to overlook those developments for reasons of political convenience.

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² Mora, F. *States of Exception, State of Internal Disturbance. Amicus Curiae* submitted to the Constitutional Court of Colombia, February 7, 2025.

³ F. Mora, *Request for an Interpretive Decision to Protect Fundamental Rights Against the Manipulation of a Popular Consultation for Purely Electoral Purposes*, submitted to the Constitutional Court of Colombia, April 24, 2025.

⁴ Mora, F. *Democratic Erosion and the Risk of a Modern Coup d'État in Colombia. Amicus Curiae* submitted to the High Courts of Colombia, September 3, 2025.