

Strategic Impunity

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Executive Summary

Authoritarian regimes continue to *consolidate power* despite decades of international condemnation, sanctions, and diplomatic pressure.

Cases such as *Iran, Venezuela, Afghanistan*, and—within a more complex institutional framework—*Colombia* illustrate a persistent global pattern characterized by the concentration of political authority, the erosion of institutional oversight, and systematic violations of fundamental rights.

In these systems, repression functions not as an episodic response to unrest but as a structural instrument of governance. Governments or dominant political networks consolidate power by weakening democratic institutions, restricting civic space, and suppressing dissent through coercion, surveillance, and legal persecution.

However, the resilience of these regimes cannot be explained solely by domestic dynamics. Their *persistence* reflects structural limitations in the international system itself. Geopolitical competition, economic incentives, and fragmented alliances often dilute the effectiveness of international pressure.

Authoritarian governments increasingly mitigate sanctions and diplomatic isolation through diversified alliances, parallel economic networks, and continued participation in global institutions. In some cases, international actors reinforce regime durability through diplomatic recognition or strategic economic cooperation.

For example, in January 2026 elements of the United Nations Secretariat recognized Maduro as Venezuela's representative despite credible allegations of authoritarian consolidation following stolen elections.

Similarly, geopolitical and economic interests frequently *override* governance concerns. *Sweden's €3.1 billion defense agreement to supply Saab JAS Gripen fighter aircraft to Colombia illustrates the persistent gap between democratic rhetoric and geopolitical opportunism.*

These *contradictions* highlight a structural challenge: while democratic norms are widely endorsed in international discourse, their *enforcement* often remains subordinate to strategic and economic priorities.

Global Authoritarian Resilience

Authoritarian governance remains a significant component of the contemporary international system. According to the *Economist Intelligence Unit*, approximately **60** countries—around **36 %** of the world's states—are classified as authoritarian regimes, governing close to **40 %** of the global population.

Comparable estimates from the International Institute for *Democracy and Electoral Assistance* identify roughly **45-50** authoritarian governments worldwide.

These regimes share several structural characteristics:

- Concentration of political authority in executive leadership or ruling networks
- Weakening or political subordination of judicial and legislative institutions
- Systematic restrictions on media, civil society, and political opposition
- Reliance on security forces, surveillance systems, and legal repression to deter dissent

Yet the durability of authoritarian governance increasingly depends on *external* geopolitical conditions that *limit* the effectiveness of international enforcement mechanisms.

Authoritarian Internationalism

The persistence of authoritarian regimes is increasingly linked to a broader geopolitical phenomenon often described as *authoritarian internationalism*—the informal alignment of governments that share an interest in limiting democratic pressure and reducing external scrutiny.

Unlike traditional military alliances, this cooperation operates through flexible networks *involving* diplomacy, trade, security cooperation, and political coordination within international institutions.

For instance, Iran has expanded strategic partnerships with Russia and China,

strengthening military cooperation, energy partnerships, and technology exchange.

Similarly, the government of Venezuela has relied on diplomatic and financial support from these partners to mitigate the impact of international sanctions. Through these *networks*, authoritarian regimes increasingly operate within parallel diplomatic and economic systems that reduce Western leverage.

Fragmentation of the Liberal International Order

The resilience of authoritarian governance also reflects structural changes in the global balance of power.

Since the end of the Cold War, the international system has been shaped by institutions intended to promote democratic norms and rules-based cooperation, including the United Nations, the European Union, and the World Trade Organization.

However, growing geopolitical competition has *weakened* consensus within these institutions. Major powers increasingly *prioritize* strategic interests *over* normative enforcement, limiting the ability of multilateral organizations to respond effectively to authoritarian governance.

This fragmentation enables authoritarian regimes to exploit divisions among *democratic states*, reducing the effectiveness of sanctions and diplomatic isolation.

Sanctions Resilience and Parallel Economic Networks

Authoritarian governments have also developed strategies to withstand economic pressure through sanctions resilience networks.

Countries facing sanctions often rely on alternative financial systems, commodity markets, and bilateral agreements that bypass Western economic restrictions.

Energy exports, defense procurement, and infrastructure partnerships frequently continue despite political tensions, weakening the intended impact of sanctions.

The €3.1 billion defense agreement between Colombia and Saab AB, supported by the government of Sweden, illustrates how strategic economic opportunism can coexist with concerns about governance and human rights.

Such dynamics reinforce perceptions among authoritarian leaders that international enforcement mechanisms lack *consistency* and political resolve. Selective Legitimacy in International Institutions

International institutions also face structural limitations in enforcing democratic norms.

Membership in organizations such as the United Nations is based *on* state sovereignty rather *than* democratic legitimacy. As a result, governments accused of systematic repression often retain full diplomatic recognition.

This dynamic creates what can be described as *selective legitimacy*—a system in which political recognition continues regardless of domestic governance practices.

The recognition of Maduro in January 2026 as Venezuela's *representative* at the United Nations illustrates how institutional legitimacy can *persist even amid* serious allegations of electoral manipulation and repression.

Country Cases

Iran

For nearly 5 decades, Iran has maintained a centralized political system combining ideological governance with extensive security control.

During protests reported in January 2026, estimates suggested that between *3,000 and 30,000 individuals were killed* by security forces. Authorities impose strict restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and association, while executions, mass arrests, and surveillance remain central instruments of political control.

Venezuela

Over the past 27 years, Venezuela has undergone a profound transformation marked by authoritarian consolidation, economic collapse, and systematic repression.

Since 2014, international organizations estimate between *23,000 and 28,000 deaths* linked to state

repression. Despite international pressure, the government of Venezuela has maintained power through control of security forces, political institutions, and external geopolitical alliances.

More than *9 million* Venezuelans have fled the country, creating one of the largest displacement crises in recent history.

Afghanistan

Since the return of the Taliban in August 2021, Afghanistan has experienced a dramatic deterioration in human rights protections.

An estimated *2,500-3,500 people* have been killed during Taliban rule, including extrajudicial killings of former government officials and civilians killed in attacks by Islamic State - Khorasan Province.

Women and girls have been systematically excluded from education, employment, and public life, creating one of the most restrictive gender regimes in the world.

Colombia

Colombia represents a hybrid case in which democratic institutions *coexist* with high levels of violence and the influence of criminal groups *connected* to Petro's government. Since Petro assumed office in August 2022, more than *40,600 killings* have been recorded nationwide.

Government negotiations with the organized crime under the "Total Peace" policy have *expanded* these organizations, which now include approximately *27,000 members* and exert control over extensive territories linked to narcotics trafficking.

Strategic Implications

The interaction *between* authoritarian cooperation, geopolitical fragmentation, and economic interdependence creates an international environment favorable to regime survival.

Three implications emerge:

First, authoritarian regimes are increasingly *embedded* within global economic and diplomatic systems, making effective isolation difficult without broad international coordination.

Second, geopolitical competition among major powers *weakens* the ability of international institutions *to enforce* democratic norms consistently.

Third, economic and security interests frequently *undermine* democratic governments' willingness to apply sustained political pressure.

Conclusion

Authoritarian governance persists not only because of domestic repression but also because the international system *lacks* coherent mechanisms to enforce democratic norms.

Sanctions, diplomatic condemnation, and legal investigations remain important tools for defending international standards. However, when applied inconsistently or undermined by competing geopolitical interests, their impact is limited.

Recent developments—including the recognition of Maduro by the United Nations and continued strategic teamwork between Sweden and Colombia—highlight the widening gap between international principles and geopolitical opportunism.

Until democratic governments align economic policy, diplomatic strategy, and institutional enforcement with their stated commitments to human rights, authoritarian regimes will continue to exploit the contradictions of the international order.

*For millions of victims in Iran, Venezuela, Afghanistan, Colombia, Ukraine, and other societies facing authoritarian repression, international law should **protect** the victims—**not provide** diplomatic cover for the regimes responsible for their suffering.*

Bogotá, Colombia March 9, 2026.