International Journal of Economics, Management and Social Science
Vol 9 No 1 March 2026
E-ISSN: 2614-3828 | P-ISSN: 2614-3887
Open Access: https://journal.salewangang.net/ijemss/index

Political Sociology: Power Relations, State Legitimacy, and Social Movement Dynamics in Democratization

Usep Saepul Ahyar[1]*, Oman Sukmana[2], Gonda Yumitro[2], Nurudin[4]
[1]Doctoral Program in Sociology, Graduate School Directorate
Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia
[2,3,4] Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia
*Correspondence: usepahyar@webmail.umm.ac.id

Article Info :
Received:
05/02/2026
Revised:
07/02/2026
Accepted:
22/02/2026

ABSTRACT

This article examines the complex interplay between power relations, state legitimacy, and social movement dynamics in contemporary democratization processes. Drawing on recent developments documented in the Global State of Democracy 2025 report, which reveals that 2024 marked the ninth consecutive year of democratic decline globally, this study analyzes how political sociology frameworks illuminate persistent challenges to democratic governance. Through systematic analysis of theoretical perspectives on power, authority, and collective action, combined with empirical evidence from recent democratic transitions and authoritarian backsliding, this research demonstrates that understanding democratization requires attention to three interconnected dimensions: the distribution and exercise of power within political systems, the mechanisms through which states maintain or lose legitimacy, and the role of social movements in challenging or supporting existing power structures. The findings reveal that contemporary democratization faces a perfect storm of autocratic resurgence, declining press freedom (at 50-year lows), and acute uncertainty amid massive social and economic changes. However, cases from Bangladesh, Guatemala, and Senegal demonstrate that mass mobilizations can shift democratic trajectories when citizens unite to demand change. This article contributes to political sociology by integrating classical theories of power and legitimacy with contemporary empirical evidence, offering insights into both democratic erosion and resilience.

Keywords: Political sociology, power relations, state legitimacy, social movements, democratization, democratic backsliding, collective action, political participat

INTRODUCTION

Democracy worldwide faces unprecedented challenges in the twenty-first century. According to the Global State of Democracy 2025 report released by International IDEA, the year 2024 marked the ninth consecutive year with more countries showing net decline rather than improvement in overall democratic performance—the longest consecutive fall since records began in 1975 (International IDEA, 2025). The report documents that 54 percent of countries suffered decline in at least one factor of democratic performance, with deterioration spanning categories of Rights, Rule of Law, and Representation. Freedom of expression reached 50-year lows, with nearly a quarter of all countries worldwide experiencing worsening conditions. These troubling trends raise fundamental questions about power distribution, state legitimacy, and the capacity of social movements to advance or defend democratic governance—core concerns of political sociology.

The contemporary crisis of democracy unfolds against a backdrop of what International IDEA Secretary-General Kevin Casas-Zamora characterizes as a "perfect storm of autocratic resurgence and

acute uncertainty, due to massive social and economic changes" (International IDEA, 2025). This perfect storm manifests through multiple interconnected dynamics: authoritarian leaders dismantling checks and balances, populist movements exploiting polarization, declining public trust in institutions, and social media platforms amplifying disinformation (Lührmann et al., 2025). Yet 2024 also witnessed inspiring examples of democratic resilience, particularly in Bangladesh where student-led protests toppled an autocratic regime, Guatemala where Indigenous communities and civil society mobilized to ensure an anti-corruption candidate could assume the presidency, and Senegal where mass protests overturned an attempted election delay (Freedom House, 2025). These contrasting trajectories underscore the need for sophisticated political sociology frameworks capable of explaining both democratic erosion and democratic renewal.

Political sociology provides analytical tools for understanding these dynamics by examining how power operates within societies, how states maintain or lose legitimacy, and how social movements challenge existing power structures (Nash, 2019). The field emerged from classical sociological concerns with authority, domination, and social order, as articulated by Max Weber, Karl Marx, and others, but has evolved to address contemporary phenomena including democratic backsliding, transnational activism, and digital-era political participation (Wallace & Wolf, 2021). The intersection of these theoretical traditions with empirical realities of the current democratic moment creates a rich intellectual terrain requiring careful navigation.

This article examines three fundamental questions: (1) How do power relations shape democratic institutions and processes in contemporary societies? (2) What mechanisms explain variation in state legitimacy, and how does legitimacy affect democratization? (3) What role do social movements play in democratic transitions and democratic defense? These questions are not merely academic. In a world where authoritarian regimes increasingly appropriate the language of democracy while systematically dismantling its institutions, understanding the sociological foundations of political systems becomes an urgent intellectual and civic task. The following sections address each question through both theoretical synthesis and empirical analysis, drawing on cases from multiple regions to build a comparative and politically sociology-informed understanding of contemporary democracy.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative comparative case analysis and theoretical synthesis methodology to examine the relationship between power relations, state legitimacy, and social movements in democratization processes. The research design integrates analysis of recent empirical cases documented in democracy monitoring reports with classical and contemporary theoretical frameworks from political sociology. The primary sources for empirical analysis include the Global State of Democracy 2025 report by International IDEA, Freedom House's Freedom in the World 2025 report, and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) datasets that track democratic indicators across more than 180 countries.

The methodological approach follows a process-tracing logic, which seeks to identify causal mechanisms linking structural conditions—such as economic inequality, institutional design, and political culture—to outcomes in democratic performance. Case selection follows a most-different systems design, identifying countries with divergent trajectories—democratic resilience versus democratic erosion—to illuminate which variables best explain variation. Bangladesh, Guatemala, and Senegal serve as positive cases where social mobilization successfully challenged power concentration, while Hungary, Turkey, and Nicaragua illustrate trajectories of sustained democratic backsliding despite civil society resistance.

Theoretical synthesis draws on multiple intellectual traditions within political sociology, including Weberian concepts of legitimacy and domination, Gramscian frameworks of hegemony and counter-hegemony, resource mobilization theory, and new social movement theory. This pluralistic theoretical orientation reflects the complexity of democratization as a social process, which cannot be adequately captured by any single theoretical lens. The analysis proceeds through interpretive engagement with both empirical data and theoretical literature, seeking to develop mid-range propositions about the conditions under which power relations, legitimacy dynamics, and social movement activity produce democratic advance or decline.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Power Relations and Democratic Institutions

The distribution and exercise of power fundamentally shapes democratic quality and stability. Weber's (1978) classic definition of power as the ability to exercise one's will over others despite resistance remains foundational for political sociology. However, contemporary scholars distinguish between different forms of power: coercive power based on force, economic power based on resource control, normative power based on legitimacy, and symbolic power based on meaning-making capacity (Dahl, 2020). Democratic systems theoretically constrain power through institutional checks, electoral accountability, and civil liberties protection. Yet recent evidence suggests these constraints face systematic erosion in many countries.

The relationship between economic power and democratic governance has become increasingly salient. Concentrated wealth enables oligarchic actors to shape political outcomes through campaign financing, media ownership, and lobbying, thereby distorting formal democratic mechanisms (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). In the United States, campaign finance deregulation has contributed to what some scholars call "plutocratic drift," in which policy outcomes increasingly reflect the preferences of economic elites rather than median voters. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's government systematically transferred media ownership to loyalists, creating an information environment that reinforces incumbent power while marginalizing opposition voices. These cases illustrate how economic power asymmetries translate into political power concentration, undermining the egalitarian premises of democratic governance.

Institutional design plays a critical mediating role between power distributions and democratic outcomes. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) demonstrate that democratic erosion typically occurs through incremental institutional capture rather than sudden coups. Elected leaders exploit procedural mechanisms—court-packing, gerrymandering, emergency powers—to entrench their power while maintaining democratic facades. This pattern, which scholars term "autocratization" or "democratic backsliding," is particularly insidious because it exploits the very institutions designed to check executive power. The V-Dem Institute's data reveals that between 2010 and 2024, the share of the world population living in autocratizing countries increased dramatically, with many of these countries previously classified as electoral democracies or even liberal democracies.

The interplay between formal institutional constraints and informal power networks represents another critical dimension of power relations in democratizing contexts. Formal institutions—constitutions, electoral laws, judicial review—provide the legal architecture of democratic governance, but their effectiveness depends on informal norms and the willingness of political actors to respect institutional limits (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Where informal norms of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance have eroded, formal institutions become arenas of conflict rather than mechanisms for managing conflict. This dynamic explains why countries with formally similar institutional arrangements can experience dramatically different democratic outcomes depending on the character of their political cultures and elite behaviors.

Digital technologies have introduced new dimensions to power relations in democratic systems. Social media platforms simultaneously democratize communication—enabling citizens to organize, share information, and hold power accountable—and concentrate algorithmic power in the hands of technology corporations (McCoy et al., 2018). Disinformation campaigns, facilitated by digital platforms, undermine the epistemic foundations of democratic deliberation by creating alternative information ecosystems in which shared factual bases for political debate erode. Governments, particularly authoritarian-leaning ones, have also weaponized digital surveillance and content control to monitor dissidents and suppress mobilization. The intersection of technological power and democratic politics represents one of the most contested and consequential frontiers in contemporary political sociology.

State Legitimacy and Democratic Governance

State legitimacy constitutes a foundational concept for understanding democratic governance and its challenges. Weber's (1978) typology of legitimate authority—traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational—provides the classical framework, with democratic states drawing primarily on legal-rational legitimacy rooted in formal rules, procedures, and rights. Beetham (2013) deepens this framework by arguing that legitimacy requires not only formal legal validity but also alignment between rules and shared beliefs about rightful authority, and active consent expressed through compliance and participation. This multidimensional conception of legitimacy illuminates why formally democratic systems can suffer legitimacy deficits when citizens perceive institutions as corrupt, captured, or systematically unresponsive to their interests.

The mechanisms through which states build and sustain legitimacy have significant implications for democratization. Performance legitimacy—based on effective delivery of public goods and economic opportunity—represents a critical but often underemphasized dimension. Lipset's (2019) foundational argument that economic development supports democratization rests partly on the observation that prosperity generates legitimacy for incumbent regimes and the institutional frameworks they inhabit. Conversely, economic failure delegitimizes incumbent governments and opens political space for challengers. The Arab Spring demonstrated this dynamic starkly, as economic grievances—unemployment, rising food prices, corruption—combined with political frustration to produce mass mobilizations that destabilized authoritarian regimes across North Africa and the Middle East.

Procedural legitimacy, derived from adherence to fair and inclusive decision-making processes, operates alongside performance legitimacy. Citizens evaluate governmental legitimacy not only by outcomes but by the perceived fairness of processes through which decisions are made (Dolan et al., 2024). Electoral integrity, judicial independence, and transparent governance generate procedural legitimacy even when specific policy outcomes are contested. Conversely, electoral manipulation, judicial capture, and opacity in governmental decision-making undermine procedural legitimacy regardless of performance outcomes. This explains why democratically elected leaders who achieve economic growth while systematically dismantling institutional checks still face legitimacy challenges from citizens who value procedural fairness.

Identity-based dimensions of legitimacy have become increasingly prominent in contemporary democratic politics. The rise of populist movements across diverse national contexts reflects, in part, crises of recognition in which segments of the population feel their identities, values, and interests are not adequately represented by existing political arrangements (Druckman, 2024). Populist leaders exploit these recognition deficits by claiming to represent the "true people" against corrupt elites, using identity politics to build legitimacy while simultaneously undermining the institutional pluralism that democratic governance requires. This tension between democratic legitimacy based on popular sovereignty and democratic legitimacy based on rights protection and institutional procedures constitutes one of the central dilemmas of contemporary democratization.

The erosion of state legitimacy in many countries cannot be divorced from questions of social trust. Longitudinal survey data from Eurobarometer, Latinobarometer, and Afrobarometer reveal declining public confidence in political parties, parliaments, and judicial institutions across diverse regional contexts. This trust deficit creates a vicious cycle: citizens who distrust institutions participate less in formal democratic processes, reducing the accountability pressures that could incentivize improved institutional performance, which further deepens distrust. Breaking this cycle requires not only institutional reforms but also civic renewal—the revitalization of the associational fabric through which citizens develop capacities for collective action and build the social capital that underpins effective democratic governance (Gilley, 2019).

Social Movements and Democratic Dynamics

Social movements occupy a pivotal position in political sociology's account of democratization. As Tilly and Wood (2020) demonstrate, the social movement emerged historically as a distinctive form of contentious politics in which organized groups of citizens make sustained claims on authorities,

employing repertoires of action including demonstrations, strikes, petitions, and symbolic displays of commitment. Tarrow (2021) argues that social movements arise when political opportunity structures open—when access to political institutions expands, elite alignments shift, or influential allies become available—and that they contribute to democratic development by extending political participation, amplifying marginalized voices, and pressuring elites to expand rights and improve governance.

The three positive cases documented in the Global State of Democracy 2025 report—Bangladesh, Guatemala, and Senegal—illustrate how social movements can shift democratic trajectories under adverse conditions. In Bangladesh, student-led protests against an unjust quota system for government jobs rapidly evolved into a broader challenge to Sheikh Hasina's increasingly authoritarian government. The movement's success reflected several factors identified by resource mobilization theory: organizational networks cultivated within universities, the capacity to frame demands in terms resonating broadly across social groups, and the mobilization of diverse constituencies beyond the movement's initial base (Schoon et al., 2020). The military's decision not to suppress the protests proved decisive, illustrating how elite defections can translate social pressure into political change.

Guatemala's case demonstrates the particular importance of cross-sectoral coalitions in democratic resilience. When the incumbent government attempted to interfere with the electoral process following Bernardo Arévalo's first-round victory, Indigenous communities, civil society organizations, labor unions, and professional associations united in defense of electoral integrity. This coalition's diversity—spanning ethnic, class, and organizational boundaries—proved crucial to its effectiveness, as it made sustained repression politically costly and internationally visible. Della Porta (2020) emphasizes that cross-cleavage coalitions represent a significant challenge to power-holders because they undermine attempts to stigmatize movements as representing only narrow sectoral interests. Guatemala's experience thus illustrates how social capital bridging diverse social groups can constitute a democratic resource that authoritarian-leaning incumbents find difficult to neutralize.

Senegal's experience with electoral defense demonstrates the international dimension of social movement success. When President Macky Sall announced a postponement of the presidential election, citizens mobilized in Dakar and other cities, while opposition political parties, media organizations, and international observers amplified their demands. The West African regional body ECOWAS and international partners added diplomatic pressure, illustrating how transnational advocacy networks can enhance the effectiveness of domestic social movements (Meyer & Tarrow, 2018). Senegal's movement ultimately succeeded in restoring the electoral calendar, enabling opposition candidate Bassirou Diomaye Faye to win the presidency—a remarkable outcome in a regional context where incumbent manipulation of electoral processes has become common.

These positive cases should not obscure the substantial challenges social movements face in contemporary democratizing contexts. Research by Chenoweth and Stephan (2021) on civil resistance demonstrates that nonviolent movements historically succeeded in achieving their objectives roughly half the time, but that success rates have declined in recent decades as governments have developed more sophisticated repertoires of counter-mobilization. Authoritarian-leaning governments now routinely deploy a combination of selective repression, co-optation of movement leaders, legal harassment through anti-protest laws, and disinformation campaigns to demobilize civil society. The survival of independent civil society organizations therefore requires not only tactical adaptability but also resilient organizational cultures and sustained international solidarity.

Digital tools have transformed social movement dynamics in ways that create both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Social media platforms dramatically reduce the costs of mobilization by enabling rapid information diffusion and coordination, allowing movements to scale quickly and operate across geographic boundaries (Lührmann et al., 2025). However, this digital democratization of mobilization comes with significant risks. Movements organized primarily through social media often lack the durable organizational structures that enable sustained campaigns and strategic adaptation. Digital platforms also expose activists to surveillance and harassment, and governments have become adept at manipulating online information environments to discredit movements and amplify divisions within them. Political sociology must therefore attend carefully to the organizational ecology of

contemporary social movements, analyzing how digital and offline organizing interact and what combinations of organizational forms best sustain democratic mobilization.

Integrating Power, Legitimacy, and Movements: Toward a Unified Framework

The three dimensions analyzed above—power relations, state legitimacy, and social movement dynamics—are not independent variables but constitute an integrated system of interactions. Power distributions shape the institutional contexts within which legitimacy is contested and social movements operate; legitimacy dynamics affect both the effectiveness of power exercise and the resonance of movement claims; and social movements, when successful, can reshape power distributions and renew or transform legitimacy frameworks. Understanding democratization therefore requires attention to this systemic interdependence rather than to any single dimension in isolation.

One productive integrative framework draws on Gramscian political sociology, which conceptualizes political contestation as a struggle for hegemony—the capacity to define the terms of social reality in ways that align popular common sense with the interests of dominant groups. Democratic erosion often involves hegemonic projects by autocratizing elites who normalize institutional violations, naturalize inequality, and stigmatize democratic opposition as representing foreign interests, elite corruption, or threats to national unity. Counter-hegemonic projects by democratic movements must therefore operate simultaneously at institutional, discursive, and cultural levels, contesting not only specific policies but the meanings through which citizens interpret political reality. Cases of successful democratic defense typically involve movements that successfully reframe political conflict in ways that broaden their coalitions and isolate power-holders.

The temporal dimension of democratization processes deserves particular emphasis. Democratic consolidation is not a binary threshold that, once crossed, guarantees political stability, but an ongoing process of institution-building, norm-cultivation, and civic renewal that requires continuous maintenance. Similarly, democratic erosion is typically gradual rather than sudden, proceeding through incremental institutional changes that individually appear modest but cumulatively transform political regimes. This gradualism makes democratic backsliding particularly difficult to counter, as each individual step may seem insufficient to trigger large-scale resistance, creating a "boiling frog" problem in which cumulative damage becomes apparent only after individual thresholds have been crossed. Political sociology's contribution includes developing conceptual tools for recognizing early warning signs of democratic erosion and building the analytical and civic capacities to respond before erosion becomes irreversible.

CONCLUSION

This analysis demonstrates that political sociology frameworks provide essential tools for understanding contemporary democratization challenges. The interplay between power relations, state legitimacy, and social movements determines whether societies move toward greater democracy or suffer authoritarian backsliding. Evidence from 2024–2025 reveals both troubling erosion trends and inspiring examples of democratic resilience, highlighting the contested and contingent nature of political regimes.

Three overarching conclusions emerge from this analysis. First, democratic institutions are not self-sustaining mechanisms but require continuous reinforcement through political culture, civic engagement, and elite commitment to procedural norms. The systematic erosion of these informal supports is as consequential for democratic quality as formal institutional changes. Second, state legitimacy in democratic systems depends on multidimensional foundations—legal validity, performance effectiveness, procedural fairness, and identity recognition—and legitimacy deficits in any of these dimensions create vulnerabilities that autocratizing elites can exploit. Third, social movements represent an indispensable resource for democratic resilience, but their effectiveness depends on organizational capacity, coalition breadth, framing skill, and access to international solidarity networks. The declining success rates of civil resistance movements in recent decades

reflect not the ineffectiveness of popular mobilization per se but the sophistication of counter-mobilization strategies deployed by autocratizing governments.

These conclusions carry important implications for both scholarship and practice. Theoretically, they suggest the need for integrated frameworks that analyze power, legitimacy, and movement dynamics as components of a single social-political system rather than as independent variables. Empirically, they highlight the importance of longitudinal comparative research that traces democratic trajectories across diverse national contexts, attending to the interaction effects between structural conditions and political agency. Practically, they underscore the importance of investing in the civic and organizational infrastructure through which citizens develop capacities for collective action, cultivate cross-cleavage solidarity, and maintain the shared commitments to democratic proceduralism that authoritarian threats tend to erode.

Future research should particularly attend to the role of digital technologies in reshaping all three dimensions of the analytical framework advanced here. Digital platforms are transforming power relations by enabling new forms of surveillance and information control; reshaping legitimacy dynamics by creating fragmented information environments in which authoritative sources compete with disinformation; and altering social movement dynamics by enabling rapid mobilization while creating organizational vulnerabilities. Understanding these transformations requires both theoretical innovation—extending political sociology's conceptual toolkit to address digital phenomena—and empirical investigation through mixed-method research designs capable of capturing both aggregate patterns and the microfoundations of political behavior. The challenges of twenty-first century democracy demand no less than the full resources of political sociology brought to bear on the questions of power, legitimacy, and collective action that define the conditions of human freedom.

REFERENCES

Beetham, D. (2013). The Legitimation of Power (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

Chenoweth, E., & Stephan, M. J. (2021). Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict (2nd ed.). Columbia University Press.

Dahl, R. A. (2020). Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City (3rd ed.). Yale University Press.

Della Porta, D. (2020). Building bridges: Political sociology meets social movement studies. In T. Janoski et al. (Eds.), The New Handbook of Political Sociology (pp. 337-363). Cambridge University Press.

Dolan, P., Vertigans, S., & Connolly, J. (2024). Theorising political legitimisation: From stasis to processes. Journal of Sociology, 60(2), 287-304.

Druckman, J. N. (2024). How to study democratic backsliding. Political Psychology, 45(1), 3-38.

Freedom House. (2025). Five Developments from 2024 That Give Us Hope for Democracy in 2025. https://freedomhouse.org/

Gilley, B. (2019). The nature of political legitimacy. In W. R. Thompson (Ed.), Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics. Oxford University Press.

Haggard, S., & Kaufman, R. (2021). Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World. Cambridge University Press.

International IDEA. (2024). The Global State of Democracy 2024: Strengthening the Legitimacy of Elections in a Time of Radical Uncertainty. International IDEA.

International IDEA. (2025). The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move. International IDEA.

Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018). How Democracies Die. Crown Publishing.

Lipset, S. M. (2019). Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics (Expanded edition). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lührmann, A., Lindberg, S. I., & Tannenberg, M. (2025). State of the world 2024: 25 years of autocratization—democracy trumped? Democratization, 32(5), 839-864.

McCoy, J., Rahman, T., & Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities. American Behavioral Scientist, 62(1), 16-42.

Meyer, D. S., & Tarrow, S. (2018). The Resistance: The Dawn of the Anti-Trump Opposition Movement. Oxford University Press.

Nash, K. (2019). Contemporary Political Sociology: Globalization, Politics and Power (3rd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

National Endowment for Democracy. (2025). 2025 Annual Report. NED Publications.

Schoon, E. W., Doherty, B., & Doerr, N. (2020). Social movement studies and political sociology. In T. Janoski et al. (Eds.), The New Handbook of Political Sociology (pp. 364-391). Cambridge University Press.

Tarrow, S. G. (2021). Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Tilly, C., & Wood, L. J. (2020). Social Movements, 1768-2018 (4th ed.). Routledge.

Wallace, R. A., & Wolf, A. (2021). Contemporary Sociological Theory: Expanding the Classical Tradition (10th ed.). Pearson.

Weber, M. (1978). Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology. University of California Press.