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# ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND FASCISM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of illiberal democracy and fascism signifies different political ideas, although both have significant effects for governance and individual freedoms. Illiberal democracy thrives on democratic framework of elections and other systems but carefully undermines concepts of liberalism including rule of law, separation of powers, and protection of civil liberties. Fascism, on the contrary, disregards democratic ideas, it completely favors totalitarian rule flagged by nationalism, suppression of dissent and opposition, and state's supremacy. This paper explores the historical episodes, ideological differences, and contemporary examples and manifestations of both systems, underlining their shared practices—such as nationalism and propaganda—and their critical differences. While illiberal democracies may arise through reform, fascist regimes/systems demand complete systemic revamp for democratic restoration. Understanding the nuances of these totalitarian tendencies is important for reinforcing democratic institutions, promoting pluralism, and safeguarding human rights in a world fighting resurgent challenges to democracy.

**Keywords:** Illiberal democracy, Fascism, Authoritarianism, Nationalism, Democratic institutions, Rule of law, Totalitarianism, Propaganda, Pluralism, Governance

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## Introduction

The notions of illiberal democracy and fascism signify different, though sometimes intersecting, political phenomena. The term illiberal democracy typically refers to regimes that preserve the appearance of democratic processes while eroding liberal principles such as personal freedoms, the separation of powers, and the rule of law. In contrast, fascism is a totalitarian ideology marked by intense nationalism, the repression of dissent, and a focus on state control and unity. This paper examines the distinctions and commonalities between these two governance forms, emphasizing their historical contexts, ideological underpinnings, and expressions in modern politics.

## Fascism: A Brief Overview

Fascism represents an authoritarian political ideology characterized by intense nationalism, centralized authority, and the repression of opposition. It frequently depends on a charismatic leader and employs propaganda to cultivate allegiance to the state, simultaneously dismissing democratic values and pluralism. Historically, fascism gained prominence in early 20th-century Europe, especially in Italy under Benito Mussolini and in Germany under Adolf Hitler, as a reaction to economic turmoil, social unrest, and perceived dangers posed by socialism and liberal democracy.<sup>3</sup>

Fascism glorifies the state above individuals, promoting a vision of unity based on ethnic, cultural, or ideological purity<sup>4</sup>. It advocates for a militarized society, prioritizing strength, discipline, and order, often at the expense of human rights<sup>5</sup>. While it claims to restore national greatness, its policies typically involve aggressive expansionism and persecution of minorities, as seen in Nazi Germany's Holocaust and Mussolini's colonial ventures<sup>6</sup>.

Modern echoes of fascism can be observed in some political movements that exhibit authoritarian tendencies and xenophobia. While not identical to historical fascism, these movements draw on its rhetoric of cultural supremacy and disdain for democratic institutions<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Payne, S. G. (1995). *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945*.

<sup>4</sup> Griffin, R. (1991). *The Nature of Fascism*.

<sup>5</sup> Paxton, R. O. (2004). *The Anatomy of Fascism*.

<sup>6</sup> Kershaw, I. (2008). *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution*.

<sup>7</sup> Traverso, E. (2019). *The New Faces of Fascism*.

Understanding fascism's history helps to recognize and resist its resurgence in contemporary politics.

## Historical Contexts

Illiberal democracies emerged primarily in the post-Cold War era as democratic transitions in various regions stalled or reversed. Countries like Hungary, Turkey, and Russia illustrate this trajectory, where initially democratic governments gradually eroded checks and balances to consolidate power. These regimes maintain elections but manipulate them through media control, judicial interference, and voter suppression to ensure incumbency. Scholars argue that this process is a direct consequence of weak institutional frameworks.<sup>8</sup>

Fascism, on the other hand, has its roots in early 20th-century Europe, particularly during the interwar period. The economic devastation following World War I, coupled with social unrest and fear of communism, created fertile ground for fascist movements in Italy and Germany.<sup>9</sup> Under leaders like Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, fascist regimes rejected democratic governance outright, instead promoting authoritarian rule, militarism, and ideologies of racial or cultural superiority.<sup>10</sup> Their rise was also facilitated by the failure of liberal democracies to address economic inequalities. For example, the Treaty of Versailles created economic hardships in Germany, contributing to public disillusionment.<sup>11</sup>

## Illiberal Democracy: A Brief Overview

Illiberal democracy refers to a political system where democratic institutions like elections exist, but fundamental democratic principles, such as rule of law, separation of powers, and protection of civil liberties, are undermined. Coined by Fareed Zakaria, the term highlights a contradiction between electoral legitimacy and authoritarian governance.<sup>12</sup>

In illiberal democracies, governments may come to power through free elections but then weaken independent institutions, such as the judiciary or media, to consolidate authority<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 17-23.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 61-68.

<sup>10</sup> Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 3-16.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914* (New York: Random House, 2013), 587-590

<sup>12</sup> Zakaria, F. (1997). "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy." *Foreign Affairs*

<sup>13</sup> Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How Democracies Die*.

While elections remain a feature, they are often manipulated to favor incumbents through gerrymandering, voter suppression, or control over election commissions<sup>14</sup>. Public dissent is frowned and suppressed, and opposition political parties or civil society groups, NGO's, face opposition or legal sanctions.

Instances of illiberal democracies can be observed in nations such as Hungary, governed by Viktor Orbán, where the administration has consolidated authority while still upholding an electoral system.<sup>15</sup> Critics say that these regimes erode democratic norms by prioritizing majoritarian rule over minority rights and constitutional checks.

The emergence of illiberal democracy frequently mirrors societal discontent with liberalism, inequality, and the perceived shortcomings of conventional democracies. Grasping this phenomenon is essential for tackling the weaknesses of democratic systems in the 21st century<sup>16</sup>.

### **Ideological Foundations**

The ideological split between illiberal democracy and fascism is rooted in their differing perspectives on democracy and individual rights. Illiberal democracies frequently defend their actions by claiming majority rule, arguing that winning elections provides them the power to limit specific freedoms for the sake of collective objectives. For example, Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, has championed what he calls a "Christian democracy" that prioritizes national identity over multiculturalism.<sup>17</sup> This approach is criticized for undervaluing minority rights.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast, fascism completely dismisses democratic principles. It prioritizes the dominance of the state or a specific leader, placing individual rights beneath the supposed requirements of the nation<sup>19</sup>. Fascist ideologies are fundamentally exclusionary, frequently identifying minorities or outside groups as dangers to national purity or power. The Nuremberg Laws of Nazi Germany serve as a prime example of this ideology, as they legally institutionalized racial

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<sup>14</sup> Diamond, L. (1999). *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*.

<sup>15</sup> Müller, J.-W. (2016). *What Is Populism?*

<sup>16</sup> Pappas, T. S. (2019). *Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis*.

<sup>17</sup> Viktor Orbán, "Building a Christian Democracy," *Hungarian Review* 10, no. 3 (2019): 24-28.

<sup>18</sup> Kim Lane Scheppele, "The Rule of Law and the Frankenstate: Why Governance Checklists Do Not Work," *Governance* 26, no. 4 (2013): 559-562.

<sup>19</sup> Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 62-66.

discrimination.<sup>20</sup> The fascist focus on homogeneity contrasts sharply with the pluralism that illiberal democracies claim to uphold, even if only superficially.<sup>21</sup>

## Propaganda and Nationalism

Propaganda is a central tool in both illiberal democracies and fascist regimes, but its application and scope vary. Illiberal democracies utilize state-controlled media to shape public opinion and discredit opposition. For instance, Russian state media under Vladimir Putin has consistently promoted nationalist narratives while marginalizing dissenting voices.<sup>22</sup> These regimes exploit modern technologies, including social media, to amplify their influence.<sup>23</sup>

Fascist regimes, however, employed propaganda with an unparalleled intensity, seeking to saturate all aspects of public and private life. Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, masterminded campaigns that glorified Hitler and demonized Jews, communists, and other perceived enemies.<sup>24</sup> Fascist propaganda often relied on grandiose spectacles, such as Mussolini's mass rallies in Italy, to evoke emotional loyalty.<sup>25</sup> This contrasts with the more subdued, bureaucratic approach of illiberal democracies, which aim to maintain an appearance of normalcy.<sup>26</sup>

Nationalism is another shared characteristic, though its expression differs. Illiberal democracies often promote nationalism as a unifying force, emphasizing cultural or religious identity. For example, India under Narendra Modi has embraced Hindutva, a nationalist ideology prioritizing Hindu identity.<sup>27</sup> This approach often marginalizes religious minorities, such as Muslims, who are portrayed as threats to national cohesion.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 78-82.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 23-27.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014), 110-116.

<sup>23</sup> Nicholas J. Cull et al., *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 318-321.

<sup>24</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris* (London: Penguin, 1999), 426-430.

<sup>25</sup> Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 45-50.

<sup>26</sup> Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 123-129.

<sup>27</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 81-88.

<sup>28</sup> Apoorvanand, "Hindutva's War on Minorities in India," *Journal of Contemporary South Asia* 27, no. 2 (2019): 183-187.

Fascist nationalism, by contrast, is explicitly aggressive and expansionist. Nazi Germany's concept of Lebensraum (living space) justified territorial conquest as a necessity for national survival.<sup>29</sup> Fascist regimes frequently employed violence to enforce their nationalist visions, a trait less prominent in illiberal democracies, which typically rely on institutional mechanisms to achieve similar goals.<sup>30</sup>

### Political Practices and Governance

Both illiberal democracies and fascist regimes employ mechanisms of control, but their methods and goals differ significantly. Illiberal democracies seek to legitimize their rule through elections while simultaneously undermining democratic institutions. For instance, in Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the judiciary has been systematically weakened, and dissenting voices in the media and civil society face severe restrictions.<sup>31</sup> Media outlets in these regimes often act as extensions of the state.<sup>32</sup>

Fascist regimes bypass such pretense, relying on outright authoritarianism. Mussolini's Italy and Nazi Germany abolished democratic institutions entirely, replacing them with structures designed to enforce absolute loyalty to the state.<sup>33</sup> Propaganda, paramilitary organizations, and extensive surveillance were central tools in maintaining control.<sup>34</sup> While illiberal democracies may tolerate limited dissent, fascist regimes suppress opposition with violent force.<sup>35</sup>

### Contemporary Relevance

The resurgence of authoritarian tendencies worldwide has blurred the lines between illiberal democracy and fascism in some respects. Leaders like Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Narendra Modi in India have been accused of embracing illiberal democratic practices by undermining judicial independence and stoking nationalist fervor.<sup>36</sup> However, these regimes differ

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<sup>29</sup> Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 213-220.

<sup>30</sup> Emilio Gentile, *The Origins of Fascist Ideology, 1918–1925* (New York: Enigma Books, 2005), 68-72.

<sup>31</sup> Ziya Öniş, "Turkey under the Challenge of State Crisis," *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 9, no. 3 (2009): 239-247.

<sup>32</sup> Esra Arsan, "Killing Me Softly with His Words: Censorship and Self-Censorship from the Perspective of Turkish Journalists," *Turkish Studies* 15, no. 3 (2014): 447-457.

<sup>33</sup> Renzo De Felice, *The History of Italian Fascism* (New York: Enigma Books, 2001), 129-136.

<sup>34</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951), 366-370.

<sup>35</sup> Wolfgang Schieder, *The Nazi Party: A Social Profile of Members and Leaders, 1919–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 223-230.

<sup>36</sup> Wendy Hunter and Timothy J. Power, "Bolsonaro and Brazil's Illiberal Backlash," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (2019): 68-82.

fundamentally from historical fascism in their retention of electoral processes and relative openness to global markets.<sup>37</sup>

Yet, certain parallels with fascism's nationalist and exclusionary rhetoric raise concerns. For instance, the demonization of minorities and political opponents in both illiberal democracies and fascist regimes fosters polarization and societal division. Scholars warn that such polarization can erode societal trust.<sup>38</sup> However, the absence of totalitarian control and explicit state ideology in illiberal democracies underscores their distinction from fascist systems.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

While illiberal democracies and fascist regimes share some authoritarian tendencies, they are fundamentally different in their ideological underpinnings and methods of governance. Illiberal democracies maintain the facade of democratic legitimacy, even as they erode liberal principles, whereas fascism outright rejects democratic norms in favor of totalitarian rule. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for addressing the challenges posed by authoritarianism in its various forms today. To combat both these phenomena, it is essential to reinforce and empower democratic institutions, promote civic education, and uphold the values of pluralism and individual rights.<sup>40</sup> The comparative analysis of illiberal democracy and fascism uncovers a range of authoritarian practices that differ in ideology, scope, and implementation, yet exhibit troubling similarities in their effects on governance and individual freedoms.

Both systems pose significant challenges to democratic principles and human rights, albeit through distinct mechanisms and with varying degrees of intensity. Illiberal democracies, while maintaining the structure of democratic elections, gradually undermine liberal principles such as the rule of law, separation of powers, and the safeguarding of individual liberties. Leaders within these regimes frequently leverage their electoral legitimacy to justify the suppression of dissent, the manipulation of judicial systems, and the control of media narratives. Their

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<sup>37</sup> Larry Diamond, *Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), 99-103.

<sup>38</sup> Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018), 124-130.

<sup>39</sup> John Keane, *The New Despotism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 212-216.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *The Ordinary Virtues: Moral Order in a Divided World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 145-150.

governance is characterized by a paradox: the façade of democratic practices concealing authoritarian inclinations.

These regimes, exemplified by contemporary cases such as Hungary, Turkey, and Russia, exploit institutional vulnerabilities and societal discontent to solidify their power, often masquerading under the pretext of majoritarian rule or cultural preservation.

In contrast, fascism represents a complete repudiation of democracy, grounded in totalitarianism and extreme nationalism. Historical instances such as Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy illustrate its focus on state supremacy, the suppression of dissent, and exclusionary ideologies that target minority groups. Fascist regimes entirely dismantle democratic institutions, substituting them with authoritarian frameworks that exalt the state and its leader. Propaganda, militarism, and aggressive expansionism characterize fascist governance, highlighting its totalitarian essence. Despite their distinctions, illiberal democracies and fascism share certain practices and ideologies that render them pertinent to modern political discourse. Both utilize nationalism to unify and mobilize populations, frequently at the cost of minority rights.

They employ propaganda to influence public perception and marginalize dissent, although fascist regimes typically do so with greater intensity and transparency. The similarities between the two systems are particularly clear in their mutual contempt for pluralism and liberal democratic principles, which contribute to polarization and societal fragmentation.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize the significant differences. Illiberal democracies conduct electoral processes, albeit flawed, to validate their power, whereas fascist regimes completely dismiss such processes. The methods of control also vary; illiberal democracies frequently utilize institutional frameworks to stifle opposition, while fascist regimes depend on overt violence and totalitarian governance.

Furthermore, while illiberal democracies have the potential to revert to liberal governance through institutional reforms, fascist systems require a total dismantling to restore democracy. In today's political landscape, the rise of authoritarian tendencies has sparked concerns regarding the indistinct boundaries between illiberal democracy and fascism. Leaders in certain contemporary nations display traits of both systems, such as nationalist rhetoric and weakened

institutions, yet they refrain from fully embracing fascism. This highlights the necessity of vigilance in safeguarding democratic principles and institutions.

Ultimately, the examination of illiberal democracy and fascism reveals the vulnerability of democratic systems and the imperative for strong protections to uphold individual liberties, pluralism, and the rule of law. By comprehending their historical and ideological foundations, societies can more effectively identify and counter these authoritarian inclinations, ensuring that democracy persists amid evolving challenges.

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