

ARTICLE



REVISTA
COLETA CIENTÍFICA

Kakistocratic Propensity and Elite Reproduction: Rethinking Political Selection and Accountability in the Arab Middle East

Khaled Chebli¹

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5694-6137>

Badji Mokhtar University – Annaba, Faculty of Law, Laboratory of Law, Urban Planning and Environment, Algeria

E-mail: khaled.chebli@univ-annaba.dz

Informações da publicação

ARK: [24285/RCC.v10i20.305](https://doi.org/10.24285/RCC.v10i20.305)

ISSN: 2763-6496

Keywords:

Kakistocratic propensity.

Political selection.

Elite reproduction.

Political accountability.

Constitutionalism.

Abstract:

This article examines the institutional conditions under which political systems reproduce elites whose continued political survival becomes increasingly detached from competence, performance, and effective accountability. It develops the concept of kakistocratic propensity as an institutional tendency that emerges when mechanisms of political selection and political survival become systematically decoupled from competence, performance, and accountability. Drawing on scholarship on authoritarianism, informal institutions, clientelism, political selection, and elite reproduction, the article identifies four mutually reinforcing mechanisms: distorted political selection, weak accountability, elite recycling, and the decoupling of political survival from performance. The concept is explored comparatively through the cases of Syria and Sudan, which illuminate different dimensions of elite reproduction amid political transition and fragmented authority. The article argues that constitutionalism matters in this context not because constitutional rules can guarantee the selection of competent leaders, but because institutionalized constraints can make political failure visible, consequential, and correctable. The concept therefore shifts analytical attention from the moral evaluation of rulers to the institutional conditions that allow political failure to coexist with continued access to political authority.

Introduction

The study of political power has traditionally been organized around a deceptively simple question: **who rules?** Political science has consequently devoted considerable attention to leaders, ruling coalitions, regime types, political parties, military establishments, bureaucratic elites, and the social groups that gain access to political authority. This literature has produced important explanations of authoritarian durability, democratic transition, elite bargaining, political selection, patronage, clientelism, and institutional change. Yet a significant analytical problem remains. Identifying who occupies political office does not necessarily explain why particular elites repeatedly obtain, retain, or recover access to political power, especially when their previous political performance has generated demonstrable institutional failure.

¹ Master's degree in International Humanitarian Law, Badji Mokhtar University – Annaba, Algeria (2014). PhD in Sciences, specializing in International Humanitarian Law, Badji Mokhtar University – Annaba, Algeria (2026).

The question therefore requires a shift in analytical perspective. Rather than concentrating exclusively on the identity of rulers, political analysis should also examine the institutional processes through which political elites are selected, protected, reproduced, displaced, and sometimes returned to positions of authority. The crucial question is not merely **who governs**, but **what happens when those who govern fail?**

This question becomes particularly important in political systems in which formal institutions coexist with informal networks of loyalty, patronage, factional protection, personal connections, and selective accountability. Existing scholarship has demonstrated that authoritarian institutions can contribute to regime survival, that informal institutions can structure political incentives, and that patronage and clientelism can shape political careers.[1] Research on elite influence further shows that political elites may acquire substantial influence without possessing effective mechanisms for constraining political leaders.[2] More recent research has also demonstrated that the disappearance of an authoritarian regime does not necessarily entail the disappearance of its elites, as former authoritarian elites may return to political office under new institutional arrangements.[3]

These observations suggest that political failure and elite reproduction must be studied together. A political system may formally change its constitution, government, electoral rules, or ruling coalition while preserving significant mechanisms through which political careers are reproduced. Conversely, institutional change may generate genuine mechanisms of correction by making political failure visible, consequential, and institutionally capable of producing replacement.

The present article develops the concept of **kakistocratic propensity** to capture this phenomenon. The term is deliberately distinguished from the normative and rhetorical meaning commonly associated with *kakistocracy*, namely government by supposedly “worst” or least qualified persons. The objective here is not to classify particular individuals as the “worst,” nor to construct a moral hierarchy of political competence. Such an approach would introduce subjective judgments that are difficult to operationalize comparatively. Instead, *kakistocratic propensity* is conceptualized as an **institutional condition in which mechanisms of political selection, political survival, and elite reproduction become progressively insulated from performance-based accountability and corrective mechanisms.**

The central proposition is therefore: **Kakistocratic propensity increases when political selection, political survival, and elite reproduction become progressively insulated from the performance-based and accountability-based mechanisms that would otherwise facilitate political correction.**

The concept rests on four interconnected mechanisms. First, **distorted political selection** occurs when access to political authority is disproportionately conditioned by loyalty, patronage, factional affiliation, personal networks, or protective relationships rather than by mechanisms capable of evaluating political performance. Second, **weak accountability** arises when political failure does not generate meaningful institutional consequences. Third, **elite recycling** occurs when individuals or networks associated with previous political failure remain capable of returning to influential positions after formal removal from office. Fourth, **decoupling of political survival from performance** occurs when remaining politically viable is determined more by institutional protection, coalition-building, or network loyalty than by demonstrable political results.

The article consequently advances a second concept: **institutional correction capacity**. This refers to the capacity of a political system to identify political failure, impose meaningful consequences upon responsible actors, and replace or constrain those actors through recognized institutional procedures. Correction is thus not synonymous with democratization, nor does it necessarily require a particular regime type. A system may possess elections but have weak correction mechanisms; another may possess strong bureaucratic or judicial procedures that constrain certain forms of political failure. The analytical issue is therefore the relationship between political selection and institutional correction.

Three dimensions are especially important: **visibility, consequence, and replacement**. Political failure must first become institutionally visible. It must then generate consequences that are sufficiently meaningful to alter political incentives. Finally, the institutional system must possess mechanisms capable of replacing or constraining actors whose performance has generated significant failure.

The study asks three principal questions. First, under what institutional conditions does political failure become disconnected from elite political survival? Second, how do informal institutions and elite networks contribute to the reproduction of political careers after formal political displacement? Third, under what conditions can constitutional and institutional arrangements restore the capacity for political correction?

The research advances four hypotheses. **H1**: the greater the influence of loyalty-based and patronage-based selection mechanisms over performance-based selection, the greater the propensity for political elites to reproduce independently of political performance. **H2**: weak accountability increases the probability that political failure will not translate into political exit. **H3**: elite recycling reduces the corrective effect of formal political transitions when networks associated with previous political power remain institutionally or informally influential. **H4**: constitutional and institutional arrangements that increase the visibility of failure, strengthen consequences, and facilitate meaningful replacement reduce the institutional propensity for kakistocratic reproduction.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative, mechanism-oriented comparative approach. It does not attempt to construct a numerical index of kakistocratic propensity at this stage. Such an index would risk generating false precision before the concept has been sufficiently validated across cases. Instead, the article operationalizes the concept through four mechanisms—political selection, accountability, elite recycling, and performance-survival decoupling—and examines how these mechanisms interact across different institutional environments.

Syria and Sudan are used as analytically contrasting cases rather than as equivalent examples of a single phenomenon. Syria provides a case of constitutional reconstruction following the collapse of the previous ruling order. Its transitional arrangements permit examination of whether institutional reconstruction changes the mechanisms through which political elites are selected and politically reproduced. Sudan, by contrast, illustrates the limits of the concept where political authority is deeply fragmented among competing coercive centers. The distinction is analytically important: kakistocratic propensity presupposes a sufficiently coherent institutional arena in which selection, accountability, and replacement can be observed. Where authority is radically fragmented, the primary analytical problem may instead concern institutional fragmentation and competing sovereignty.

The article is organized into two main parts. The first establishes the theoretical foundations of the concept by connecting political selection, informal institutions, elite reproduction, and institutional correction. The second develops the comparative and analytical model, applies it to Syria and Sudan, and examines the implications of constitutionalism for correcting elite reproduction. The conclusion identifies the principal theoretical implications and proposes a broader research agenda.

1- Theoretical Foundations: Political Selection, Elite Reproduction and Institutional Failure

1.1- Political Selection, Informal Institutions and Elite Reproduction

Political institutions do not merely distribute formal powers. They also structure access to political careers. Political selection is therefore an essential but frequently underexamined dimension of institutional analysis. Political regimes may differ in their constitutional structures, electoral systems, party organizations, or levels of political competition while sharing mechanisms through which political careers are disproportionately conditioned by personal loyalty, patronage, military affiliation, family connections, or factional protection.

The literature on authoritarian institutions has demonstrated that institutions within non-democratic regimes cannot simply be dismissed as meaningless façades. Legislatures, parties, elections, and bureaucratic structures may serve important functions in managing elites, distributing resources, incorporating potential opponents, and reducing uncertainty within ruling coalitions.[4] Institutions can therefore contribute to political survival even when they do not operate according to democratic expectations.

This insight is essential for the present argument because political selection and political survival are closely connected. A political system may formally permit competition while simultaneously creating strong incentives for political actors to prioritize loyalty over independent performance. The relevant question is not therefore whether formal institutions exist, but **what political incentives those institutions generate**.

Informal institutions are particularly important in this respect. Helmke and Levitsky define informal institutions as socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside officially sanctioned channels.[5] Informality should not be understood simply as the absence of institutions. Informal institutions can interact with formal rules, reinforce them, compete with them, or transform their practical consequences.

Clientelism illustrates this interaction. Patron-client relationships may create political incentives that differ significantly from those implied by formal institutional rules. Political actors may obtain access to resources, offices, protection, or political advancement through relationships of loyalty rather than through institutionalized mechanisms of performance evaluation. Contemporary research on formal institutions and neopatrimonialism similarly demonstrates that formal institutional arrangements themselves may generate incentives for patronage and particularistic political exchange.[6]

The analytical consequence is important. Clientelism should not itself be treated as equivalent to kakistocratic propensity. A clientelistic system may contain mechanisms

of political correction, while a formally impersonal system may exhibit substantial elite reproduction. Clientelism is therefore better understood as **one possible mechanism affecting political selection**, rather than as the concept that explains the entire phenomenon.

The same distinction applies to authoritarianism. Authoritarian institutions can facilitate elite reproduction, but authoritarianism and kakistocratic propensity are not synonymous. An authoritarian regime may remove poorly performing officials for reasons of regime survival. Conversely, a formally competitive system may reproduce politically unsuccessful elites through party networks, patronage, or weak accountability. The concept must therefore be capable of travelling across regime categories.

Elite reproduction is consequently broader than regime continuity. A regime can collapse while important elements of its political elite survive. Conversely, a political system may change leadership without substantially changing the networks through which political influence is distributed.

Recent research on the return of authoritarian elites following democratization reinforces this point. Former authoritarian elites may re-enter cabinets and political institutions after regime change, demonstrating that formal political transition does not automatically produce comprehensive elite renewal.[3] The implication is not that elite continuity is always undesirable or that every former officeholder should be excluded from public life. Rather, the analytical question concerns whether elite continuity reflects legitimate political competition and accumulated expertise or whether it results from mechanisms that insulate political careers from accountability.

This distinction is central to the concept of kakistocratic propensity. Elite continuity is not itself evidence of kakistocratic propensity. The relevant variable is the **relationship between continuity and accountability**.

Where political actors can survive failure because their networks protect them from meaningful consequences, the institutional system may progressively decouple political survival from performance. Where political actors can remain in public life but are subject to transparent evaluation, institutional constraints, electoral competition, judicial accountability, or parliamentary scrutiny, continuity does not necessarily indicate institutional dysfunction.

The concept therefore focuses not on the identity of elites but on the **rules and mechanisms governing their political reproduction**.

1.2- From Kakistocracy to Kakistocratic Propensity: A Mechanism-Based Concept

The term *kakistocracy* has historically been used as a normative characterization of government by supposedly inferior or incompetent persons. Its rhetorical force is obvious, but its analytical value is limited when the objective is comparative empirical research. Determining who constitutes the “worst” political actors requires a prior normative judgment concerning competence, morality, legitimacy, or public interest.

The concept of **kakistocratic propensity** addresses this problem by shifting the object of analysis from individual quality to institutional mechanisms.

A political system displays kakistocratic propensity not because its rulers can objectively be classified as inferior, but because its institutions create conditions under which political selection and survival become progressively disconnected from mechanisms capable of correcting political failure.

This distinction produces a more precise analytical framework.

Analytical dimension	Central question	Observable mechanism
Political selection	How do actors gain political access?	Loyalty, patronage, networks, competence, competition
Accountability	What happens after failure?	Scrutiny, sanction, resignation, removal, impunity
Elite recycling	What happens after formal exit?	Return, network continuity, institutional influence
Performance-survival relationship	Does political performance affect survival?	Replacement, continued office, protection
Institutional correction	Can institutions correct failure?	Visibility, consequence, replacement

Table 1. Analytical dimensions of kakistocratic propensity

Source: Author's elaboration based on the institutional and elite-reproduction literature.[4–6]

The concept can therefore be represented as a causal sequence:

Political selection → political performance → institutional evaluation → consequence → replacement or continuation → elite reproduction

The sequence becomes problematic when the middle stages are systematically weakened:

Political selection → political performance → weak evaluation → limited consequence → continued survival → elite reproduction

The second sequence does not necessarily indicate authoritarianism, corruption, or state failure. It identifies a narrower institutional phenomenon: **the insulation of political survival from corrective mechanisms**.

Four mechanisms are consequently proposed.

First mechanism: distorted political selection

Selection becomes distorted when access to political office depends disproportionately on loyalty networks, patronage, factional affiliation, inherited political capital, or protective relationships. Distortion does not mean that all selected actors are incompetent. It means that the institutional process provides insufficient mechanisms for performance-based correction.

Second mechanism: weak accountability

Political accountability becomes weak when identifiable political failure does not produce proportionate institutional consequences. Accountability may be electoral, parliamentary, judicial, administrative, party-based, or constitutional. Its precise form varies across regimes.

Third mechanism: elite recycling

Elite recycling occurs when individuals or political networks associated with previous political authority return to positions of influence without undergoing meaningful institutional evaluation. Recycling may occur after elections, constitutional transitions, revolutions, coups, or governmental reorganizations.

Again, recycling is not inherently pathological. Political experience can be valuable. The analytical concern arises when recycling neutralizes the corrective consequences of political failure.

Fourth mechanism: performance-survival decoupling

This mechanism represents the conceptual core of the argument. Political survival becomes decoupled from performance when an actor's continued political relevance depends primarily on institutional protection, factional loyalty, patronage, coercive capacity, or network position rather than on demonstrated political performance.

The four mechanisms are mutually reinforcing. Distorted selection can generate weak accountability; weak accountability can facilitate elite recycling; elite recycling can reinforce distorted selection; and the entire process can produce increasing decoupling between performance and survival.

The concept can therefore be stated more formally:

Kakistocratic propensity is the degree to which a political system permits political elites to obtain, retain, or regain political influence through mechanisms that are insufficiently conditioned by performance-based selection and meaningful institutional accountability.

This definition intentionally avoids identifying particular individuals or governments as “kakistocratic.” It instead identifies a variable institutional tendency.

The concept is consequently compatible with different regime types. It may appear under authoritarian rule, competitive authoritarianism, transitional government, weak democracy, or fragmented political orders, although its mechanisms and intensity may differ.

The distinction from related concepts is essential.

Table 2. Kakistocratic propensity and related concepts

Concept	Principal analytical concern	Distinctive feature
Authoritarianism	Political competition and constraints on rulers	Regime structure
Clientelism	Particularistic exchange	Patron-client relationships
Kleptocracy	Appropriation of public resources	Extraction for private gain
Patrimonialism	Personalization of authority	Personal rather than impersonal rule
State failure	Loss of institutional capacity	Institutional incapacity
Civil war	Organized violent conflict	Competing coercive actors
Kakistocratic propensity	Insulation of elite survival from correction	Selection-survival-reproduction mechanism

Source: Author's elaboration from the comparative politics literature.[1,4–6]

The distinction prevents conceptual inflation. Not every authoritarian system exhibits high kakistocratic propensity; not every clientelistic system produces elite recycling; not every elite transition creates institutional correction.

The concept therefore seeks to identify a particular causal mechanism rather than provide a new label for familiar political phenomena.

2- Institutional Correction, Comparative Application and Constitutional Implications

2.1- Institutional Correction and the Comparative Cases of Syria and Sudan

If kakistocratic propensity concerns the insulation of political survival from correction, the analytical counterpart is **institutional correction capacity**.

Institutional correction capacity can be defined as the capacity of a political system to:

1. identify political failure;
2. attribute institutional responsibility;
3. impose meaningful consequences; and
4. replace or constrain political actors through recognized procedures.

Three dimensions are especially important: **visibility, consequence, and replacement**.

Visibility concerns whether political failure can become institutionally observable. Parliamentary questions, investigative journalism, independent auditing, judicial proceedings, electoral competition, administrative review, and constitutional litigation can all contribute to visibility.

Consequence concerns whether identified failure produces an institutional response. A system may possess extensive information but still lack meaningful accountability if no consequences follow.

Replacement concerns whether institutions can remove or constrain political actors whose continued authority is incompatible with the correction mechanisms of the system.

The three dimensions can be expressed as follows:

Institutional correction capacity = Visibility + Consequence + Replacement

This is not proposed as a numerical index at this stage. It is an analytical framework for comparative research.

The distinction between visibility and consequence is particularly important. Political systems may possess abundant information about political failure while lacking mechanisms capable of acting upon that information. Similarly, elections may permit replacement but not necessarily provide sufficient visibility or attribution to make replacement genuinely performance-based.

The relationship can be represented in a matrix:

Visibility	Consequence	Replacement	Institutional implication
High	High	High	Strong correction capacity
High	High	Low	Accountability without effective political replacement
High	Low	High	Information without meaningful consequences
Low	Low	Low	High insulation of political survival
High	Low	Low	Exposure without correction
Low	High	High	Potentially arbitrary correction

Table 3. Dimensions of institutional correction

Source: Author's analytical framework.

This framework provides a basis for examining transitional political environments.

Syria: constitutional reconstruction and elite selection

Syria offers an analytically important case because the collapse of the previous ruling order created a process of constitutional and institutional reconstruction. The Constitutional Declaration signed on 13 March 2025 contains 44 articles and establishes a transitional constitutional framework, while retaining Islamic jurisprudence as the principal basis of legislation and expressly addressing fundamental freedoms.

The analytical question is not whether the new Syrian order should be described as kakistocratic or non-kakistocratic. Such a conclusion would require longitudinal evidence that is not yet sufficiently developed. The more precise question is whether the reconstruction of institutions changes the mechanisms of political selection, accountability, and elite reproduction.

Several developments are relevant to this question. In September 2026, Syria's new parliament voted to abolish the Assad-era Counter-Terrorism Court and nullify the legal effects of its rulings. The court had been established in 2012 and had prosecuted thousands of Syrians on terrorism-related charges. The new authorities had already taken steps toward its abolition, including a June 2025 decree dismissing 67 judges who had served in the institution.

These developments illustrate an important distinction between **institutional correction** and **elite replacement**. The dismantling of institutions associated with previous political repression can increase corrective capacity, but it does not automatically establish performance-based political selection. The two processes must be studied separately.

The Syrian case therefore permits three analytical questions.

First, does constitutional reconstruction increase the visibility of political failure and institutional abuse?

Second, does the new framework create meaningful consequences for actors associated with previous political practices?

Third, does the transformation of formal institutions change the networks through which political authority is selected and reproduced?

The answers cannot be inferred solely from constitutional texts. Formal rules provide the institutional architecture, but their practical effects depend upon implementation, political competition, administrative practices, judicial independence, and elite behavior.

This point is consistent with the broader institutional literature. Formal institutions can shape political incentives without determining political outcomes mechanically.[4] The same constitutional provision can operate differently depending on the surrounding political environment.

Syria should therefore be understood as a **case of institutional reconstruction under conditions of political transition**, rather than as evidence that the new order has already achieved a particular level of institutional correction.

The concept of kakistocratic propensity is particularly useful here because it directs attention away from the simple question of whether a new ruling coalition has replaced an old one. The more important question is whether the mechanisms of political reproduction have changed.

If new elites are selected through substantially different mechanisms, if political failure generates consequences, and if previous political networks cannot automatically

reproduce themselves, then institutional correction may be increasing. If, however, political authority merely changes hands while networks of protection and reproduction remain intact, formal transition may coexist with substantial elite continuity.

Sudan: the boundary condition of the concept

Sudan illustrates a different analytical problem. The country's conflict, which began in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, has produced competing centers of authority and extensive institutional fragmentation. In September 2026, Reuters reported that the war continued to generate major humanitarian consequences and that the two principal military actors remained central to the country's political and coercive structure.

This makes Sudan particularly important as a **boundary case**.

The concept of kakistocratic propensity presupposes an institutional arena in which political selection, political survival, accountability, and elite reproduction can be traced. Where authority is fragmented between competing coercive organizations, the problem may precede the question of elite correction. The first analytical question becomes: **who possesses effective authority within the relevant institutional arena?**

This distinction prevents the concept from being stretched beyond its explanatory limits.

In a fragmented conflict environment, political survival may depend upon military capacity, territorial control, external support, or coercive organization. Such survival mechanisms differ from the institutional reproduction of elites within a relatively coherent political order.

Sudan can therefore be used to establish a boundary condition:

Where political authority is sufficiently fragmented that no coherent institutional arena exists for selection, accountability, and replacement, kakistocratic propensity becomes a secondary or inappropriate explanatory variable.

This does not imply that elite reproduction is absent in fragmented states. Rather, elite reproduction must be analyzed through different mechanisms, including coercive control, wartime political economy, territorial governance, and competing claims to sovereignty.

The contrast between Syria and Sudan is consequently analytical rather than normative. Syria provides an opportunity to examine institutional reconstruction and the possibility of corrective mechanisms after regime transformation. Sudan demonstrates the limits of applying a selection-and-correction framework where institutional fragmentation remains central.

2.2- Constitutionalism as a Mechanism of Elite Correction

The relationship between constitutionalism and elite quality requires careful formulation. Constitutionalism does not guarantee the selection of competent rulers, nor does a constitution independently determine the quality of political elites. Its contribution lies elsewhere: constitutionalism can structure the **conditions under which political failure becomes institutionally consequential**.

This distinction is crucial.

A constitution may define powers, establish procedures, create oversight institutions, protect rights, regulate succession, and distribute authority. These mechanisms do not tell society which individuals should govern. Instead, they establish the institutional environment within which political actors can be evaluated, constrained, removed, or replaced.

Constitutionalism therefore contributes to **correction capacity**, rather than directly producing “better rulers.”

This argument also helps explain why constitutional change alone may not produce political transformation. A new constitution can reproduce old political incentives if informal networks remain powerful and if institutional enforcement remains weak. Conversely, constitutional provisions can become significant where they interact with independent institutions and political practices capable of enforcing them.

The concept of institutional correction can thus be divided into three constitutional functions.

First: constitutional visibility

Constitutionalism can make political power more visible by establishing reporting requirements, parliamentary oversight, judicial review, transparency obligations, rights protections, and institutional procedures through which governmental conduct can be challenged.

Second: constitutional consequence

A constitution can establish consequences for violations of institutional rules. These consequences may include judicial invalidation, parliamentary removal, electoral defeat, administrative sanction, constitutional litigation, or other legally recognized forms of constraint.

Third: constitutional replacement

Constitutionalism can create procedures through which political actors can be replaced without requiring systemic rupture. Regular elections, parliamentary confidence mechanisms, impeachment procedures, judicial disqualification, term limits, and other institutional arrangements can transform political failure into institutional change.

The analytical relationship can therefore be formulated as:

Constitutionalism → visibility of failure → institutional consequence → replacement or constraint → correction

Where these links are weak, constitutional rules may exist formally while producing limited corrective effects.

This also clarifies the relationship between constitutionalism and elite reproduction. Elite reproduction is not inherently incompatible with constitutionalism. Democratic and constitutional systems necessarily reproduce political careers: experienced legislators, ministers, civil servants, party leaders, and political professionals may legitimately return to office.

The critical distinction is between **reproduction under accountability** and **reproduction despite failure**.

The former is compatible with institutional continuity. The latter creates the conditions for kakistocratic propensity.

This distinction is particularly relevant to comparative constitutional analysis because constitutional systems differ in the intensity of their corrective mechanisms. Presidential systems, parliamentary systems, semi-presidential systems, transitional constitutional arrangements, and hybrid systems distribute correction mechanisms differently. No institutional architecture guarantees correction automatically.

Political parties are also important. Parties can function as mechanisms of political selection, but they can also become channels of elite reproduction. Where party advancement depends heavily upon loyalty to internal leaders, political careers may become detached from broader performance. Conversely, internal competition and transparent selection procedures can increase corrective capacity.

The same applies to legislatures. Parliaments can provide visibility through questions, investigations, debates, committees, and public scrutiny. But parliamentary institutions may have limited corrective capacity if political majorities systematically protect executive actors.

Judicial institutions present another dimension. Judicial review can constrain executive power and provide a mechanism for correcting unlawful political decisions. Yet judicial independence and institutional accessibility are essential. A formally empowered judiciary that lacks practical autonomy may have limited corrective effects.

The resulting framework therefore does not identify one institution as sufficient. Institutional correction is a **systemic property** produced through interactions among constitutional rules, political parties, legislatures, courts, administrative institutions, elections, civil society, and informal practices.

Elite recycling and the illusion of political change

Political transition often produces an apparent contradiction: institutions change while elites remain.

This phenomenon can generate what may be called the **illusion of political change**. A government may be replaced, a constitution amended, a parliament dissolved, or a new political movement established, while networks of influence remain largely intact.

Elite recycling is therefore a crucial variable in evaluating political transformation. Three forms should be distinguished:

Continuity through legitimate political competition: former officials return because voters, parties, or institutions select them under recognized procedures.

Continuity through institutional expertise: former officials remain influential because their technical knowledge or administrative experience is necessary.

Continuity through protective reproduction: former elites return because informal networks shield them from the consequences of previous political failure.

Only the third mechanism directly strengthens the case for kakistocratic propensity.

The distinction matters because simplistic theories of elite renewal may incorrectly assume that political change requires complete generational or personnel

replacement. Such an approach would confuse institutional correction with political purging.

The objective of correction is not to eliminate experienced political actors. It is to ensure that their continued political relevance is **institutionally conditional**.

A political system with strong correction capacity may therefore permit elite continuity while simultaneously preventing immunity from accountability.

Beyond authoritarianism: why the concept should not be reduced to regime type

The concept developed here deliberately avoids being reduced to authoritarianism.

Authoritarianism concerns the structure and limits of political competition and accountability. Kakistocratic propensity concerns the relationship between political selection, political performance, political survival, and correction.

The two concepts may overlap, but neither is reducible to the other.

A highly authoritarian regime may replace incompetent officials rapidly because elite discipline is necessary for regime survival. Conversely, a competitive political system may reproduce poorly performing elites through electoral machines, party patronage, political polarization, or weak institutional accountability.

The concept is therefore better understood as **cross-regime**.

This also means that kakistocratic propensity should not be treated as synonymous with democracy or democratization. Democratic institutions may strengthen correction capacity, but democratic competition can itself be distorted by clientelism, patronage, information asymmetries, or entrenched political networks.

The relevant analytical variable is institutional correction, not regime classification.

Relationship with kleptocracy and patrimonialism

The same distinction applies to kleptocracy and patrimonialism.

Kleptocracy focuses on the appropriation of public resources by political actors for private or networked benefit. Patrimonialism emphasizes personalized authority and the fusion of public and private spheres. Both may contribute to elite reproduction.

But neither concept captures the entire mechanism developed here.

A political system may reproduce elites through loyalty and patronage without large-scale resource extraction. Conversely, a kleptocratic system may still remove politically unsuccessful actors when the ruling coalition perceives them as threats.

Kakistocratic propensity therefore focuses on the **political consequences of insulated survival**, not the substantive nature of the resources exchanged.

The Arab world and the danger of cultural explanation

The concept also requires an explicit rejection of cultural essentialism.

The persistence of elite networks, patronage, authoritarian institutions, or political clientelism in parts of the Arab world should not be explained through generalized assumptions about Arab political culture. Such explanations risk transforming historically contingent institutional arrangements into supposedly permanent cultural characteristics.

Comparative political analysis should instead identify concrete mechanisms: party structures, constitutional rules, military organization, electoral incentives, bureaucratic autonomy, judicial institutions, economic resource distribution, informal networks, and historical trajectories.

The Arab world is not a single institutional system. Political trajectories differ substantially across states, and even within the same state institutions can change over time.

Syria and Sudan illustrate this point. Their contemporary institutional configurations are shaped by distinct histories of state formation, military organization, conflict, constitutional development, and political transition. Treating them as manifestations of a single regional political culture would obscure rather than explain these differences.

The same methodological caution applies to the concept of kakistocratic propensity itself. It should be treated as a hypothesis about institutional mechanisms, not as a cultural label.

Toward a research program

The concept generates a broader research agenda.

First, future research should develop longitudinal datasets tracing the careers of political elites before, during, and after major institutional transitions.

Second, researchers should distinguish between legitimate political continuity and protected political recycling.

Third, comparative studies should examine whether specific constitutional arrangements strengthen the three dimensions of correction: visibility, consequence, and replacement.

Fourth, researchers should investigate whether political failure produces different consequences under presidential, parliamentary, semi-presidential, transitional, and hybrid constitutional arrangements.

Fifth, the concept should eventually be operationalized through carefully validated indicators rather than through an arbitrary numerical index.

Sixth, future studies should examine whether kakistocratic propensity can emerge in democratic systems through party cartelization, patronage, electoral machines, or weak accountability, rather than assuming that the phenomenon belongs exclusively to authoritarian contexts.

Seventh, longitudinal research should examine the relationship between institutional failure and elite return. The crucial empirical question is not merely whether former elites return but **under what conditions they return and whether their return is conditioned by meaningful accountability.**

Finally, comparative research should examine whether institutional correction can occur without regime change. If political systems can develop mechanisms for replacing or constraining poorly performing elites without constitutional rupture, then institutional correction may be understood as a normal component of political stability rather than as an exceptional consequence of crisis.

Conclusion

The central argument of this article is that the study of political power should move beyond the conventional question of **who rules** toward the more analytically demanding question of **how political elites are reproduced and what happens when those elites fail**.

The concept of **kakistocratic propensity** provides one possible framework for making this shift. It does not seek to identify particular rulers as the “worst,” nor does it constitute a normative ranking of political competence. Instead, it identifies an institutional tendency: the progressive insulation of political selection, political survival, and elite reproduction from the mechanisms that would otherwise make political performance and accountability consequential.

Four mechanisms define this tendency: distorted political selection, weak accountability, elite recycling, and the decoupling of political survival from political performance.

The analysis also introduces the complementary concept of **institutional correction capacity**, defined through three dimensions: visibility, consequence, and replacement. Political failure must be capable of being identified; identification must generate meaningful consequences; and institutions must possess mechanisms through which responsible actors can be replaced or constrained.

This framework produces an important theoretical distinction. Elite continuity is not equivalent to institutional failure. Political experience, administrative expertise, and democratic competition may legitimately reproduce political careers. The problem arises when political survival becomes insulated from the consequences of political failure.

The same distinction applies to constitutionalism. Constitutions do not produce better rulers automatically. Their importance lies in their capacity to structure political incentives, make governmental conduct visible, establish consequences for institutional violations, and create procedures for political replacement or constraint.

The comparative discussion of Syria and Sudan demonstrates the importance of institutional context. Syria represents a case of constitutional reconstruction in which the transformation of formal institutions can be examined alongside questions of political selection and elite reproduction. The abolition of the Assad-era Counter-Terrorism Court and the nullification of its rulings illustrate the possibility of institutional correction, while also demonstrating that institutional dismantling alone does not establish a new performance-based system of political selection.

Sudan, by contrast, illustrates a boundary condition. Where political authority is fragmented among competing coercive centers, the central analytical problem may concern the existence of an institutional arena capable of producing selection, accountability, and replacement in the first place. The concept of kakistocratic propensity must therefore be applied cautiously in such contexts.

The broader implication is that political change should not be measured exclusively through constitutional replacement, leadership turnover, electoral alternation, or the emergence of new political actors. These events may represent genuine transformation, but they may also coexist with substantial continuity in the mechanisms through which elites reproduce themselves.

The more demanding test is institutional:

Can a political system identify failure? Can it impose meaningful consequences? Can it replace or constrain those responsible? And can it prevent the same mechanisms of political reproduction from simply restoring the previous pattern under a new institutional label?

These questions transform the study of political elites from a descriptive analysis of political incumbency into an analysis of institutional reproduction and correction.

The final proposition of this article is therefore:

The central problem is not whether political systems reproduce elites, but whether they possess sufficient institutional correction capacity to ensure that elite reproduction remains conditional upon accountability, political performance, and legitimate institutional selection.

Where those mechanisms are progressively weakened, kakistocratic propensity increases. Where they are strengthened, political failure becomes more visible, more consequential, and more capable of producing institutional correction.

The concept should therefore be understood not as a new regime classification but as a **researchable institutional condition**. Its value ultimately depends upon comparative testing, longitudinal evidence, and careful differentiation from authoritarianism, clientelism, kleptocracy, patrimonialism, state failure, and civil conflict.

The question with which political analysis began—**“Who rules?”**—therefore remains relevant, but it is no longer sufficient. A fuller theory of political power must also ask:

Who is selected, by what mechanisms, protected by which institutions, reproduced through which networks, and-most importantly-what happens when those who govern fail?

Citations

- [1] Gandhi, Jennifer. *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- [2] Kaire, José. “Can’t Coalesce, Can’t Constrain: Redefining Elite Influence in Non-Democracies.” *Political Science Research and Methods*, 2022. The study emphasizes that elite coordination and power-sharing do not automatically produce effective constraints on rulers.
- [3] “Autocratic Revolving Doors: The Return of Authoritarian Elites to Democratic Cabinets.” *Perspectives on Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2025. The study examines the return of former authoritarian elites to cabinet positions following democratization and its implications for accountability and elite continuity.
- [4] Svoblik, Milan W. *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- [5] Helmke, Gretchen, and Steven Levitsky. “Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda.” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2004, pp. 725–740.
- [6] Bektas, Eda. “Neopatrimonial Rule through Formal Institutions: The Case of Turkey.” *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 2025, pp. 850–871. The article examines how formal institutional arrangements can generate and sustain patron-client relationships and particularistic political incentives.
- [7] Geddes, Barbara. “What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1999, pp. 115–144.

- [8] Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- [9] Brownlee, Jason, Tarek Masoud, and Andrew Reynolds. *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- [10] Corstange, Daniel. "Kinship, Partisanship, and Patronage in Arab Elections." *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 52, 2018, pp. 58–72.
- [11] Lipa, Michał. "Informal Politics and the National Democratic Party in Egypt Before 2011." *Studia Polityczne*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2018.
- [12] Gerschewski, Johannes. "Co-optation." In *The Two Logics of Autocratic Rule*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, pp. 91–110. The chapter examines formal and informal co-optation and the mechanisms through which authoritarian elites incorporate and manage political actors.
- [13] "Regime Cycles and Political Change in African Autocracies." *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 4, 2021, pp. 415–437. The study emphasizes the importance of elite management, patronage, political competition, and institutional arrangements in explaining political continuity and change.
- [14] Abadjian, Vahram. "Kakistocracy or the True Story of What Happened in the Post-Soviet Area." *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2010, pp. 153–163.
- [15] Syrian Arab Republic. *Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic*, 13 March 2025.
- [16] Reuters. "Syria Retains Islamic Jurisprudence as Main Basis of Law, Preserves Freedoms." 13 March 2025.
- [17] Reuters. "Syria Parliament Votes to Abolish Assad-era Terrorism Court, Nullify Rulings." 16 September 2026.
- [18] Reuters. "US Withholding Sudanese Leader's Visa over Ceasefire Plan, Sources Say." 22 September 2026.
- [19] Reuters. "Foreign Support, Drones Fuel Sudan War and Possible War Crimes, UN Probe Says." 3 September 2026.

References

- Abadjian, Vahram. "Kakistocracy or the True Story of What Happened in the Post-Soviet Area." *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2010, pp. 153–163.
- Bektas, Eda. "Neopatrimonial Rule through Formal Institutions: The Case of Turkey." *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 2025, pp. 850–871.
- Brownlee, Jason, Tarek Masoud, and Andrew Reynolds. *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Corstange, Daniel. "Kinship, Partisanship, and Patronage in Arab Elections." *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 52, 2018, pp. 58–72.
- Gandhi, Jennifer. *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Geddes, Barbara. "What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1999, pp. 115–144.
- Gerschewski, Johannes. "Co-optation." In *The Two Logics of Autocratic Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, pp. 91–110.
- Helmke, Gretchen, and Steven Levitsky. "Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda." *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2004, pp. 725–740.



- Kaire, José. "Can't Coalesce, Can't Constrain: Redefining Elite Influence in Non-Democracies." *Political Science Research and Methods*, 2022.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Lipa, Michał. "Informal Politics and the National Democratic Party in Egypt Before 2011." *Studia Polityczne*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2018.
- Reuters. "Foreign Support, Drones Fuel Sudan War and Possible War Crimes, UN Probe Says." 3 September 2026.
- Reuters. "Syria Parliament Votes to Abolish Assad-era Terrorism Court, Nullify Rulings." 16 September 2026.
- Reuters. "Syria Retains Islamic Jurisprudence as Main Basis of Law, Preserves Freedoms." 13 March 2025.
- Reuters. "US Withholding Sudanese Leader's Visa over Ceasefire Plan, Sources Say." 22 September 2026.
- Svolik, Milan W. *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Syrian Arab Republic. *Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic*. 13 March 2025.