

The Development of Democracy in Developing Countries: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the development of democracy in developing countries through a qualitative approach based on literature. Democracy in developing countries exhibits diverse dynamics, ranging from institutional progress to decline due to covert authoritarian practices. By reviewing various scientific sources such as academic journals, international agency reports, and reference books, this study presents a thematic synthesis of factors influencing the democratization process. The results indicate that the weakness of political institutions, elite dominance, and socio-economic inequality are the main obstacles to democratic consolidation. However, there is also a significant role for non-state actors such as civil society organizations and the media in promoting political openness and accountability. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of a contextual, non-universal theoretical approach in understanding democratic practices in developing countries. These findings reinforce the urgency of developing a more inclusive, adaptive, and local-reality-based democratic framework. Thus, this literature study not only provides theoretical contributions to the realm of political science and governance but can also serve as a reference for formulating more sustainable policies to strengthen democracy in developing countries.

Keywords

Democracy, Developing Countries, Literature Study

Introduction

Democracy has become a political ideal widely adopted by many countries, particularly since the end of the Cold War, which marked the rise of the third wave of democratization. Developing countries have become part of this global trend by adopting democratic systems through various political mechanisms such as general elections, the establishment of representative institutions, and the enforcement of civil rights. However, despite the formal adoption of democracy, in practice,



many developing countries still face challenges in developing and sustaining the quality of democracy substantially.

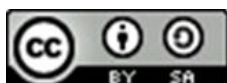
The democratization journey in developing countries is neither linear nor uniform. Some countries have made significant progress in strengthening democratic institutions, while others have stagnated, even regressing toward authoritarianism disguised as pseudo-democratic procedures. This demonstrates that the success of democracy depends not only on procedural implementation but also on the maturity of institutions, the role of civil society, and the political culture that develops within society. These dynamics make democracy a process heavily influenced by the local context of each country.

Historically, many developing countries inherited weak governance structures from colonialism and faced significant challenges in the form of internal conflict, poverty, and social inequality. These factors pose major obstacles to building a democratic and stable political system. Democracy in such environments is often threatened by political elites exploiting institutional loopholes to maintain power, weak law enforcement, and low public political participation due to distrust of state institutions.

In this context, it is crucial to understand how democracy develops through an academic approach based on literature. Numerous empirical and theoretical studies have explored the development of democracy in developing countries from various perspectives, ranging from institutionalism and modernization theory to structural approaches to transnational actors. However, these studies are often fragmented in terms of method, scope, and analytical framework. Therefore, a literature review that can systematically compile, summarize, and evaluate existing findings is necessary.

In this context, a literature review serves as an important tool for critically examining the direction of democratic development in developing countries. This study can uncover dominant patterns in democratization, including supporting and inhibiting factors, and identify research gaps that remain open for exploration. Thus, a literature review serves not only as a means of scientific documentation but also as an analytical tool to enrich academic discourse on democracy and its relevance in various developing country contexts.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that theories of democracy developed in the Western world are not always relevant in explaining political dynamics in developing countries. Many of the basic assumptions of liberal democratic theory remain untested in countries with vastly different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, literature reviews should also



examine how these theories are tested, modified, or even rejected in the practice of democratization in developing countries. This can open up space for the development of alternative, more contextual and inclusive theories of democracy.

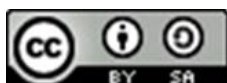
In-depth literature studies also have significant practical implications, particularly in formulating public policies and political development strategies in developing countries. Insights gained from various previous studies can provide a strong foundation for strengthening democratic institutions, increasing public political participation, and improving the quality of governance. Thus, literature reviews serve not only as a theoretical framework but also as a conceptual foundation for evidence-based policy transformation.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to comprehensively review the literature on the development of democracy in developing countries. Its primary focus is to describe key trends and findings in the study of democracy, evaluate the relevance of the theories used, and provide a synthesis that can serve as a basis for developing theories and policies that are more adaptive to the realities of developing countries. Through this literature review, it is hoped that a more holistic and contextual understanding of the complexities of democratization and the direction of its future development will emerge.

Method

This research employs a qualitative approach with a literature review as the primary strategy for data collection and analysis. This approach was chosen because it aligns with the research objectives, which focus on mapping, critically analyzing, and synthesizing various studies that have addressed the development of democracy in developing countries. The literature review allows researchers to review various previous research findings, both theoretical and empirical, to gain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the research topic.

The data sources in this study consist of relevant scientific literature, including academic journals, books, research reports, and institutional documents published by trusted institutions such as international organizations (e.g., UNDP, Freedom House, and IDEA), as well as articles from scientific databases such as JSTOR, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and ProQuest. The inclusion criteria for the literature analyzed include: (1) the focus of the study is on democracy in developing countries, (2) published within the last 15 years to maintain relevance, and (3) written by sources with academic credibility.



The data collection process was conducted using documentary analysis techniques, namely searching and selecting documents based on specific keywords such as "democracy in developing countries," "democratic consolidation," "political transition," and "democratization challenges." After that, the literature was categorized based on themes, theoretical approaches, areas of study, and the resulting main conclusions. This procedure aims to identify general patterns, common ground, differences in perspectives, and research gaps that have not been widely addressed in previous studies.

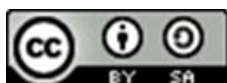
The data analysis in this study employed thematic analysis, conducted inductively. Researchers grouped the data based on recurring themes in the literature, such as institutional factors, the role of political actors, external influences, or structural barriers to democratization. Each theme was then analyzed in depth to examine how the dynamics of democracy are explained from various perspectives and how the context of developing countries influences the course of democracy.

Validity in this literature study was maintained through source triangulation, which involves comparing various literature from different sources to ensure consistency of findings. Furthermore, the researcher critically reflected on the methodological biases and theoretical assumptions contained in each literature to maintain objectivity and depth of analysis. The researcher explicitly avoided overgeneralization while emphasizing the diversity of socio-political contexts across developing countries.

Using a qualitative approach based on literature, this research does not aim to produce statistical generalizations, but rather to develop a deep and reflective conceptual understanding of the development of democracy in developing countries. The results of this method are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of democratic discourse and offer critical perspectives that can serve as references in policy formulation at the national and global levels.

Results and Discussion

The development of democracy in developing countries is a complex, dynamic political process fraught with structural and cultural challenges. Unlike developed countries with established political institutions and a deeply ingrained democratic culture, developing countries often undergo democratization under less-than-ideal conditions. This is characterized by weak government institutions, high socio-economic inequality, and the strong influence of the legacy of



colonialism that still lingers in political and legal structures. In such conditions, democracy often faces ambiguity between formal procedures and substantive realities on the ground.

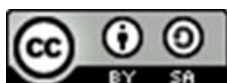
Based on the results of a literature study, it was found that one of the main challenges to democracy in developing countries is the lack of strong and independent democratic institutions. The weak rule of law, the lack of transparency in executive institutions, and the continued dominance of patronage politics hinder democratic consolidation. Much of the literature indicates that unstable institutions that are susceptible to interference by certain political forces have the potential to undermine public trust in the democratic system itself. This creates a recurring cycle of political instability in various developing countries.

In addition to institutions, the role of political elites is also a focus in a number of the reviewed literature. In many developing countries, political elites often lack a commitment to democratic values. They are more interested in maintaining power through non-democratic means such as constitutional manipulation, co-opting electoral institutions, or repressing the opposition. Low political literacy among the public also reinforces the dominance of manipulative elites. In this context, the democracy that is formed tends to be procedural, rather than substantive.

However, not all studies show pessimistic results. Several developing countries have demonstrated positive achievements in the democratization process, particularly in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Frequently identified success factors include strong civil society pressure, the role of an independent media, and openness to legal and institutional reform. Thus, democratization in developing countries is not a static process, but is heavily influenced by social dynamics and interacting internal and external pressures.

The economic aspect cannot be ignored in discussions of democracy. Several analyzed studies show a positive correlation between economic growth and democratic stability, but this relationship is not deterministic. In some cases, economic growth is controlled by elites, strengthening oligarchic structures and weakening public accountability. Therefore, it is important to understand that economic growth does not necessarily guarantee a healthy democracy, especially if it is not accompanied by equitable wealth distribution and institutional capacity building.

Literature studies also underscore the importance of non-state actors in supporting democratization. Civil society organizations, NGOs, youth groups, and the mass media play crucial roles in shaping public opinion, monitoring government policies, and promoting transparency. However, the



effectiveness of these actors depends heavily on the civil liberties space provided by the state. In countries with authoritarian tendencies, this space is often restricted through repressive regulations, the criminalization of activists, or pressure on the media.

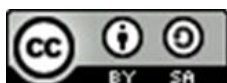
The global dimension is also an integral part of studies of democracy in developing countries. Much literature notes that the influence of international institutions, foreign aid, and global agendas such as democracy and human rights can strengthen the democratization process. However, these global interventions also risk creating dependency or even local resistance to what are perceived as "foreign values." Therefore, the success of democracy cannot simply be achieved through the adoption of external norms; it must be rooted in the needs and aspirations of local communities.

Differences in approaches to democratic theory are also a significant debate in the literature. Some researchers adopt a normative-liberal approach that emphasizes institutions and procedures, while others emphasize participatory and substantive dimensions. In the context of developing countries, the substantive approach seems more relevant because it can explain why democracy does not automatically function simply through the existence of elections or formal institutions. A quality democracy must guarantee social justice, meaningful participation, and the protection of minority rights.

There is also debate about whether democracy is an end in itself or merely a means to political stability and economic development. Some studies consider democracy an ideal state, but it is not always a priority in developing countries facing pressing challenges such as poverty, conflict, or food crises. Therefore, imposing a democratization agenda without considering the local context can lead to negative reactions or even complete failure.

In their synthesis, researchers found that the literature on democracy in developing countries is rich but scattered. Some regions, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, have received considerable research, while others, such as Oceania and North Africa, have received less academic attention. Furthermore, most studies focus on the country level, leaving local and subnational dynamics largely unexplored. This suggests there is room for further research to examine democratization from the bottom up.

The literature review also shows that although many developing countries claim to be democratic, violations of fundamental democratic principles such as freedom of expression, the right of opposition, and the independence of the judiciary persist. This phenomenon is often referred to as



"illiberal democracy," or democracy that is merely procedural. This concept is crucial in analyzing countries that hold regular elections while still restricting civil liberties.

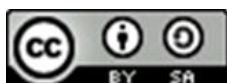
Thus, democratization in developing countries must be understood as a long-term process that cannot be separated from each country's socio-political context. This process requires patience, strengthening local capacity, and a commitment to the principles of social justice and public participation. Literature studies show that no single model of democracy fits all countries; a contextual and inclusive approach is key to success.

The results of this discussion reinforce the position that literature studies play a crucial role in synthesizing diverse approaches, findings, and perspectives to build a more comprehensive understanding of democracy. This study not only provides academic contributions but can also be used by policymakers, international organizations, and civil society in designing democracy-strengthening strategies that better suit the realities of developing countries. With its systematic scientific approach, this literature review is an important contribution to broadening insights and encouraging further research in the fields of political science and governance.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the analyzed literature, it can be concluded that the development of democracy in developing countries is a complex, non-linear process, and is heavily influenced by various contextual factors, both internal and external. Democracy in developing countries cannot be measured solely by the existence of formal institutions such as elections and parliaments, but must also be seen in terms of the quality of political participation, government accountability, and the fulfillment of civil rights. The literature study shows that institutional weaknesses, the dominance of political elites, low political literacy, and economic inequality are major challenges in democratic consolidation. However, there is also evidence that the role of civil society, independent media, and international pressure can be a driving force for improving the quality of democracy, as long as they are supported by political commitment and adequate space for civil liberties. Various theoretical approaches in the study of democracy, both normative-liberal and substantive-participatory, make important contributions to understanding the variety of forms and practices of democracy in developing countries. The findings in the literature also emphasize the importance of developing a contextual and non-universal theory of democracy, given the diversity of socio-political conditions in developing countries.

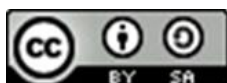
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