

Absolute Power in Pseudo-Democracy: The Illusion of Democracy in Contemporary Politics

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Abstract

The global rise of pseudo-democratic regimes reflects a paradox in contemporary politics, where democratic institutions are maintained in form but undermined in substance. This study aims to analyze how the concentration of power within pseudo-democratic systems constructs the illusion of democracy and shapes political legitimacy. The research employs a normative juridical approach with a qualitative design, utilizing secondary data from scholarly literature, legal documents, and comparative case studies across various political contexts. Data collection was conducted through a systematic literature review, while data analysis applied doctrinal and thematic approaches to identify patterns of institutional manipulation and legitimacy construction. The findings reveal that pseudo-democratic regimes rely on mechanisms such as electoral manipulation, legislative and judicial capture, media control, and patronage networks to consolidate power. These mechanisms weaken democratic principles, including the rule of law, accountability, and political equality, while maintaining a façade of democratic procedures. Furthermore, political legitimacy in such regimes shifts from participatory legitimacy toward performance-based and symbolic legitimacy. In conclusion, pseudo-democracy represents a hybrid governance model that combines democratic appearance with authoritarian substance, ultimately eroding the integrity of democratic systems while sustaining regime stability through constructed legitimacy.

Keywords: Pseudo-Democracy, Power Concentration, Political Legitimacy, Rule Of Law, Electoral Authoritarianism

1. Introduction

In contemporary political development, the global trajectory of governance increasingly reflects a paradoxical phenomenon in which democratic institutions persist in form while eroding in substance. Many regimes today maintain the outward features of democracy such as elections, constitutions, political parties, and judicial systems yet systematically undermine the constraints that define genuine democratic governance. This condition is widely conceptualized as *pseudo-democracy* or *electoral authoritarianism*, where democratic procedures are preserved primarily as instruments of legitimacy rather than mechanisms of accountability. The persistence of such regimes signals a critical transformation in modern politics, where the distinction between democracy and authoritarianism becomes increasingly blurred. Rather than abrupt regime change, many states experience gradual democratic backsliding, resulting in hybrid systems that combine formal democratic structures with deeply entrenched power concentration. This phenomenon raises fundamental questions about the nature of political legitimacy, the resilience of democratic norms, and the capacity of institutions to restrain power in contemporary contexts.



Empirical evidence demonstrates that the rise of pseudo-democratic regimes is not confined to a specific region but represents a global trend. In post-Soviet contexts, for instance, many “new democracies” have evolved into systems characterized by competitive oligarchy and neo-patrimonialism, where political and economic elites dominate institutional structures through patronage networks and strategic manipulation (Shapovalenko, 2021). These regimes maintain the façade of democratic governance while effectively consolidating power among a narrow group of actors. Similarly, the global proliferation of electoral autocracies highlights how elections traditionally regarded as the cornerstone of democracy can be repurposed as tools for legitimizing authoritarian rule. In such systems, leaders derive authority from electoral processes that are formally competitive but substantively manipulated, particularly in societies experiencing economic instability or political crisis, where demands for strong leadership often outweigh commitments to democratic norms (Matovski, 2021).

The trajectory toward pseudo-democracy frequently follows a pattern of gradual institutional erosion rather than overt authoritarian takeover. Studies indicate that many regimes transition through phases of competitive authoritarianism and hybrid governance, in which multiparty elections and constitutional frameworks remain intact but are systematically weakened (Merkel & Lührmann, 2021; Riedl et al., 2024; De Sa E Silva, 2022). In these contexts, democratic institutions are not dismantled but reconfigured to serve the interests of ruling elites. Mechanisms such as democratic authoritarianism illustrate how institutions that appear democratic—such as parliaments, courts, and media—are strategically mobilized to expand executive power and suppress opposition (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022; De Sa E Silva, 2022). This transformation creates a form of governance that is neither fully democratic nor openly authoritarian, but rather a hybrid system in which the boundaries between legality and manipulation are increasingly obscured.

A central feature of pseudo-democracy is the concentration of power and the systematic erosion of democratic principles. In several contemporary cases, including Hungary and Turkey, ruling parties have utilized legislative supermajorities to redesign institutional frameworks, consolidate control over state resources, and entrench their dominance (Enyedi & Mikola, 2024; Somer, 2024). Legislative capture becomes a key mechanism through which democratic checks and balances are neutralized, allowing governing elites to reshape legal and constitutional arrangements in their favor. This process is often accompanied by the emergence of pseudo-multiparty systems, where opposition parties exist but operate under significant constraints, and political competition is carefully managed rather than genuinely contested (Nisnevich, 2023). The result is a political environment in which democratic institutions function primarily as instruments of control rather than platforms for representation.

In addition to institutional manipulation, pseudo-democratic regimes frequently rely on the strategic use of law as a tool of governance. The concept of *autocratic legalism* captures how legal frameworks are employed to legitimize authoritarian practices while maintaining the appearance of legality (De Sa E Silva, 2022). Rather than overtly violating democratic norms, these regimes enact legal reforms that gradually weaken accountability mechanisms, restrict civil liberties, and expand executive authority. Courts, which are traditionally viewed as guardians of constitutional order, are often subject to processes of purging, packing, or co-optation, transforming them into instruments for enforcing political

agendas and suppressing dissent (Aguilar, 2023; Williams & Hanson, 2022). Through these mechanisms, the rule of law is not abolished but reinterpreted in ways that serve the interests of those in power, thereby reinforcing the illusion of democratic governance.

The interplay between institutional façade and substantive control produces what can be described as the illusion of democracy. Pseudo-democratic regimes actively simulate democratic processes to construct narratives of legitimacy, both domestically and internationally. Elections, for example, are used not only to select leaders but also to demonstrate popular support, even when the conditions of competition are fundamentally unequal (Matovski, 2021). Similarly, the existence of constitutions and legal frameworks allows regimes to claim adherence to democratic norms, despite systematic violations of those norms in practice (Nisnevich, 2023; Shapovalenko, 2021). This performative dimension of democracy complicates efforts to assess regime legitimacy, as formal indicators of democracy may coexist with deeply authoritarian practices.

Importantly, the illusion of democracy also affects public perceptions of legitimacy. In many cases, pseudo-democratic regimes succeed in securing a degree of genuine popular support by framing themselves as providers of stability, order, and economic development. This is particularly evident in contexts where democratic institutions are associated with inefficiency or instability, leading citizens to prioritize strong leadership over procedural accountability (Matovski, 2021). As a result, elections become a key source of legitimation, even when they are manipulated, creating a paradox in which authoritarian rule is reinforced through ostensibly democratic means. Moreover, the use of repression and manipulation behind a democratic façade enables regimes to deflect criticism and maintain international recognition as democratic states, thereby complicating external responses and interventions (Merkel & Lührmann, 2021; Steinfeld, 2025; Riedl et al., 2024).

Despite the growing body of literature on democratic backsliding and hybrid regimes, significant gaps remain in understanding the conceptual and empirical dimensions of pseudo-democracy. Existing studies tend to focus on specific aspects of the phenomenon, such as electoral manipulation, legal reforms, or media control, without fully integrating these elements into a comprehensive framework that explains how the illusion of democracy is constructed and sustained. Furthermore, much of the literature emphasizes institutional dynamics while paying less attention to the interaction between power concentration and political legitimacy. In particular, there is a need for deeper analysis of how pseudo-democratic regimes simultaneously rely on and undermine democratic legitimacy, creating a paradoxical form of governance that is both stable and inherently fragile. This gap is especially relevant in contemporary contexts where democratic decline occurs incrementally and is often obscured by formal adherence to democratic procedures.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative approach to analyzing pseudo-democracy as a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses institutional design, legal strategy, and legitimacy construction. By examining the interplay between power concentration and the illusion of democracy, this research seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts of democratic backsliding and provide a more nuanced understanding of how pseudo-democratic regimes operate in practice. Unlike previous studies that treat legitimacy as a secondary outcome, this research positions legitimacy as a central analytical lens, exploring how it is produced, contested, and sustained within hybrid political systems. In doing so, the study contributes to the development of a more comprehensive theoretical

framework for analyzing contemporary political regimes that defy traditional categorizations of democracy and authoritarianism.

Based on the foregoing discussion, the primary objective of this study is to analyze how the concentration of power within pseudo-democratic regimes constructs and sustains the illusion of democracy while shaping political legitimacy in contemporary political practices. This objective is pursued by examining the mechanisms through which democratic institutions are manipulated, the role of legal and institutional strategies in consolidating power, and the ways in which legitimacy is generated and maintained despite the erosion of democratic principles. Through this analysis, the study aims to provide critical insights into the evolving nature of political authority in the modern era and to contribute to ongoing debates on the future of democracy in a rapidly changing global landscape.

2. Methods

This study employs a **normative juridical approach** combined with a qualitative analytical design to examine the phenomenon of pseudo-democracy, the concentration of power, and the construction of political legitimacy in contemporary political practices. The research relies on **secondary data sources**, consisting of primary legal materials such as constitutions, statutory regulations, and institutional frameworks related to democratic governance, as well as secondary materials including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and policy reports discussing electoral authoritarianism, hybrid regimes, and autocratic legalism. Data collection is conducted through a **systematic literature review**, where relevant scholarly works are identified, categorized, and critically selected based on their relevance, methodological rigor, and contribution to the topic. Additionally, **comparative case documentation** is utilized to examine illustrative examples from different political contexts—such as post-Soviet states, Hungary, Turkey, and other hybrid regimes—to capture variations in how pseudo-democratic systems emerge and operate. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of both the structural and contextual dimensions of the phenomenon.

The data analysis is carried out using a combination of **doctrinal analysis and thematic qualitative analysis**. Doctrinal analysis is applied to interpret key concepts such as democracy, rule of law, separation of powers, and political legitimacy, with a focus on how these principles are redefined or manipulated within pseudo-democratic systems. Meanwhile, thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns, mechanisms, and narratives related to power concentration, institutional manipulation, and the construction of democratic illusions across the selected literature and case studies. The analytical process involves data reduction, coding, categorization, and interpretive synthesis to generate coherent and critical insights. Furthermore, a **comparative analytical framework** is employed to examine similarities and differences across various regimes, highlighting how socio-political contexts influence the interaction between formal democratic structures and substantive authoritarian practices. Through this integrated analytical strategy, the study aims to provide a systematic and in-depth understanding of how pseudo-democracy functions and how it shapes political legitimacy in contemporary governance.

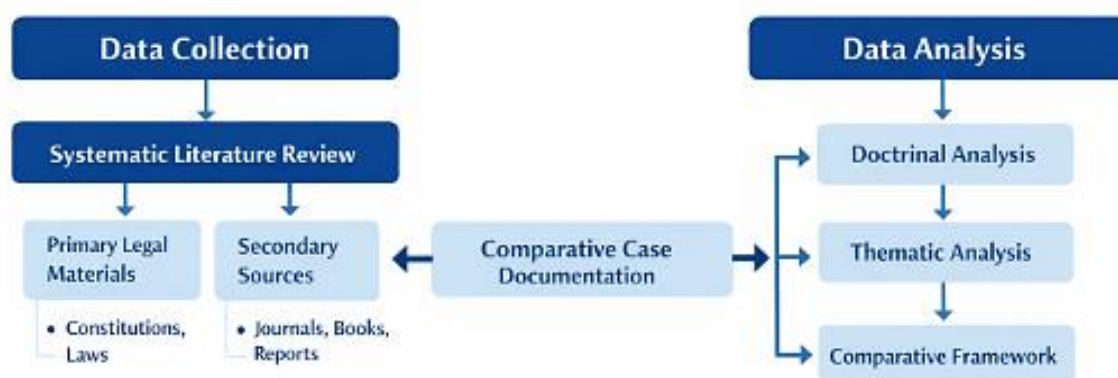


Figure 1. Diagram Conceptual Research

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the qualitative doctrinal and thematic analysis conducted across various comparative political contexts, this study identifies core patterns that explain how pseudo-democratic regimes operate through power concentration mechanisms while simultaneously constructing and maintaining political legitimacy. The findings are organized to illustrate the relationship between institutional manipulation, forms of power consolidation, and their implications for democratic principles and legitimacy.

Table 1. Mechanisms of Power Concentration and the Construction of Legitimacy in Pseudo-Democratic Regimes

No	Mechanism of Power Concentration	Form of Implementation	Impact on Democratic Principles	Effect on Political Legitimacy
1	Electoral Manipulation	Controlled elections, unequal competition, media bias	Weakens free and fair elections	Creates procedural legitimacy through formal voting
2	Legislative Capture	Dominant party control, supermajority, rubber-stamp parliament	Erodes checks and balances	Legitimizes policies through formal institutional approval
3	Judicial Control	Court packing, purging judges, politicized rulings	Undermines judicial independence	Provides legal justification for authoritarian actions
4	Media Domination	State-controlled or co-opted media, suppression of dissent	Limits freedom of expression and public discourse	Shapes public perception and manufactured consent
5	Autocratic Legalism	Use of law to justify power expansion and restrict opposition	Distorts rule of law into a political tool	Projects image of legality and constitutional order
6	Patronage and Oligarchic Networks	Distribution of resources to elites and loyal groups	Reduces political equality and fairness	Builds loyalty-based legitimacy among key actors

7	Symbolic Democratic Institutions	Maintenance of elections, parties, and constitutions as façade	Preserves form but not substance of democracy	Sustains illusion of democracy domestically and internationally
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The interpretation of the table indicates that pseudo-democratic regimes rely on a systematic combination of institutional manipulation and symbolic legitimacy construction to sustain power. While democratic structures such as elections, legislatures, and courts remain formally intact, their functions are strategically altered to serve the interests of ruling elites. This creates a dual reality in which democratic procedures continue to exist, but their substantive meaning is significantly weakened. As a result, political legitimacy in pseudo-democratic systems is not derived from genuine public participation or accountability, but rather from the successful simulation of democratic norms. This dynamic reinforces the illusion of democracy while simultaneously masking the concentration of power, ultimately challenging the integrity of democratic governance and blurring the boundary between democracy and authoritarianism.

Discussion

The findings of this study, derived from a qualitative doctrinal and thematic analysis, demonstrate that *pseudo-democracy* in contemporary political systems is characterized by a systematic concentration of power masked by the preservation of democratic institutions. In addressing the research objective—namely, to analyze how the concentration of power within pseudo-democratic regimes constructs and sustains the illusion of democracy while shaping political legitimacy—this discussion reveals that pseudo-democracy is not merely a transitional phase between democracy and authoritarianism, but rather a stable and adaptive form of governance. It combines formal democratic procedures with substantive authoritarian practices, allowing regimes to maintain legitimacy while consolidating near-absolute power.

One of the most defining features of pseudo-democracy is the existence of democratic institutions without genuine political competition. As indicated in the findings table, mechanisms such as electoral manipulation and media domination play a crucial role in ensuring that elections, while formally conducted, do not provide a real opportunity for opposition forces to gain power. Empirical studies confirm that many regimes maintain the appearance of pluralism—through the existence of opposition parties, civil society organizations, and electoral processes—while systematically undermining their effectiveness. In post-Soviet contexts, for example, regimes operate under a competitive-oligarchic structure, where political and economic elites dominate institutions and limit meaningful competition through patronage and resource control (Shapovalenko, 2021). Similarly, other studies highlight how electoral rules, media access, and state resources are manipulated to create an uneven playing field, effectively neutralizing opposition while preserving the façade of democratic legitimacy (Prokop, 2024; Bërdufi & Krasniqi, 2022; Yoel, 2022).

This dynamic illustrates that elections in pseudo-democratic regimes serve less as mechanisms of representation and more as instruments of legitimation. Rather than enabling citizens to freely choose their leaders, elections are carefully managed to produce predictable outcomes that reinforce the authority of ruling elites. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of *electoral authoritarianism*, where regimes derive legitimacy from electoral processes that are procedurally valid but substantively flawed. As a result, the presence of elections

contributes to the illusion of democracy while masking the underlying concentration of power. This finding directly supports the argument that pseudo-democracy operates through the strategic use of democratic symbols to legitimize authoritarian governance.

The concentration of power within pseudo-democratic regimes is further reinforced through the subordination of key institutions, including legislatures, judiciaries, media, and civil society. The findings indicate that legislative capture, judicial control, and media domination are central mechanisms through which ruling elites consolidate authority. In several contemporary cases, such as Hungary and Turkey, ruling parties have utilized parliamentary supermajorities to redesign institutional frameworks, weaken checks and balances, and entrench their dominance (Ekiert & Dasanaike, 2024; Yesilada, 2023). Legislative institutions, which are traditionally intended to serve as arenas of representation and oversight, are transformed into instruments of executive power, often functioning as “rubber-stamp” bodies that legitimize government policies without meaningful scrutiny.

Similarly, the judiciary is frequently subjected to processes of politicization, including court packing, purging of independent judges, and the appointment of loyalists. These practices undermine judicial independence and transform courts into tools for enforcing political agendas. Research demonstrates that such judicial manipulation is a key component of *authoritarian legalism*, where legal frameworks are used to justify and institutionalize power concentration while maintaining the appearance of legality (Serra et al., 2025). In this context, the rule of law is not eliminated but redefined to serve the interests of those in power, thereby reinforcing the illusion of democratic governance.

Media control constitutes another critical dimension of power concentration in pseudo-democratic regimes. By co-opting or suppressing independent media, governments are able to shape public discourse, control information flows, and marginalize dissenting voices. This creates a political environment in which citizens are exposed primarily to narratives that reinforce the legitimacy of the ruling regime. Studies indicate that the combination of media domination and disinformation contributes to the erosion of democratic norms and the weakening of public accountability (Nord et al., 2025). In such contexts, the public sphere becomes increasingly constrained, limiting the capacity of citizens to engage in informed political participation.

Beyond institutional manipulation, pseudo-democratic regimes often rely on patronage networks and oligarchic structures to sustain power. The findings highlight that patron–client relationships and the distribution of resources to loyal elites are central mechanisms of governance in such systems. In post-Soviet and other hybrid regimes, political authority is closely tied to economic power, with oligarchic groups playing a significant role in shaping policy and maintaining regime stability (Shapovalenko, 2021; Bërdufi & Krasniqi, 2022). This form of governance undermines the principle of political equality, as access to power and resources is determined by loyalty rather than democratic participation. At the same time, patronage systems contribute to regime durability by creating networks of dependency that reinforce elite cohesion and limit opposition.

The construction of the illusion of democracy is further facilitated by the strategic use of democratic discourse and populist narratives. The concept of *democratic authoritarianism* illustrates how regimes employ democratic language—such as “the will of the people” and “national sovereignty”—to justify the expansion of executive power (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022). Populist leaders, in particular, often claim to represent the authentic voice of the जनमत,

thereby delegitimizing opposition and undermining pluralism. Research shows that anti-pluralist rhetoric is a strong predictor of democratic erosion, as it enables leaders to justify the exclusion of dissenting voices and the concentration of power (Huber & Pisciotta, 2022; Medzihorský & Lindberg, 2023).

This dynamic is closely related to the phenomenon of *dictatorial drift* and gradual autocratization. Rather than dismantling democratic institutions outright, pseudo-democratic regimes engage in incremental changes that cumulatively weaken democratic norms and practices. These changes may include restrictions on media freedom, limitations on civil society, and the gradual erosion of electoral integrity. Over time, such processes result in the transformation of democratic systems into more repressive forms of governance, while maintaining the appearance of continuity (Ekiert & Dasanaike, 2024; Serra et al., 2025; Nord et al., 2025). The gradual nature of this transformation makes it more difficult for both domestic and international actors to respond effectively, as each individual change may appear relatively minor or legally justified.

The implications of these dynamics for the rule of law are profound. As indicated in the findings, pseudo-democratic regimes systematically weaken the rule of law by subordinating legal institutions to political authority. The use of *autocratic legalism* allows regimes to enact laws that restrict civil liberties, limit political competition, and consolidate executive power, all while maintaining a veneer of legality. Studies demonstrate that such practices erode fundamental principles of the rule of law, including equality before the law, accountability, and the protection of individual rights (Mittiga, 2021; Serra et al., 2025). In this context, the law becomes an instrument of power rather than a constraint upon it, undermining the normative foundations of democratic governance.

Moreover, the erosion of the rule of law is often accompanied by the expansion of executive authority and the weakening of institutional checks and balances. In pseudo-democratic regimes, the executive branch frequently dominates other branches of government, reducing their capacity to provide oversight and accountability. This concentration of power increases the risk of abuse and corruption, further undermining public trust in political institutions. As a result, the formal existence of legal frameworks does not necessarily translate into effective protection of rights or accountability of power.

The impact of pseudo-democracy on political legitimacy is equally complex. On one hand, the preservation of democratic institutions and procedures allows regimes to claim legitimacy based on formal adherence to democratic norms. Elections, constitutions, and legal frameworks provide a basis for both domestic and international recognition, even when their substantive content is compromised. On the other hand, the manipulation of these institutions raises questions about the authenticity of such legitimacy. In many cases, pseudo-democratic regimes shift the basis of legitimacy from democratic participation to performance-based criteria, such as economic growth, stability, or security (Kutlay & Öniş, 2022; Helms, 2022).

This shift toward *performance legitimacy* reflects a broader transformation in the relationship between citizens and the state. Rather than evaluating governments based on procedural fairness and accountability, citizens may prioritize outcomes such as economic development or social order. In contexts characterized by political instability or economic crisis, this can lead to increased support for strong leaders who promise effective governance, even at the expense of democratic norms (Mittiga, 2021). Consequently, pseudo-democratic

regimes are able to maintain a degree of popular support despite the erosion of democratic principles.

However, this form of legitimacy is inherently fragile, as it depends on the regime's ability to deliver tangible benefits. When economic conditions deteriorate or governance failures become apparent, the lack of genuine democratic accountability may exacerbate public dissatisfaction and instability. Furthermore, the reliance on manipulated institutions and controlled information limits the capacity of citizens to express dissent and hold leaders accountable, potentially leading to the accumulation of unresolved grievances.

In conclusion, the discussion highlights that pseudo-democracy represents a sophisticated form of governance that combines the outward appearance of democracy with the substantive realities of power concentration. Through mechanisms such as electoral manipulation, institutional capture, media control, and patronage networks, regimes are able to construct and sustain the illusion of democracy while consolidating near-absolute power. These dynamics have significant implications for both the rule of law and political legitimacy, as they undermine democratic principles while simultaneously providing a basis for regime stability. Ultimately, the findings suggest that addressing the challenges posed by pseudo-democracy requires not only institutional reforms but also a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between power, legitimacy, and democratic norms in contemporary politics.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that pseudo-democratic regimes construct and sustain the illusion of democracy through systematic power concentration embedded within formally democratic institutions. By manipulating elections, capturing legislatures and judiciaries, controlling media, and utilizing legal frameworks as instruments of authority, ruling elites are able to maintain the appearance of democratic governance while exercising near-absolute power. This dynamic enables regimes to generate political legitimacy not through genuine public participation and accountability, but through procedural symbolism and performance-based narratives such as stability and economic outcomes. Consequently, the study finds that pseudo-democracy represents a hybrid yet stable form of governance in which democratic forms coexist with authoritarian substance, ultimately weakening the rule of law and reshaping the foundations of political legitimacy in contemporary politics.

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