When the Emergency Doesn't End

How democracies give power back, or don't.

Nevo Goor · The Governance Atlas · August 2026

A reading of one pattern that runs across many countries, and the single question that separates a hard season from a lasting change. Not a country reading, and not a forecast.



The interesting question is never whether a democracy takes emergency power, it is whether the empty chamber fills again once the pressure lifts.

I built the Governance Atlas to read the condition of a democracy one country at a time. This piece does something else. It is not a country reading and it is not a forecast. It is about one pattern I keep meeting across the countries I look at, and about the single question I have learned to ask when I see it.

The pattern is simple to state. A democracy comes under real pressure, from a disaster, a threat to its people, or a slower emergency that never quite ends, and it gathers its power inward. Decisions that used to be slow and argued over get made quickly, and made alone. This by itself is not the failure. A system under real strain pulls its power together, and often that is the right thing to do. The interesting question is never whether a democracy takes emergency power. It is whether it hands that power back once the pressure lifts.

01 / THE ASYMMETRY

The asymmetry I keep seeing

Think of the power as something borrowed. It is easy to lend in a hard winter, and hard to ask back once the borrower has grown used to the warmth. Taking it and returning it are not mirror images.

The threshold to take is low, because a real crisis writes the justification for you. The threshold to return is high, because the power is useful, and the next crisis is always plausible.

The offices that would ask for it back are usually the ones already pushed aside. Political scientists have a plain name for one version of this. They call it the **ratchet effect**: each use sets the next baseline a little lower, no matter whose hand is on the lever. The Varieties of Democracy project has traced how states of emergency, declared and then quietly extended, have kept company with democratic decline in country after country.

I want to be careful here. The emergency does not cause the decline. It is only the room where a strain that could have been undone becomes one that cannot.

02 / THE PRESSURES

Three pressures, one test

Three pressures are pushing in this direction right now, and they look unrelated. They are not, at least not in the way that matters.



Not the weather, the way of governing the weather invites. When the once-in-a-lifetime event arrives every year, a government starts to live in a standing emergency.

First, climate. Not the weather. The way of governing that the weather invites. The research on democracy and climate names this exact tension: institutions built to be slow, to argue, to be undone, sitting across from a demand to act fast and to keep acting. International IDEA and the peer-reviewed literature treat this as a real tension, and as an association, not a settled cause. I read it the same way. Documented, contested, and on the list.

Second, security. The oldest reason to hand power over, and the most reliable reason it outstays the danger.

Third, the information space, and the newer strain that synthetic media puts on it around elections. Here I have to slow down, because the evidence is thinner

than the noise. The careful work so far finds that the ability to flood a public with false material is real and growing, while the measured effect on how people actually vote stays uncertain. So I keep this one where the evidence keeps it: a pressure on a democracy's sight, its ability to see itself clearly, and not a proven mover of outcomes.

Different pressures. One test. Does the emergency footing get stood down, or does it move in and stay?

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03 / THE READINGS

What the readings show so far

This is where the country work earns its place. Across the readings I have published, that one distinction does most of the work. Four readings are not a dataset, and I will not dress them as one. They are the same question, asked the same way, four times. The sameness is the point.

United States

ACUTE STRESS

Reads in 2026 as a democracy under acute stress, strained in several places at once, and still holding the reversible form, competitive elections and courts that still rule against the executive, under pressure rather than rewritten. The leverage there is ordinary. Ordinary is not small.

Israel

WATCH CLOSELY

Reads as a democracy under sustained constitutional pressure, the only reading in the set so far to show strain at two of the framework's hard floors rather than one. Nearer the line where the reversible turns into the entrenched: the reason to watch it, and the reason not to declare it either way.

Brazil

ACTIVE REPAIR

Reads as a democracy under active repair, the movement running toward restoring limits rather than removing them. The case that keeps the story

Peru

OPEN CASE

Published as an inaugural snapshot, a lighter reading that waits for the full diagnostic. Included here as an open case and nothing more.

honest. The direction of travel can turn.	

04 / THE WATCH

What I am actually watching

Because this is a reading of condition and not a forecast, the honest form of it is a short list of things to watch, and every one can be checked against the public record:

- → Whether emergency declarations end on the day they promised, or quietly renew.
- → Whether the sunset clause is honoured, or moved.
- → Whether the courts, the legislatures, and the press that were pushed aside find their footing again, or stay smaller than before.

None of this asks me to predict. It asks me to keep reading, and to say out loud when one of them turns.

05 / THE LIMITS

The honest limits

This is one instrument's reading, carried up from single countries to a shared pattern. The links I lean on, climate to governance, emergency to erosion, live in the research as associations and comparisons, not as proven causes, and I have tried to say so every time I lean. Reasonable people will weigh these signals differently. I have kept the sources named so you can argue with a line and not with a mood.

I built this to be argued with. I want the pushback. That is the point.

STAGE 0 DISCLOSURE

The Governance Atlas is a structured analytical framework calibrated across a limited case set. It produces evidence-based governance assessments using public indicators and a documented method. It is not yet externally validated as a predictive instrument. No claim is made regarding accuracy, sensitivity, specificity, or predictive value. It is not investment advice, legal due diligence, political endorsement, or a substitute for expert country-specific analysis.

How this works. The method behind these readings, why these twelve functions and four floors, and what the Atlas can and cannot claim, is documented on the Governance Atlas site under *How this works*. The country readings referenced above, each with its full table and sources, live on the Governance Atlas.

SOURCES

V-Dem Democratic Emergency Powers dataset (Rooney, *Research and Politics*, 2019); V-Dem, *Autocratization by Decree: States of Emergency*; Israel Democracy Institute, *Autocratization and States of Emergency in Comparative Perspective*; Miller Center, *The Ratchet Effect: Presidents, Emergency Powers, and the Crisis of Institutional Faith* (2025); International IDEA, *Democracy and the Challenge of Climate Change*; Democracy-climate nexus review, *Climate Policy* (2023).