

Anti-Corruption Helpdesk Answer

Corruption risks in the concentration of power in the executive

Author: Maria Dominguez, tihelpdesk@transparency.org

Reviewers: Caitlin Maslen, Jamie Bergin, Gabriela Camacho, Buren Mandakhbileg, Matthew Jenkins (TI)

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In recent decades, many countries have experienced a growing concentration of power in the executive branch. While constitutions typically grant executives significant powers, democratic systems rely on horizontal and vertical accountability mechanisms to prevent abuses. Executive aggrandisement occurs when democratically elected leaders gradually expand their authority beyond constitutional limits while weakening checks and balances. This process is usually associated with democratic backsliding.

This Helpdesk Answer provides an overview of how executive aggrandisement also increases corruption risks. It identifies key pathways through which concentrated executive authority weakens horizontal and vertical accountability, promotes political patronage and favouritism, facilitates clientelistic strategies, and increases opportunities for conflicts of interest and personal enrichment. Drawing on examples around different political systems, the paper also outlines mitigation strategies aimed at reinforcing institutional resilience. These include safeguarding judicial and oversight independence, ensuring meaningful electoral competition and alternation of power, strengthening meritocratic bureaucracies capable of resisting political capture, and protecting civil society and media freedoms as essential mechanisms of accountability.

Query

Could you please provide an overview of the corruption risks associated with the concentration of power in the executive branch?

Main points

- In recent decades, different political systems have experienced an increasing concentration of authority in the executive branch, accompanied by the erosion of institutional checks and balances and the weakening of accountability mechanisms.
- While this phenomenon, also known as executive aggrandisement, is mostly associated with democratic backsliding and institutional decay, it also creates acute corruption risks.
- Weakening horizontal and vertical accountability mechanisms, constrained media reporting on corruption, political patronage and favouritism, and personal enrichment are the main corruption risk factors associated with executive aggrandisement.
- Guaranteeing the stability of democratic and oversight institutions, ensuring electoral competition, promoting bureaucratic resistance and protecting the civil space are mitigating measures against these risks.
- As shown by examples from Benin, Colombia, Ecuador and South Korea, efforts by horizontal and vertical accountability actors to hold the executive to account can be complementary and mutually beneficial. Informal alliances between state and non-state accountability actors can provide opponents of executive aggrandisement with institutional access to formal accountability mechanisms to demand explanations or impose penalties

on the executive, while also lending oversight institutions popular legitimacy and support.

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Introduction

Constitutions¹ typically allocate a wide range of powers to the executive branch, including administrative, military, budgetary, and legislative competences. In both presidential and parliamentary systems, the chief of the executive may exercise significant constitutional authority. For example, the executive may have the power to initiate and veto legislation (e.g. in Mexico)², nominate members of the supreme or constitutional court (South Korea)³, form the cabinet (India)⁴, prepare and execute the budget (Brazil)⁵, conduct foreign affairs (the United States)⁶, issue executive orders (the United States)⁷, dissolve the legislature under determined conditions (France)⁸, and declare states of emergency (Poland)⁹.

These powers are constitutionally conferred and, in themselves, are compatible with democracy (Cheibub, 2007: 24) and their existence does not inherently generate risks of corruption. The concentration of power in the executive may even generate benefits in terms of decision-making efficiency. For example, when authority is centralised, transaction costs tend to be lower, and policy expertise can be more effectively drawn from the bureaucracy (Epstein & O'Halloran, 1999). By contrast, legislatures are typically more fragmented, reflecting diverse local and partisan interests, which increases the transaction costs associated with reaching consensus – particularly in multiparty coalition settings (Strøm & Müller, 2014).

A constitution that grants the head of government¹⁰ strong constitutional powers does not necessarily lead the head of government to usurp legislative, judicial or administrative powers for private gain (Cheibub, 2008). Nevertheless, constitutional theory generally expects heads of government to operate within a broader constitutional framework designed to prevent the excessive concentration of authority or the abuse of power for private gain (Da Ros & Taylor, 2021). Systems of checks and balances distribute responsibilities among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, enabling each to oversee and constrain the others (Madison, 1961).

¹ Not all countries have constitutions. Some allocate powers through legislation, judicial decisions, and/or royal or executive powers.

² Article 72. [Mexican Constitution](#).

³ Article 111. [South Korean Constitution](#).

⁴ Article 75. [Indian Constitution](#).

⁵ Article 61. [Brazilian Constitution](#).

⁶ Article 2. [USA Constitution](#).

⁷ Article 2. [USA Constitution](#).

⁸ Article 12. [French Constitution](#).

⁹ Article 229. [Polish Constitution](#).

¹⁰ Since executive aggrandisement can happen in different political systems, this Helpdesk Answer uses the term head of government instead of president unless discussing specific cases.

These systems of checks and balances are codified in legal tools such as judicial review, vetoes, impeachment, overturning executive orders, and others, which are part of the system referred to as horizontal accountability¹¹ (O'Donnell, 1998). Furthermore, a predictable institutional environment, enforceable norms for individuals in positions of power, and the creation of veto institutions are also intended to prevent the concentration of powers in one single person or branch (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962).

Nevertheless, in recent years, several countries have experienced expansions of executive authority that go beyond the exercise of constitutionally conferred powers. In some cases, this has resulted in abuses. This development has been described as “executive aggrandisement” (Bermeo, 2016; Khaitan, 2019). This refers to the, usually gradual, concentration and enlargement of power within the executive branch, typically accompanied by the weakening of institutional checks and balances designed to ensure accountability (Bermeo, 2016; Khaitan, 2019; Laebens, 2023). In this sense, it can be defined as:

“An executive power-grab, whereby a democratically elected incumbent attempts to disable checks on their powers gradually and largely through institutional means... An effort by a democratically elected executive leader to weaken both vertical and horizontal accountability without fully suspending democratic institutions” (Laebens, 2023: 4).

Executive aggrandisement is often associated with democratic backsliding (Khaitan, 2019: 8). Haggard & Kaufman (2021: 83) describe how the increase of executive authority can restrict political competition and narrow fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression, association, and media independence, which are essential to the democratic systems.

In this sense, executive aggrandisement had been largely studied from the point of view of the quality of democratic institutions, since democratically elected incumbents threaten these institutions “from within” (Kaufman & Haggard, 2018), subverting democratic norms while maintaining a democratic façade (Gamboa, 2023).¹² As such, executive aggrandisement can be understood as a means through which autocratisation occurs (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

Executive aggrandisement does not only imply democratic backsliding but also generates higher risks of corruption. The concentration of power can weaken distinctions between officeholders’ public and the private roles (Da Ros & Taylor, 2021), presenting opportunities for corruption. Additionally, the concentration of authority in the hands of a president, prime-minister, or dominant ruling party may weaken

¹¹ Horizontal accountability refers to constraints emerging from other branches of government (O'Donnell, 1998), while vertical accountability refers to constraints emerging from political competition such voters and the political opposition (Schmitter & Karl, 1991).

¹² Authors have employed different terms to describe the phenomenon, such as “executives with hegemonic aspirations” (Gamboa, 2023), “would be authoritarians” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) and “elected autocrats” (Kaufman & Haggard, 2018).

oversight mechanisms and diminish effective accountability. This process can lead to the personalisation of power and eventually the capture of state resources for patronage and personal enrichment (Laebens, 2023).

The analysis presented in this Helpdesk Answer draws on academic literature and case studies that examine the corruption risks associated with expanding executive power. It highlights numerous documented instances in which political actors have reportedly consolidated authority for personal or political gain. The paper concludes by outlining mitigation strategies recommended in the literature to strengthen institutional integrity and address these identified risks.

Concentration of power in the executive branch: how does it work?

Executive aggrandisement is observed through various setbacks and dismantling of constitutional mechanisms that usually ensure accountability and limit the executive's power, as well as through the weakening of opposition forces that could challenge the incumbent in the executive (Bermeo, 2016: 10). In this sense, it is a two-fold process, taking place through:

- (i) eroding checks and balances that hold the executive accountable, and
- (ii) increasing the powers wielded by the executive.

In this context, the leader - whether a president, a prime-minister or the ruling party - may come to power through free and fair elections and then incrementally expand executive authority through both formal and informal means. The strategy of incrementalism is often used to implement legal and sometimes informal changes to hollow out mechanisms intended to ensure executive accountability (Khaitan, 2019: 8).

While aggrandisement is referred to as a process (Laebens, 2023: 9), it is important to understand it is a systematic one – it does not happen by chance, but rather because the executive purposefully seeks to dismantle vertical¹³, horizontal¹⁴, and diagonal¹⁵ accountability mechanisms (Khaitan, 2019: 8). Unlike other forms of autocratisation and power concentration, aggrandisement does not happen through a sudden suspension of democratic institutions, like self-coups or military coups (Laebens, 2023: 9), but through a series of institutional changes that disassemble institutions meant to keep the executive in check (Bermeo, 2016:11).

Formally, stretching the limits of the executive authority can be achieved by mobilising tools that include constitutional amendments, executive decrees, states of emergency, passing new Constitutions and/or dismantling existing legislation and institutions (Bisarya & Rogers, 2023: 119). Informally, executive aggrandisement is often legitimised through political discourse, with leaders deploying democratic rhetoric to paint institutional enforcers as corrupt, elitist and even anti-democratic (Khaitan, 2019: 10).

¹³ *Vertical accountability* encompasses institutions and actions that make the government accountable to the people, such as political parties and popular elections (Walsh, 2020).

¹⁴ *Horizontal accountability* relates to the checks and balances that are in place and used by the legislative and judicial branches of government to hold the executive branch to account (Walsh, 2020).

¹⁵ *Diagonal accountability* represents the extent to which actors outside of formal political institutions (e.g., the media and civil society) hold a government to account.

These mechanisms are used to expand or eliminate term limits, to increase the power to pass legislation and implement policies, to enlarge authority to appoint allies in key institutions, to silence opposition and dissent, to change electoral legislation to favour the incumbent in power, and others (Bisarya & Rogers, 2023: 113-114). When engaged in aggrandisement, common strategies employed by the heads of government are:

- **Expanding term limits:** Increasing or eliminating term limits or delaying elections may be used by incumbents to remain in power. They may justify it with the need to promote significant change, or to defend the interests of ‘the people’ - of whom the incumbent portrays themselves as the only true representative and defender (Bisarya & Rogers, 2023: 11).
- **Changing electoral rules:** Different types of electoral reforms can be implemented to increase executive authority: indirect to direct elections to increase elected officials’ legitimacy, the restructuring of electoral bodies, the manipulation of electoral rules such as changing electoral thresholds, gerrymandering and drawing new districts (Haggard & Kaufmann, 2021: 68; Bisarya & Rogers, 2023: 126-127).¹⁶
- **Control over bureaucracy:** The power to appoint and to fire bureaucrats and other civil servants can be mobilised to increase the head of government’s capacity to implement their political agenda (Bisarya & Rogers, 2023: 141-142).
- **Interference in oversight bodies:** Similarly, the appointment of the heads of key government bodies and agencies can be used to undermine their independence and autonomy, including to investigate and sanction corruption (Haggard & Kaufmann, 2021: 40).
- **Weakening opposition:** Attacks on political opponents, weakening the ability of opposition to run for elections, and manipulating electoral processes can be used to extend the aggrandiser’s term in office and to hinder political challengers (Laebens & Luhrmann, 2021: 3).

Legislators may have legitimate reasons to delegate more power to the executive leader. There are benefits associated with the delegation of powers, specifically from the legislative to the executive branch, for example, the expertise to implement policies is normally concentrated in the executive (Bendor & Meirowitz, 2004: 2); potential inefficiencies in the legislative process are minimised (Lohmann & O’Halloran, 1994: 596); the time legislators devote to policies considered less relevant is reduced - especially when taking into account that legislative time and resources are limited enabling them to act strategically in areas where greater benefits can be obtained (Reich, 2002: 6). In this sense, sometimes it may be in the interest of a legislature to delegate certain powers to the executive branch (Bolton & Thrower, 2022: 32).¹⁷

¹⁶ As mentioned earlier, these reforms may also have legitimate democratic institutional objectives and will not always be used by incumbents trying to erode democratic institutions.

¹⁷ The authors also highlight that while there is a rationale in delegating powers from the legislative to the executive, legislatures still have opportunities to constrain and curtail the executive, for instance through ex-ante and ex-post mechanisms of policymaking (Bolton & Thrower, 2022: 32).

However, the delegation of legislative competencies can also serve less legitimate purposes and contribute to executive aggrandisement. Here, powers are delegated to the executive not to reduce transaction costs or improve the efficiency of decision-making, but to expand the power of the head of government and/or their party at the expense of parliament's institutional authority (Bisarya & Rogers, 2023: 119).

Beyond institutional factors, particular political contexts may offer the conditions for executive aggrandisement to occur. In contexts where the party leader is the head of the government and exercises control over the party members, individual legislators may also be incentivised to delegate powers as they view their career opportunities as being tied to the will of the executive (Bisarya & Rogers, 2023: 121-122).

Cases of executive aggrandisement around the world

There are many reported examples of executive aggrandisement in different political and party systems, as well as in both young and established democracies. As previously mentioned, the executive may employ different strategies to accomplish this.

In Venezuela, for instance, under former president Hugo Chávez, a new Constitution was drafted by a Constituent Assembly elected in 1999 and subsequently approved by popular referendum. The new Constitution significantly expanded executive authority – for example, broadening executive control over parliament and granting it the power to issue laws on certain matters such as banking and natural resources (Bisarya, Rogers, 2023: 11). Venezuela also illustrates the strategy of expanding term limits. The 1999 Constitution¹⁸ – triggered unilaterally without negotiation with Congress (Landau, 2018: 161) – extended the presidential mandate from five to six years and permitted immediate re-election (Article 230). It also increased presidential authority over the military (Articles 236 and 382), and the power to dissolve parliament (Articles 236 and 240). Later, in 2009, a constitutional amendment passed by referendum removed term limits entirely, modifying Article 230 to allow indefinite re-election (Carroll, 2019a).

In Türkiye, in 2017, an amendment package referendum proposed by the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) changed the political system from indirect election of the executive by the parliament to direct election which made it easier for the president to claim a popular elected mandate (Varol, 2018). This amendment abolished the role of the prime minister and consolidated all executive authority in the president, including judicial and legislative powers such as the power to appoint supreme court judges and initiate investigations into government employees (Varol, 2018: 353).

¹⁸ The Venezuelan Constitution of 1999 is available at: https://www.oas.org/dil/esp/constitucion_venezuela.pdf.

In the United States, in 2020, President Donald Trump increased his authority to fire and hire when he issued the executive order n. 13957 (reinstated in his second term in 2025). The executive order gave himself authority to fire thousands of career civil servants and to hire a new class of political appointees (Moynihan, 2022: 174). Increasing executive control over bureaucracy in this case included both independent agencies and nonpartisan civil services (Sozan & Olinsky, 2025). Despite the incremental aspect of aggrandisement, the second term of Trump has been described as “the most rapid executive aggrandisement in modern history”, due to a “rapid and aggressive concentration of powers in the presidency” (Nord et al., 2026: 34). V-Dem Indicators regarding Judicial and Legislative constraints on the executive (i.e. checks and balances), among others, declined faster than other countries considered emblematic of democratic backsliding in the past, such as Hungary, India and Türkiye (Nord et al., 2026: 34).

In the Maldives, in 2024, President Mohamed Muizzu was given greater decision-making power in key oversight bodies: he increased his authority to make political appointments to nominate the presidents and vice-presidents of oversight institutions such as the Anti-Corruption and Elections commissions (MV+ News Desk, 2024).

In 2016 in Poland, the then dominant party, the Law and Justice Party (PiS), passed a legislation to change the composition of oversight bodies and to reform the judiciary. In 2017, an electoral reform restructured the electoral body and allowed the executive and the legislative majority to exercise more control over the electoral process (Sadurski, 2019: 266-267).

Despite the various examples, systematically identifying and measuring executive aggrandisement presents analytical challenges. The process of aggrandisement does not always manifest through formal constitutional amendments or institutional transformations. Rather, it develops gradually through a sequence of incremental changes (Khaitan, 2019: 8). These may include sub-constitutional legal reforms, administrative adjustments, or procedural modifications that, when viewed in isolation, can seem limited or even justified (Freeman, 2020: 42).

Identifying executive aggrandisement

As Khaitan (2020) observes, executive aggrandisement frequently occurs “by a thousand cuts”. The case of India illustrates this point, where aggrandisement occurred through smaller and incremental changes over time: since Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s first term (2014-2019), the executive branch incrementally undermined existing mechanisms that held the political executive to account, by ensuring that these mechanisms became subservient to the executive or were captured by party loyalists (Khaitan, 2020: 92). Small steps were then undertaken over the years to dismantle electoral freedom, to constrain the opposition, to attack non-governmental organisations (NGOs), journalists, and other accountability institutions (Khaitan, 2020: 85).

The challenge in identifying aggrandisement cases becomes even greater when it does not involve formal constitutional change at all, but instead operates through informal practices, incremental legislative adjustments, and subtle institutional shifts. These changes have lower transaction costs associated with them than big constitutional ones and thus are often preferred by ruling parties (Khaitan, 2019: 9).

Still, authors have proposed different means of identify instances of aggrandisement. Laebens (2023) identified 26 cases of executive aggrandisement in democracies worldwide between 1989 and 2019. The author relied on indicators from the V-Dem dataset¹⁹ to identify legal changes to weaken both vertical and horizontal accountability. Indicators used as proxies for horizontal and vertical accountability were monitored, and cases of aggrandisement were identified when both sets of indicators showed a decline while the same incumbent remained in power. For instance, the author identified cases of legal changes made by incumbents to weaken high court compliance, high court independence, judicial purges, executive oversight, legislature investigations, among others (Laebens, 2023: 10).

Colombia, between 2002 and 2010, illustrates one case where both vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms were in decline: former President Álvaro Uribe served for two consecutive terms. Uribe introduced constitutional amendments to undermine the independence of the legislature and courts, and to enhance powers of the executive, for instance by extending term limits in office (Gamboa, 2023: 1). Under Uribe, media freedom also significantly declined (Laebens, 2023: 14). The cases of executive aggrandisement which the study identified are listed in Table 1:

Table 1: Cases of executive aggrandisement around the world according to Laebens (2023)²⁰

Country-years	Head of executive	Political system
Mexico (2018-)	AMLO	Presidential
Brazil (2019-2022)	Bolsonaro	Presidential
United States (2017-2020)	Trump	Presidential
Nicaragua (2006-)	Ortega	Presidential
Nicaragua (2006-)	Ortega	Presidential
Ecuador (2007-2017)	Correa	Presidential
Bolivia (2005-2019)	Morales	Presidential

¹⁹ The V-Dem dataset includes democracy ratings for more than 200 countries and territories. Available at: <https://www.v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/>.

²⁰ The paper was published in 2023, so it reflects the state of affairs at that time. Some countries may have faced changes until then.

Colombia (2002-2010)	Uribe	Presidential
Dominican Republic (2000-2004)	Mejía	Presidential
Dominican Republic (2012-2020)	Medina	Presidential
Venezuela (1998-2013)	Chávez	Presidential
Czech Republic (2017-2021)	Babis	Parliamentary
Poland (2015-)	PiS/Kaczynski	Parliamentary
Serbia (2014-)	Vucic	Parliamentary
Hungary (2010-)	Orbán	Parliamentary
Ukraine (2010-2014)	Yanukovych	Semi-presidential
N. Macedonia (2006-2016)	Gruevski	Parliamentary
Moldova (2001-2009)	Voronin	Parliamentary
Benin (2016-)	Talon	Presidential
Senegal (2012-)	Sall	Presidential
Zambia (2011-2021)	Lungu	Presidential
South Africa (2013-)	Zuma	Parliamentary
Botswana (2008-2018)	Khama	Parliamentary
India (2014-)	Modi	Parliamentary
Türkiye (2002-)	Erdogan	Parliamentary and presidential since 2017
Philippines (2001-2010)	Arroyo	Presidential
Philippines (2016-2022)	Duterte	Presidential

Source: Laebens (2023).²¹ Information about the nature of the political system information was added by the author of this Helpdesk Answer.

Williamson, Akor & Edgell (2024) identify cases of democratic resilience to aggrandisement, when incumbents fail to fully erode democracy, and can lose elections and leave office. The authors used the Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT)

²¹ Besides experiencing decline on both vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms, to be defined as aggrandisement, Laebens (2023) selected cases from countries considered as democratic in the year that the incumbent was firstly elected.

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dataset²² to identify decline in democracy levels over time. Cases of autocratisation that were driven by initially democratically elected incumbents were identified and taken as a proxy for aggrandisement. The study selected five cases where democracy survived autocratisation processes orchestrated by the incumbent. They are presented below.

Table 2: Cases of executive aggrandisement around the world according to Williamson, Akor & Edgell (2024)²³

Country-years	Chief of executive	Political system
India (1971-1975)	Gandhi	Parliamentary
Bulgaria (2001-2018)	Multiple	Parliamentary
South Korea (2008-2014)	Myung-bak (2008-2013) and Geun-hye (2013-2017)	Presidential
Slovenia (2011-2021)	Multiple	Parliamentary
Ecuador (2007-2013)	Correa	Presidential

Source: Williamson, Akor, Edgell (2024).²⁴ Information about the nature of the political system information was added by the author of this Helpdesk Answer.

Both identification strategies operationalise executive aggrandisement primarily through observable declines in democratic quality, whether measured as deterioration in horizontal and vertical accountability (Laebens, 2023) or as episodes of autocratisation driven by elected incumbents (Williamson, Akor & Edgell 2024). In doing so, they identify the erosion of constraints, rather than directly measuring the accumulation of power in the executive.

More subtle forms of aggrandisement, such as those achieved through informal practices, partisan capture without immediate measurable democratic decline, or the

²² The ERT relies on the [V-Dem datasets](#) to identify cases of democratisation and autocratisation in countries. The cases are classified as “liberalising autocracy” and “democratic deepening” (democratisation) and “democratic regression” and “autocratic regression” (autocratisation).

²³ The paper was published in 2024, so it reflects the scenario at that time. Some countries may have faced changes until then.

²⁴ Note: To ensure that these episodes reflect gradual, incumbent-led processes rather than rapid ruptures, the authors restrict their sample to episodes lasting at least three years, thereby excluding short-lived or sudden breakdowns. The authors excluded cases initiated by coups, self-coups, or early suspensions of legislatures or elections. From the resulting sample, they identify a subset of cases in which democracy survived despite these autocratization processes led by the incumbent. Democratic regimes are identified by scoring higher than 0.50 on V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index, holding multiparty elections for the legislature and executive that are deemed sufficiently free and fair; and elected officials assuming office after the election.

erosion of only one dimension of accountability (horizontal or vertical, not necessarily both), may thus remain undetected. While these studies provide valuable and systematic insights through comparisons, they should not be interpreted as exhaustive overviews of cases of aggrandisement worldwide.

Executive aggrandisement and corruption

Corruption is closely linked to executive aggrandisement. A central mechanism connecting the two is the erosion of accountability mechanisms (Bermeo, 2016: 11). The executive branch is subject to oversight by other independent institutions, such as the legislature, the judiciary, supreme audit institutions and anti-corruption agencies. These bodies are designed to monitor, investigate, and constrain abuses of power. Executive aggrandisement involves weakening these oversight mechanisms (Bermeo, 2016; Laebens, 2023). This can occur through reducing the autonomy, capacity, or independence of anti-corruption institutions, politically capturing them, or limiting their authority. When such institutions are subordinated to executive influence, which often happens under a “collapse of the separation of powers” (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021: 39), their ability to investigate and sanction corruption diminishes. As a result, it not only concentrates power in the executive, but also creates the conditions in which corruption can flourish, since the institutions responsible for detecting and punishing it can be undermined from within (Williamson, Akor & Edgell, 2024: 55).

Executive aggrandisement in Bulgaria under the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party offers an illustration of this dynamic. In addition to the erosion of media freedoms and judicial independence, Williamson, Akor & Edgell (2024: 27-33) argue that executive aggrandisement by GERB enabled an environment of rampant corruption, with the judiciary becoming compliant with government corruption by dismissing charges based on technicalities and delaying proceedings.

Corruption can also be used itself as a justification for expanding executive powers, with leaders claiming that greater concentration of power and authority is needed to combat corruption on the part of their opponents. While abolishing term limits, for instance, Chávez justified it with the need to fight crime and corruption (Coronel, 2006; Carroll, 2009b). Here, anti-corruption rhetoric can be framed as requiring exceptional executive authority and then used to weaken opponents as well as checks and balances.

In Colombia, Uribe tried to pass a bill to call for a “Referendum against bad politics and corruption” in 2002. In the name of fighting corruption, had it passed as proposed, the bill would have been able to decrease the powers of the legislature vis-à-vis the president, potentially creating a congress more aligned with Uribe’s personal agenda (Gamboa, 2023: 155).

In Brazil, judges and prosecutors adopted a populist discourse to fight corruption, justifying the use of new tools that at times bypassed legal constraints and expedited the prosecution of politicians (Gonzales-Ocantos et al, 2023). This form of anti-corruption populism – characterised by rhetoric that divides society between the

corrupt elites and ‘the people’ – can be used to reinforce authority (González, 2025). More broadly, such discourse can serve to empower the executive under the guise of fighting corruption.

Importantly, despite the association between executive aggrandisement, corruption, and democratic backsliding, there may still be public support for it – which can make corruption associated with the concentration of power more difficult to counter. For instance, Apaydin et al. (2022) found that even workers organised in progressive labour unions supported executive aggrandisement in Türkiye, particularly partisan supporters of the incumbent party. Bessen (2024) argues that this public support was cultivated by the president through a populist discourse casting himself as the genuine representative of the people and by portraying the political opposition as corrupt. In this narrative, democratic and accountability institutions were cast as the ‘anti-people’ establishment while the executive was depicted as embodying the democratic mandate (Khaitan, 2020:2).

Finally, there is evidence that, under certain conditions, corruption may decrease even as power becomes more concentrated in the executive branch. Using panel data from 22 Latin American and Caribbean countries, de Viteri Vázquez and Bjørnskov (2020)²⁵ found that in settings where legislatures are ideologically fragmented (used as a proxy for stronger political competition) combined with an increase in the concentration of power in the executive branch is associated with lower levels of corruption and higher judicial accountability. The authors argue that under those conditions, non-aligned political veto players in the legislature can keep the executive in check, making constitutional constraints effective when it is in the political interest of certain actors to enforce them (de Viteri Vázquez and Bjørnskov, 2020:529). This suggests that the effect of executive power concentration on corruption may depend on the degree of political competition that remains within the system to constrain it.

²⁵ Here, corruption was measured by assessments from the V-Dem datasets (corruption in the public sector, the executive, the legislative and the judiciary indicators). In this sense it tested the effect of corruption at those levels or state capture. The concentration of power was measured using the Index of Parliamentary Legislative Influence (IPLI) and the Index of Executive Influence (IEI) developed by the same authors and coded by the Comparative Constitutions Project (CCP). These indexes account for legislative/executive concentration of powers granted by constitutions.

Risk factors of executive aggrandisement

Executive aggrandisement is often made possible by concerted attempts to limit the ability of both oversight institutions and non-state watchdog organisations to hold the government to account for its actions.

Weakening of horizontal accountability mechanisms

The two other branches of government, the judiciary and the legislature, are meant to provide horizontal checks (Walsh, 2020).²⁶ Other oversight and independent institutions, such as law enforcement agencies, supreme audit institutions and anti-corruption agencies, perform similar functions. Accountability institutions can mobilise judicial, administrative and legislative constraints to the incumbent leader, and prevent the occurrence of corruption (Heinrich & Brown, 2017: 376-377).

One of the first signs of the expansion of the executive power often relates to its growing influence over the judicial branch (Bisarya & Rogers, 2023: 99-100). Freedom House's 2025 report found that elected leaders were undermining the independence of the judiciary by taking control of judiciary appointments, influencing how judges are disciplined (and removed), and limiting judges' authority (Freedom House 2025). As the executive consolidates control, judicial independence may be undermined, which can discourage judges from pursuing corruption charges against the head of government.

In Hungary, for instance, Fidesz undermined the judiciary by changing the jurisdiction of the Constitutional Court, expanding its size of the court and packing it with supporters. Further changes included changing the retirement age of judges – resulting in more vacancies in a shorter period of time – and controlling their appointments (Landau, 2013: 209-210). Other key institutions leading the budget, elections, and the media board were restaffed with party loyalists (Landau, 2013: 210).

In Türkiye the Supreme Court was enlarged by the AKP government from 11 to 17 members, with one third of its judges appointed simultaneously (Kosař and Šipulová, 2023). The head of government also has the power to name fourteen out of the seventeen Constitutional Court judges (Bermeo, 2019:11). Through a series of

²⁶ *Horizontal accountability* relates to the checks and balances that are in place and used by the legislative and judicial branches of government to hold the executive branch accountable (Walsh, 2020).

constitutional amendments, besides court-packing, the AKP government paved the way for other forms of judicial manipulation (Esen, 2025: 1).

Similarly, in Poland, the creation of new chambers within the Supreme Court by the incumbent government introduced 20 additional seats at the court of last resort (Sadurski, 2019), paving the way for the party to engage in court-packing with party loyalists. In Ecuador, the government of Correa established the Council of the Judiciary, granting it more authority to appoint, suspend, and remove judges from the Constitutional Court. In this sense, the court became more prone to political interference, thereby affecting judicial independence (HRW, 2021).

Concentrated executive authority can distort anti-corruption efforts themselves: investigations and prosecutions may become selective and politically motivated, targeting opponents while shielding loyal elites from scrutiny. In Guatemala, the Attorney General's office dismissed corruption cases involving ruling party members, while launching new investigations into journalists reporting on corruption (Papadovassilakis, 2023).

The legislature may also enable the expansion of executive powers over the judiciary. In Venezuela, in 2006, the majority in Congress approved Chávez's appointment of twelve loyalists to the Supreme Court, and in Hungary, the Fidesz supermajority also approved Orbán's expansion of the size of the Supreme Court (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021: 54).

Finally, the executive power to issue executive orders may also be instrumentalised to promote setbacks in anti-corruption legislation. In 2025, in the United States, Trump signed the executive order n. 14209 suspending the enforcement of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), likely affecting the fight against foreign bribery not only in the USA but worldwide (Transparency International, 2025).

Weakening of vertical accountability mechanisms

Electoral competition and the emergence of viable challengers can serve as a sanctioning mechanism, enabling voters to remove from office incumbents who abuse executive authority and engage in corruption (Banerjee et al. 2011; Ferraz & Finan, 2008). For vertical accountability²⁷ to function, however, a genuine political opposition must exist alongside free and fair elections. Where these conditions are met, both party and intra-party competition may halt democratic erosion by removing aggrandising incumbents and their parties from office (Laebens & Lührmann, 2023: 5).

The concentration of power in the executive can undermine these conditions, as heads of government may infringe upon opposition rights (Pérez-Liñán, Schimdt & Vairo, 2019), change electoral rules, engage in voter suppression, gerrymandering and other

²⁷ Vertical accountability encompasses institutions and actions that make the government accountable to the people through elections or political parties (Walsh, 2020).

mechanisms to undermine political competition by giving an advantage to the ruling party, and thus compromising democracy (Khaitan, 2019:7). Under these conditions, elections will cease to function as a sanctioning mechanism, thereby increasing the likelihood that corrupt incumbents remain in office. The expansion of the executive powers manifests through attacking or disqualifying political opposition, relaxing term limits and changing electoral rules (Bisarya & Rogers, 2023). When the incumbent leader weakens the ability of the opposition to compete in elections, gradually elections become less free and fair (Laebens & Lührmann, 2023: 3).

Venezuela is an example of a process of aggrandisement which led, in 2009, to the elimination of mandate limits (Carroll, 2019a). Chávez also manipulated electoral practices to inhibit the opposition (Corrales, 2020). Furthermore, corruption was used as a weapon to curtail competition in the elections. Based on corruption charges, political opponents were disqualified from running (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021: 63) and the government made a list of citizens banned from running for office due to corruption, in contravention of a law that required a court conviction for such a ban to take place (Corrales, 2011: 128).

In Russia, anti-corruption enforcement has also been characterised as politically motivated. Corruption charges have targeted mainly opposition mayors, in some instances serving even to overturn electoral outcomes, while reinforcing central control in the presidency (Masyutina, 2025: 10).

Corruption risks arising from executive aggrandisement

Executive aggrandisement often unfolds incrementally (Khaitan, 2019: 8), with power consolidated through the gradual erosion, co-optation, and politicisation of countervailing institutions. These dynamics can make corruption risks more difficult to detect in the early stages. This section therefore examines how executive aggrandisement contributes to various forms of corruption risks, highlighting the most prominent, though not exhaustive, patterns.

Personal enrichment and gains

The chief executive and their inner circle may use public office to capture state resources as a vehicle for personal enrichment (Laebens, 2023: 9). When executive power expands and institutional constraints weaken, the head of government may be better positioned to leverage regulatory authority, foreign policy discretion, pardon powers, and other constitutional instruments in ways that generate private benefits, raising concerns over conflict of interests (Block, 2018). These risks are particularly salient when the head of government and their family maintain personal business interests, and public decision-making intersects with private financial interests.

In the United States, for example, Trump, who has engaged in executive aggrandisement, has faced allegations that the presidential pardon power was used in ways that benefited political allies and individuals connected to his campaign and inaugural committee (Stone, 2025). Such claims raise concerns about conflicts of interest and the potential instrumentalisation of constitutionally granted powers for partisan and personal purposes. Media investigations have also revealed that presidential policy decisions, foreign relations initiatives, and regulatory positions have had implications for businesses associated with the president's family (Kirkpatrick, 2025; NYT, 2026).

In Brazil, former president Jair Bolsonaro faced allegations of personal enrichment through the exploitation of his relations with foreign governments, including accusations that he illegally sold jewellery and luxury gifts received from the Saudi Arabian government – a conduct described as “illicit enrichment of the then president” (Wright, 2024).

Political patronage and favouritism

Executive aggrandisement can foster political patronage whereby the executive mobilises state resources – such as appointments and public contracts – to maintain power, exchanging these resources for support. In presidential systems, one of the executive's constitutional prerogatives is the authority to appoint and remove the ministers that form the cabinet (Martínez-Gellardo, 2014: 6-7). Such discretion may be used as patronage to reward other politicians on whose support the head of the executive relies (Geddes, 1994; Raile, Pereira & Power, 2011).

A relevant example of the expansion of this discretion – not only to appoint but to decide the size of the cabinet – is Indonesia, where in 2008 the president amended the legal framework to remove the cap on the number of ministries, which was previously limited to 34. This reform allowed the president to determine the number of ministers, increased their control over the bureaucracy and generated new opportunities for patronage and party co-optation (Ramadhan & Risky, 2025: 278-279).

Public contracting has also functioned as a mechanism of political patronage and favouritism in both Hungary and Türkiye. In Hungary, since 2010, when Orbán took office, CRCB (2026: 8) argues that public procurement has been driven less by market competition and more by party political calculation. Companies linked to Prime Minister Orbán's inner circle, identified as the "top actors" of the country's kleptocratic network, have enjoyed significantly higher probabilities of winning state contracts than firms without these political connections (CRCB, 2026). Magyar (2016) writes that Orbán deployed blackmail and threats of prosecution to force the sale of private firms to benefit political allies and to divert funds to buy support from lower-level government and party officials (Magyar, 2016: 79).

In Türkiye, public procurement is identified as one of the most vulnerable sectors to corruption. Numerous cases have involved high-level officials, their relatives, and individuals close to senior figures within the ruling party, AKP (Chêne, 2012: 4). Since the 2010s, with executive aggrandisement and the prolonged dominance of the AKP party, public procurement has reportedly been used to reward party supporters in exchange for political and financial backing, thereby functioning as a channel of political patronage and corruption (Gürakar, 2016).

Incumbents may also rely on clientelistic networks to reward loyalty during elections and to remain in power. When candidates have greater access to state resources, clientelism can be fostered to attract supporters through the distribution of these resources (Berenschot, 2018: 1570). Similarly, discretionary powers over budgets, jobs, public contracts and business licenses can be diverted to generate electoral support through clientelistic strategies, particularly when the executive expands its control over these resources (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2018).

Political capture

Executive control can also be extended into the bureaucracy. When the executive branch is strengthened, it can weaken bureaucratic autonomy by reducing civil servants' independence and promoting the politicisation of the executive (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018). This can increase opportunities for corruption. In a politically captured bureaucracy, public administrators are unable to serve as internal checks on executive actions, challenge policies, or investigate wrongdoing. Dahlström, Lapuente and Teorell (2012) showed that bureaucratic factors, particularly meritocratic recruitment for bureaucracy – as opposed to politicised appointments – were associated with the reduction of corruption.

The strategic use of political appointments and dismissals can ensure that civil servants become subordinate to the political executive or are replaced by loyalists aligned with the ruling party. This dynamic undermines the professional neutrality of the civil service and increases its responsiveness to partisan interests rather than public accountability (Casey, 2022). In Poland, for instance, political appointments to ministerial bureaucracies presented new risks of corruption and reduced bureaucratic integrity, reinforcing political dependencies (Heywood & Meyer-Sahling, 2013).

Mitigation strategies

In some countries, aggrandisers fail in their strategies to remain in power. They may lose elections, face prosecution - including on corruption charges – and occasionally face exile. In these cases, democratic institutions prove that they can be resistant to aggrandisement (Williamson, Akor & Edgell, 2024). When a new government takes office, though, it may take much longer to rebuild constraints on the executive power than it took to dismantle them, as the reconstruction of horizontal checks and rehabilitation of institutions are neither quick nor unilateral processes (Freeman, 2020: 53). Even after aggrandisers leave office, the consequences of their governments remain (Gamboa, 2023: 245).

This section covers strategies to counter executive aggrandisement that may also serve to reduce the associated risks of corruption. In a narrow sense, these strategies can serve to empower oversight institutions and non-state actors that work to strengthen anti-corruption safeguards and hold power to account. In a broader sense, these strategies can help to strengthen democratic institutions and good governance, which is generally also associated with lower levels of corruption (Drapalova, 2019).

As such, this final part of the paper highlights the rules and institutions that can be designed and reinforced to constrain political powers of the head of the executive, as well as the actors, stakeholders and contexts that can hold executive power to account.

Guaranteeing the independence of democratic institutions

There are examples of presidents who engaged in aggrandisement and whose efforts were later overturned by judicial courts.

The Brazilian Supreme Court illustrates the capacity of the judiciary to restrict the behaviour of an abusive executive. Former Brazilian President Bolsonaro failed to fully subordinate the courts, for instance, as he was not successful dismantling judicial checks on executive authority (Campante & Levitsky, 2025; Vargas Jones, 2025). This outcome appears to reflect both institutional and political constraints: the Brazilian Supreme Court enjoys a high degree of autonomy and, during Bolsonaro's term, remained largely composed of justices appointed by prior administrations (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). During the Covid-19 pandemic, while in office, Bolsonaro suspended the Freedom of Information Law, an action that was overturned by the Supreme Court (Meyer, Reis, Castro, 2023). After losing elections, the Supreme Court was also responsible for hearing Bolsonaro's trial for plotting a coup d'état (Philips, 2025).

In Colombia, the Constitutional Court also played a central role in stopping Uribe's reforms (Gamboa, 2023: 143). The Constitutional Court was responsible for blocking the executive-driven constitutional changes that would have changed term limits and enforcing strict judicial control over executive lawmaking by decree (Roa & López, 2025). Besides having legitimacy and public support, the court benefitted from the opposition to Uribe in Colombia. The opposition employed strategies to delay and undermine the legislative process of those reforms. In doing so, it provided the court enough room and support to rule against the executive and keep its legitimacy (Gamboa, 2023: 176). This demonstrates how efforts by horizontal and vertical accountability actors to hold the executive to account can be complementary and mutually beneficial, such as by lending providing legitimacy and popular support to oversight institutions.

In the Czech Republic, the legislative also resisted executive aggrandisement. In Parliament, during Covid-19, the Prime Minister Andrej Babiš minority government faced a debate before a proposed state of emergency received approval, and the Senate significantly amended the executive's bills (BTI, 2022:15). Regarding corruption, the parliament played an active oversight role by voting to lift Babiš' immunity, which enabled prosecutors to proceed with a fraud case against him (Reuters, 2018).

Regarding the role of parliaments, Bolton and Thrower (2022) highlight that to encounter executive aggrandisement, political will is not enough. Parliaments must have institutional capacity (both resources such as staff and policymaking capacities encompassed by institutional rules) to be able to effectively constrain the executive (Bolton & Thrower, 2022: 6).

Contextual factors, including corruption allegations against the head of the executive, also affect the popularity of a president pursuing aggrandisement, and may enable accountability institutions to perform their work.

This was the case of South Korea under president Park Geun-hye and Benin under President Thomas Boni Yayi: in both cases, corruption scandals made the presidents politically weaker, so accountability institutions could act and sanction the incumbents despite the increasing powers of the presidents (Laebens & Luhrmann, 2023). In Benin in 2013 under Boni, a combination of poor economic performance and the government's political appointments to the courts, its punishment of individual judges and its push to change the constitution to allow three presidential terms severely weakened the president's standing. This sparked mass demonstrations in support of judicial efforts to secure free and fair elections, which culminated in defeats for Boni in the 2015 and 2016 elections (Laebens & Luhrmann, 2023:17). In South Korea, Park Heun-hye was involved in a major corruption scandal involving abuse of power and state funds, as well as harassment against journalists. When the scheme was uncovered by the media, mass protests turned public opinion against the president, which led the parliament to impeach Park Heun-hye (Laebens & Luhrmann, 2023: 12).

Ensuring the transition of power

Even though executive aggrandisement may not disappear when a new administration takes office (Freeman, 2020: 54), term limits and periodic free and fair elections represent minimum safeguards for the possibility of the transition of power and to reverse executive expansion through a renewed mandate.

Referring to the experience of Ecuador, Freeman (2020) shows that when a new government takes office after a period of executive aggrandisement, they may find themselves incentivised to use legal strategies similar to the ones deployed by the administration they replaced.

Similarly, in Poland, since election in 2023, Prime Minister Tusk's government has struggled to "restore liberal democratic institutions after [a period of] illiberal rule" by the Law and Justice (PiS) party (Bill and Stanley, 2025). Democratic backsliding of the type that occurred under PiS can create "institutional traps" for new administrations that are difficult to overcome without turning to the same "illiberal playbook" that executive aggrandisers used (Bill and Stanley, 2025).

In Poland, PiS-appointed officials – often installed as part of a strategy of executive aggrandisement – have been challenging to unseat in the judiciary, civil service and state-owned enterprises (Bertelsmann Foundation, 2026). As such, some of Tusk's supporters have appealed to the concept of transitional justice, in order to

"justify some of [the Tusk government's] more legally questionable moves, such as its refusal to recognise judicial bodies that they say are improperly constituted, on the grounds that constitutional safeguards can (indeed, should) sometimes be ignored when taking steps to restore legal order to institutions that have been corrupted or whose legitimacy is questionable" (Szczerbiak, 2025)

Instead of engaging in constitutional and sub-constitutional legal reforms to increase the executive powers, new governments must be incentivised to mobilise these instruments to rehabilitate independent institutions and to reconstruct vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms (Freeman, 2020: 53). Leaders engaging in the rehabilitation of accountability mechanisms and systems could turn to citizens to increase the legitimisation of this reconstruction process. For instance, public engagement can enable more effective anti-corruption reforms and improve the enforcement of laws against corruption (Hickle, 2022).

To preserve democratic order, elections remain the best option to remove governments that have engaged in executive aggrandisement. This is because attempts by the opposition to remove the incumbents through irregular means (such as through impeachments or popular revolutions), rather than waiting for the next election, are more likely to result in a democratic breakdown (Cleary & Ozturk, 2022). Government change through free and fair elections functions as a vertical accountability

mechanism, and in doing so strengthens democratic institutions (Laebens & Luhrmann 2021: 2). Beyond elections, Cheibub (2007:24) argues that presidential term limits are necessary to curb presidential powers, which, if left unchecked, might have detrimental effects on democracies (Cheibub, 2007: 24).

Promoting bureaucratic resistance

Stability, tenure protections and meritocratic recruitment for careerists²⁸ in the public service appears to be associated with better bureaucratic resistance to aggrandisement and political control of public agencies and departments, at least in the short term. Studying the case of environmental agencies in Brazil under Bolsonaro, Bersch and Lotta (2024) showed that even though powerful presidents can try to politically control such agencies, careerists were less prone to be controlled when compared to political appointees initially, although over time leaders may learn to calibrate their strategies and isolate those individuals. When the executive branch successfully interferes in public agencies, the loss of expertise may take decades to rebuild, and agencies that have been gutted often remain politicised bastions of corruption for years to come (Bersch & Lotta, 2024: 44). The same can be said with regard to anti-corruption institutions and it is important to guarantee the tenure of their staff and insulation from political executive control.

Kucinkas and Zylan (2023) studied data regarding the bureaucracy from 2017 to 2020 in the United States and documented other forms of resistance to the executive power. When actions that could be characterised as resistance to the executive did occur, they were situated within institutional and professional norms rather than outright defiance of the president's executive directives and confronting the authority. For instance, bureaucrats tried to use established channels of dissent to express their voice or stretched the rules in ways that were technically in compliance with political directives and their roles, but that helped mitigate perceived harm to agency missions (Kucinkas & Zylan, 2023: 1800).

In Brazil and the United States, both organisational conditions (having internal support from peers and supervisors) and individual factors (commitment to public service, courage) proved to be key factors influencing civil servants' acts of resistance towards executive authority (Kucinkas & Silveira, 2025).

Protecting civic space

Aggrandisers may engage in censorship, state capture and pressure on the media, for instance by using defamation laws to punish journalists for critical reporting, and

²⁸ As opposed to political appointees, careerists are bureaucrats who gain access to governmental positions on the basis of meritocratic criteria, such as exams, interviews and other types of merit-based evaluation (Salazar-Morales & Lauriano, 2020: 55).

intimidating civil society (Williamson, Akor & Edgell, 2024: 62). Nevertheless, civil society and media still play a crucial role by alerting the population to the government's excesses and documenting its expansion of powers, thereby triggering both horizontal and vertical accountability (Williamson, Akor & Edgell, 2024: 62). In several cases where democracy survived executive aggrandisement, it was the combination of media exposure of government mismanagement and corruption with civil society-led strikes and demonstrations that proved decisive, as seen in India, Ecuador, and South Korea (Williamson, Akor & Edgell, 2024).

In three cases of democratic resilience studied by Laebens & Luhrmann (2021), Benin, Ecuador and South Korea, civil society protests and engagement were highlighted as relevant for halting democratic erosion. In Ecuador, protests led Correa to shift strategies and abandon his attempt to run for a fourth-term bid. In South Korea, public engagement led the parliament to investigate Park Heun-hye. In Bulgaria and Slovenia, the exposure of corruption through the media led Borisov and Janša respectively to electoral defeats (Williamson, Akor & Edgell, 2024: 60).

As such, while protests and pressure from the civil society might not be sufficient on their own, they were necessary to activate formal mechanisms to check on the incumbents (Laebens & Luhrmann, 2021: 13). In the final analysis, this underscores the importance of building alliances between horizontal and vertical accountability actors, which can provide non-state watchdogs with institutional access, and oversight institutions with popular support.

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