

Overstaying Their Welcome: The Problem of Presidential Term Limit Evasion

Around the world, power-hungry heads of state are increasingly circumventing term-limit restrictions. These efforts can have lasting consequences for a country's democratic trajectory.

By Cathryn Grothe and Grady Vaughan

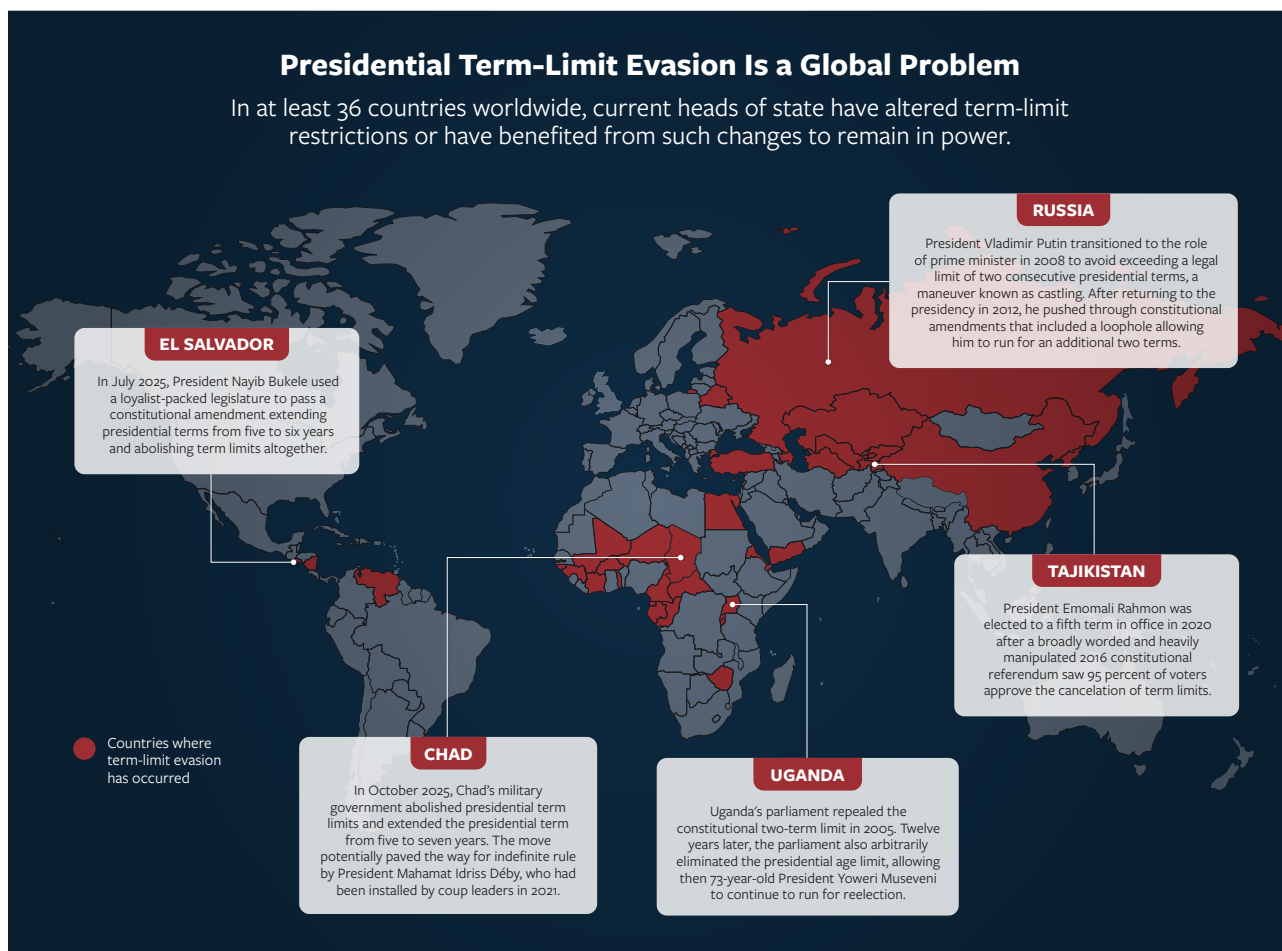
Upon taking power following a military rebellion in 1986, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni declared that “the problem of Africa in general, and Uganda in particular, is not the people but leaders who want to overstay in power.”¹ Four decades later the 81-year-old remains in office. Like a growing number of heads of state worldwide, Museveni has been able to achieve his long tenure by removing presidential term limits.

Term limits—regulations governing the length and number of terms a president can serve—are a core safeguard in presidential and semipresidential democracies. By restricting the amount of time an incumbent can remain in office, they constrain the accumulation of power by individual leaders, promote the rotation of power among political parties, and ensure that elections continue to be competitive.¹ These time-bound restrictions also encourage executive-office holders to concentrate on achieving policy goals before their term is up.

Around the world, however, presidents are increasingly circumventing term-limit restrictions. In 2025 alone, presidents in Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, El Salvador, and Guinea-Bissau paved the way to extend their tenure in office through term-limit revisions or by removing barriers to future reelection. Other common tactics of term-limit evasion include constitutional amendments, manipulated referendums, and election delays. This is a global problem: in at least 36 countries worldwide, current heads of state have altered the rules or benefited from such changes to remain in power. Over 85 percent of presidents seeking to prolong their time in office govern countries rated Not Free in Freedom House's [Freedom in the World](#) report, while the remainder serve in Partly Free countries. The checks and balances provided by democratic institutions in democracies tend to provide safeguards against this phenomenon.

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¹ This report looks solely at presidential and semipresidential systems. While parliamentary systems generally lack term-limit requirements for the prime minister, parliamentary democracies feature many ways to hold the office to account. For example, a prime minister who is indirectly elected by a directly elected legislature is only able to stay in office as long as they maintain lawmakers' confidence. If they lose popularity lawmakers can vote to replace them.



Efforts to evade term limits can have lasting consequences for a country's democratic trajectory. Unlimited incumbency helps enable power-hungry presidents to undermine institutions, appoint loyalists and relatives, and enrich themselves and their allies with taxpayers' funds. Term-limit evasion can also trigger protests from angry citizens, which have sometimes been met with state violence. Authoritarian leaders' efforts to remove term limits by forcing undemocratic constitutional changes may inspire even more anti-institutional actions—such as military coups aiming to overthrow leaders seeking to remain in office for life.

TACTICS TO REMOVE OR EXTEND TERM LIMITS

Heads of state seeking to extend their hold on power have employed several tactics to overcome term limits. In some cases, leaders—often aided by pliant legislators and judges—have rewritten the rules to remove term-limit mandates from the constitution or legal frameworks. Other tactics are less subtle and include delaying elections or shifting to a new executive position, from which they exercise paramount authority or control a figurehead replacement.

Rewriting the rules

In many countries, aspiring autocrats have organized tightly controlled referendums to amend or altogether remove constitutionally enshrined term limits. In Tajikistan, a broadly worded and heavily manipulated 2016 constitutional referendum saw 95 percent of voters approve the cancelation of term limits. This change permitted President Emomali Rahmon, who with 32 years in office is the second longest-serving leader in Eurasia, to win the tightly managed 2020 presidential election and further his decades-long crackdown on independent media, religious freedom, and free expression.²

Major changes to constitutions can also be facilitated by pliant legislatures and courts. In 2008, Cameroon's National Assembly pushed through constitutional changes that cleared the way for President Paul Biya to seek reelection in 2011 after the expiration of his second term per the 1996 constitution. Biya—at 93 the world's oldest head of state—has ruled Cameroon for over 40 years and, alongside his ruling party, has maintained power through rigged elections, political patronage, and repression.³ President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador—which is rated Partly Free by Freedom House—has similarly used a loyalist-packed legislature to pass a constitutional amendment extending presidential terms from five to six years and abolishing term limits altogether.⁴

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Other long-serving leaders including Museveni in Uganda have remained in office by removing age caps as well as term limits. In October 2025, lawmakers in Djibouti overwhelmingly voted to remove the age ceiling for presidential candidates to allow incumbent Ismail Omar Guelleh, who has been in office since 1999, to run for a sixth term.⁵ Much like the removal of term limits, the arbitrary scrapping of age limits is another tactic that incumbents have used to bypass constitutional protections against indefinite rule.

Circumventing the rules

Apart from legislative changes and judicial rulings that expressly alter term limits, other approaches to term-limit evasion include postponing elections and shifting positions to retain authority. These tactics circumvent conventional processes to prolong a leader's stay in office.

Delaying elections is one of the most brazen methods for sidestepping term limits. For example, a Supreme Court ruling allowed Guinea-Bissau's President Umaro Sissoco Embaló to postpone elections scheduled for November 2024 for a year and extended his mandate from February 2025 until September 2025. During the November 2025 election, however, the military deposed Embaló in a move that some civil society experts claimed was designed to interrupt the processing of election results.⁶

Castling, a term borrowed from chess, occurs when an incumbent shifts to a different executive position after their term has ended. This allows the entrenched leader to maintain power while also complying with constitutional constraints. Russian President Vladimir Putin popularized this maneuver when he transitioned to the role of prime minister in 2008 to avoid exceeding a legal limit of two consecutive presidential terms. As prime minister, Putin then pushed through a law that increased term limits for future presidents from four to six years.⁷ He returned to the presidency in 2012, and in 2020 orchestrated the approval of constitutional amendments that capped presidential tenure at two terms, but which also stated that current and previously served terms would not count toward that total. Thus, Putin allowed himself to run for an additional two terms and potentially extended his rule to 2036.⁸

In Togo, President Faure Gnassingbé upended the entire political system to secure an indefinite hold on power. In 2024, the National Assembly pushed through a new constitution that replaced the presidential system with a parliamentary system.⁹ Under the new system, Gnassingbé, who inherited power following the death of his father in 2005, became the president of the Council of Ministers—a new post with sweeping executive authority that is unelected and has no term limit.



A man holds a placard reading “Change the president, not the constitution!” during a protest against constitutional amendments in Saint Petersburg, Russia, in 2020. (Photo: SOPA Images Limited/Alamy Live News)

REMOVING TERM LIMITS CAUSES LASTING DAMAGE

The damage caused to a country’s democratic institutions by term limit evasion can be long-lasting. When incumbents stay in power indefinitely, and without accountability, it becomes easier for them to use state institutions to enrich themselves at the expense of the public, prosecute perceived enemies, and to harness the state security apparatus to silence dissent. In some cases, term-limit evasion has given way to serious instability in the form of military coups undertaken to dislodge the long-standing incumbent from power.

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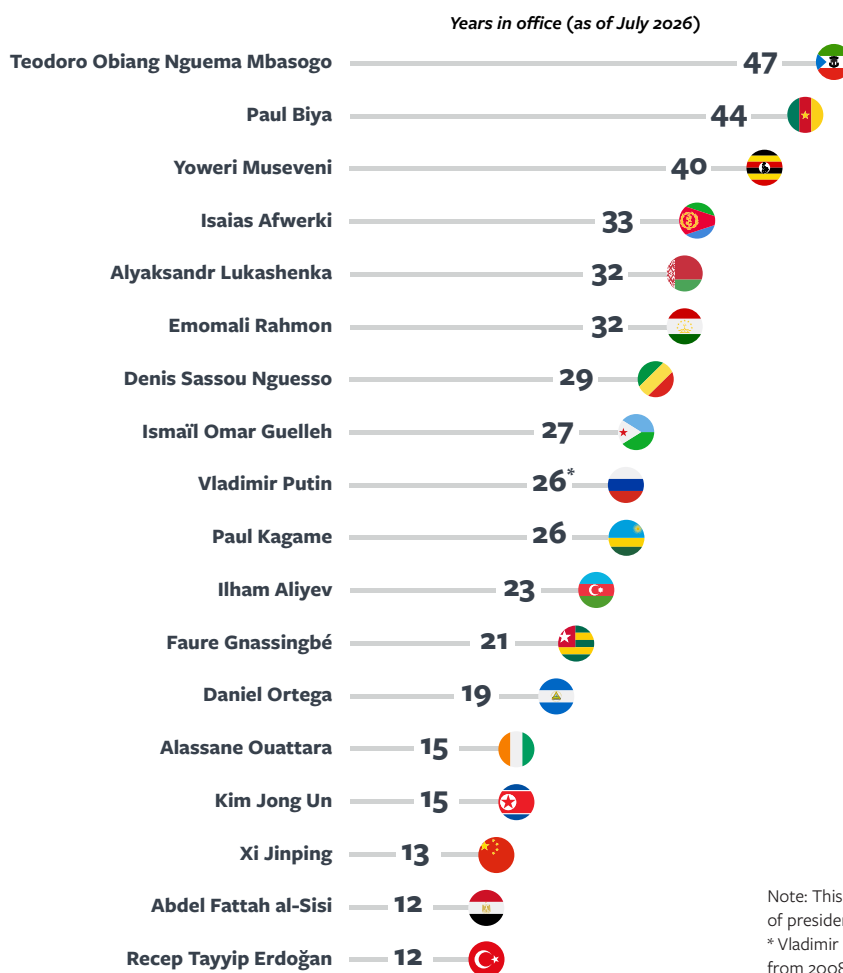
The elimination of term limits and subsequent concentration of power in an unaccountable executive can fuel corruption, kleptocracy, and fraud. Since Azerbaijan eliminated term limits in 2009, for example, President Ilham Aliyev and his family have deepened their involvement in rampant corruption and money laundering schemes¹⁰ that enrich the ruling family and their political allies. Government-aligned courts only selectively investigate officials who have fallen afoul of the regime and criminalize whistleblowers that expose these schemes.¹¹

Overstaying in office generates political stagnation, as leaders become increasingly unrepresentative of the populations they govern. This disconnect has fueled youth-led protests in recent years, including in Uganda

following President Museveni's reelection in January 2026, where antigovernment demonstrators were met with violence by state security officials.¹² Some crackdowns have been even more severe. After Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza ran for an unconstitutional third term in 2015, protests erupted across the country. In response, security forces opened fire on demonstrators, killing dozens of people.¹³

Leading for Life

Term-limit evasion has played a central role in making the following leaders some of the longest-serving heads of state globally.



Presidential term-limit violations can invite additional unconstitutional actions like military coups. In 2009, democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya of Honduras attempted to hold a controversial referendum on abolishing term limits. Pushback from both the Supreme Court and the opposition escalated into a political crisis that resulted in the military arresting and exiling Zelaya.¹⁴ A military coup in Guinea in 2021 came after an authoritarian incumbent made changes to the country's constitution that allowed him to seek additional terms.¹⁵ Following the enactment of a new constitution that allowed President Alpha Conde to reset his term count and win a third term in a violently contested October 2020 election, the military ousted the unpopular leader.

Military coup leaders themselves have rewritten the constitution to cement their own power. In October 2025, Chad's military government abolished presidential term limits and extended the presidential term from five to seven years. The move potentially paved the way for indefinite rule by President Mahamat Idriss Déby, who had been installed by coup leaders in 2021.¹⁶

SAFEGUARDING DEMOCRACY

Democracies are resilient political systems because they allow citizens to choose their own leaders and provide tools to rein in ones who abuse power or fail to act in the people's interests. Leaders who seek to remain in office indefinitely through term-limit extensions typically use the advantages of a long incumbency to consolidate power, sideline political opposition, and

weaken the system of checks and balances that prevent executive abuses and overreach. This is why presidential term-limit evasion is antithetical to democracy, and why the practice's global spread is a threat to freedom globally.

In Free and Partly Free countries, democratic institutions with healthy checks and balances can backstop efforts by civil society and lawmakers to push back against power-hungry incumbents seeking to extend their rule.

Importantly, not all attempts to evade term limits are successful. In Senegal, then President Macky Sall's efforts to remain in office by delaying February 2024 elections were met with a show of democratic resilience. There was strong pushback from civil society, the Constitutional Council blocked Sall from delaying the vote, and elections were ultimately held that March.¹⁷ In Indonesia, key power brokers within the ruling coalition prevented President Joko Widodo from vying for an unconstitutional third term in February 2024.¹⁸ (However, the Constitutional Court did effectively create an exception to an elections law that allowed one

of Widodo's sons to run for vice president in 2024 even though he didn't meet the age requirement.) Nevertheless, in Free and Partly Free countries, democratic institutions with healthy checks and balances can backstop efforts by civil society and lawmakers to push back against power-hungry incumbents seeking to extend their rule.

Alongside other authoritarian tactics, accelerating attempts to evade term limits have contributed to the 20 consecutive years of decline in global freedom.¹⁹ Participatory democracy is vital to thwarting these maneuvers, as civil society and interventions from other officials can serve as checks on this tactic of executive overreach. Citizens in democracies should consistently demand good governance and hold those who attempt to overstay in office accountable. And, democratic leaders must recognize term limits as a sacrosanct democratic norm, and condemn efforts to evade them.

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