



Think Again: Dictators

Arab autocrats may be tottering, but the world's tyrants aren't all quaking in their steel-toed boots

BY GRAEME ROBERTSON | MAY/JUNE 2011



"Dictatorships are all about the dictator."

Rarely, if ever. In the first months after the Arab revolutions began, the world's televisions were filled with instantly iconic images of a crumbling old order: the Ben Ali clan's seaside villa **on fire** in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak's stilted **pre-resignation speeches** in Egypt, Muammar al-Qaddafi's **rambling, defiant diatribes** from a bombed-out house in Libya. They were a reminder that one of the most enduring political archetypes of the 20th century, the ruthless dictator, had persisted into the 21st.

How persistent are they? The U.S. NGO Freedom House this year listed **47 countries as "not free"** -- and ruled over by a range of authoritarian dictators. Their numbers have certainly fallen from the last century, which

brought us quite a list: Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, Pinochet, Khomeini, and a host of others now synonymous with murderous, repressive government. But invoking such tyrants, while a useful shorthand in international politics, unfortunately reinforces a troublesome myth: that dictatorships are really only about dictators.

The image of a single omnipotent leader ensconced in a mystery-shrouded Kremlin or a garishly ornate presidential palace took hold during the Cold War. But dictatorships don't just run themselves. Performing the basic tasks expected of even a despotic government -- establishing order, levying taxes, controlling borders, and overseeing the economy -- requires the cooperation of a whole range of players: businessmen, bureaucrats, leaders of labor unions and political parties, and, of course, specialists in coercion like the military and security forces. And keeping them all happy and working together isn't any easier for a dictator than it is for a democrat.

Different dictatorships have different tools for keeping things running. The communist regimes of the 20th century relied on mass-membership political parties to maintain discipline, as did some non-communist autocracies. The authoritarian system that ruled Mexico for 70 years -- what Peruvian novelist and Nobel Prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa once called "the perfect dictatorship" -- was orchestrated by the nationalist Institutional Revolutionary Party, a massive organization whose influence extended from the president's compound in Los Pinos to the local seats of government in every tiny village. Egypt's recently departed Hosni Mubarak was similarly buttressed for three decades by his National Democratic Party.

Then there's the junta option: a military-run dictatorship. These have advantages -- discipline and order, and the capacity to repress opponents, among them -- but also drawbacks, most notably a small natural constituency that doesn't extend far beyond the epaulet-wearing classes. The generals who ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985 solved this problem by offering controlled access to a parliament in which economic elites and other powerful interests could voice their demands and participate in governance. However, this proved to be a difficult balancing act for a military that found it hard to manage elections and the pressures of a public increasingly dissatisfied with its record on the economy and human rights, and the generals ultimately headed back to their barracks.

At the extreme, some authoritarian governments do approximate the dictator-centric regimes of the popular imagination. Mobutu Sese Seko, who ruled Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) for more than 30 years, and the Duvalier dynasty in Haiti are classic examples. Here, order is maintained largely by distributing patronage through personal or other networks: clans, ethnic groups, and the like. But paradoxically, these are the most unstable dictatorships. Keeping a government operating smoothly is difficult in the absence of a broad organizational or institutional base, and the whole system rises and falls with the fate of one man.

BULENT KILIC/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

"The power of the masses can topple autocrats."

Not by itself. In 1989, people power swept across Eastern Europe. Mass strikes in Poland brought the

country's communist rulers to the table to negotiate their way out of power. After hundreds of thousands of people gathered in Prague's Wenceslas Square, one of Eastern Europe's most brutal communist regimes crumbled and handed over power in Czechoslovakia to a motley crew of playwrights, priests, academics, and friends of Frank Zappa. In East Germany, teeming crowds simply walked out of communism's westernmost showpiece to seek asylum in, and then reunification with, the West. And people power, as Ferdinand Marcos found to his dismay in the Philippines in 1986, was not limited to communism or Eastern Europe.

But there was far more to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and autocratic regimes elsewhere than the impressive moral authority of crowds. As the Chinese showed in Tiananmen Square in 1989, capitulating to pro-democracy activists in the streets is hardly the only option. There have been plenty of other places where people power has failed disastrously in the face of a well-organized military response. In Hungary, the popular uprising of 1956 was brutally crushed by Red Army tanks. Burma's 2007 Saffron Revolution produced little more than life sentences for the country's dissident Buddhist monks; Iran's 2009 Green Revolution fell to the batons of the Basij two years later.

What distinguishes people power's successes from its failures? Size, of course, matters, but autocrats tend to fall to crowds only when they have first lost the support of key allies at home or abroad. The Egyptian military's decision to abandon Mubarak and protect the protesters gathered in Cairo's Tahrir Square, for instance, was crucial to the president's downfall this February.

How can demonstrators persuade regime stalwarts to jump ship? In Eastern Europe, the geopolitical sea change engineered by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and his allies obviously helped -- but you can't exactly bring down the Iron Curtain again. Regimes with professionalized militaries separate from civilian authorities might be more vulnerable to defections; regimes based on highly ideological political parties are less likely to see their members break ranks. The credible threat of ending up at the war crimes tribunal in The Hague or having your Swiss bank accounts frozen can work wonders as well. But unfortunately for protesters, predicting authoritarian reactions to uprisings is far from an exact science -- which is little consolation when your head is being cracked by a riot cop.

"The more brutal the dictator, the harder to oust."

Unfortunately, true. Reflecting on the French Revolution, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that the "most dangerous moment for a bad government is when it begins to reform." What was correct in the 18th century is, sadly, still true in the 21st. It is probably not a coincidence that the list of authoritarians removed by street protest in recent years is largely populated by rulers whose regimes allowed at least a modicum of political opposition. Tyrants like Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic, Georgia's Eduard Shevardnadze, Kyrgyzstan's Kurmanbek Bakiyev, and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak may have been horrible in many ways, but their regimes were undoubtedly more permissive than those of many who have held onto power to this day.

If this is true, why do any dictators allow opposition in the first place? And why don't they simply go the full Tiananmen at the first sign of protest? Because running a truly ghastly dictatorship is tougher today than it used to be.

The interconnections of 21st-century civilization make it harder to control information and far more difficult and costly to isolate a country from the outside world than it was in the 20th. The death of communism, meanwhile, has robbed leftists and right-wing strongmen alike of a cover story for their anti-democratic practices. In the past decade, rulers of countries such as Uzbekistan and Yemen have used the West's newfound fear of militant Islam -- and the logistical necessities of the United States' post-9/11 wars -- to similar ends, but they number far fewer than the ideological tyrants who divvied up whole continents under Cold War pretexts a generation ago.

The result is that in more and more places, rulers are compelled to justify their practices by adding a touch of "democracy." Vladimir Putin chose to stand down -- though not far down -- in 2008 rather than break Russia's constitutional ban against a third consecutive presidential term, and even the Chinese Communist Party allows some competitive elections at the town and village levels. There are exceptions to this trend, of course: Turkmenistan, North Korea, and Burma spring to mind. But such regimes feel increasingly like remnants of the late, unlamented 20th century, rather than harbingers of things to come.

"Personality cults are crazy."

Crazy like a fox. Do North Koreans really believe that Kim Jong Il can change the weather based on his mood? Do Libyans think Qaddafi's Green Book is a brilliant work of political philosophy? Do Turkmen really think that the Ruhnama, the religious text authored by their late post-Soviet dictator -- and self-styled spiritual leader -- Saparmurat Niyazov, is a sacred scripture on par with the Quran and the Bible?

Probably not, but for the dictators' purposes, they don't have to. As political scientist Xavier Márquez has argued, personality cults are as strategic as they are narcissistic. Part of the problem that dictators' would-be opponents face is figuring out who else opposes the leader; compelling the populace to publicly embrace preposterous myths makes that harder still. Official mythmaking is also a means of enforcing discipline within the regime. Stalin -- the progenitor of the modern dictator personality cult -- understood well that his self-mythologizing would be too much for some of his old comrades to swallow; Lenin, after all, had specifically warned against it. But those who might have objected were swiftly dispatched. For the apparatchiks who remained, submitting to the cult was humiliating -- and humiliation is a powerful tool for controlling potential rivals.

But personality cults, like most authoritarian technologies, have their drawbacks. The bigger the cult, the bigger the challenge of succession. Heirs to the throne really have just two options: dismantle the cult or go one better. The former is perilous; in the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev's famous 1956 secret speech -- the posthumous critique of Stalin that gave us the term "personality cult" -- was, after all, secret, deemed too explosive for the

Soviet public. Today, North Korea's ruling Kim family illustrates the hazards of the alternative: Now that the official newspapers have already reported that the current Dear Leader, Kim Jong Il, has mastered teleportation, what's his son and newly designated heir, Kim Jong Un, supposed to do for an encore?

"Sometimes it takes a dictator to get the job done."

Actually it doesn't. The past two years have not done much to advertise the abilities of the Western democratic model of government to take large and painful but necessary actions. Frustrated over everything from a failure to balance budgets to an apparent inability to face up to the challenges of climate change, more than a few Westerners have turned their gaze wistfully toward the heavy-handed rule of the Communist Party in China. "One-party autocracy certainly has its drawbacks," the *New York Times*' **Thomas Friedman wrote** in a 2009 column. "But when it is led by a reasonably enlightened group of people, as China is today, it can also have great advantages." This March, Martin Wolf wrote in the *Financial Times* about how "**China has achieved greatness.**"

This romanticizing of authoritarianism is not new; Augusto Pinochet's murderous regime in 1970s Chile was once cheered by many in Washington as an ugly but necessary instrument of economic reform. Yearning for a strong hand, however, is rooted in several fallacies. First, it conflates the failings of one form of democracy -- in Friedman's case, the gridlocked American version -- with an entire category of governance. Second, it assumes that dictators are more able than democrats to undertake unpopular but essential reforms. But unpopular decisions don't simply become popular because an autocrat is making them -- just remember the late North Korean finance chief Pak Nam Gi, who ended up in front of a firing squad following the public backlash against the confiscatory currency reform the Kim regime pushed through in 2009. In fact, authoritarians, lacking the legitimacy of popular election, may be even more fearful of upsetting the apple cart than democrats are. In Putin's Russia, for instance, leaders are unable to dial back the massive military expenditures that keep key constituencies quiet but that even their own ministers recognize to be unsustainable.

Besides, suggesting that dictators can force better policies upon their people assumes that a dictator is likely to know what those better policies are. The idea that there are technocratic solutions to most economic, social, and environmental problems might be comforting, but it is usually wrong. Such questions rarely have purely technical, apolitical answers -- and only in a democracy can they be aired and answered in a way that, if not entirely fair, is at least broadly acceptable.

"Digital revolutions are bad news for autocrats."

Not necessarily. New technologies -- from the fax machine to the Internet to Facebook -- have invariably been heralded as forces for upending dictatorial regimes. And of course, if cell phones and Twitter made no

difference at all, then pro-democracy activists wouldn't use them. But the real test of technology is its ability to shift the balance of power between dictators and those trying to unseat them -- to make revolutions more frequent, faster, or more successful. And though it's too early to know for sure, the arc of revolutions in 2011 doesn't look that different so far from the lower-tech upheavals of 1989, or, for that matter, 1848.

What makes a difference is how quickly authoritarians can work out how to counter a new innovation, or use it themselves. Sometimes this happens quickly: The barricades invented in Paris that made the revolutions of 1848 possible were briefly useful, but militaries soon figured out how to use cannons against them. Similarly, today's authoritarians are already learning how to use cell phones and Facebook to identify and track their opponents. In Iran, for instance, Facebook posts, tweets, and emails were used as evidence against protesters in the wake of the failed Green Revolution.

As it happens, some of the most enduring innovations have been the least technological. Mass protests, petitions, and general strikes, though now ubiquitous tactics, were at first ideas as novel as Twitter, and they have continued to play a crucial role in spreading democracy and civil rights around the world. It's a useful reminder that not all the new tools that matter come in a box or over a Wi-Fi connection.

"Dictatorship is on the way out."

Not in our lifetime. The recent upheavals in the Middle East, though inspiring, have happened against a gloomy backdrop. Freedom House reported that in 2010, for the fifth year in a row, countries with improving political and civil rights were outnumbered by ones where they were getting worse -- the longest such run since the organization started collecting data in 1972. Two decades after the Soviet Union's collapse, democracy may be robust in formerly communist Central Europe, Latin America, and even the Balkans, but most former Soviet states remain quite authoritarian. And though a few Arab countries are newly freed of their tyrants, they are still very much in transition. Being poor or corrupt, as Egypt and Tunisia are, does not rule out being democratic -- think of India -- but it does make it harder to build a stable democratic system.

Nevertheless, the Arab revolutions have offered a spark of hope, one that has clearly worried dictators in places as far off as Moscow and Beijing. The question is what the world's liberal democracies should do, or not do, to push things along. Survey the United States' long history of democracy-promotion successes and failures, and the inescapable lesson, even setting aside recent adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, is that less is usually more. Providing aid -- as the United States did to the opposition in places like Serbia, Ukraine, and Georgia -- or simply setting an example are better means of toppling a dictator than actually doing the toppling.

But in either case, it's important to remember that powerful Western friends aren't everything. After all, the lesson of Tunisia and Egypt is that dictators sometimes fall despite, not because of, American help.

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