

The New Dictators Rule by Velvet Fist

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[By Sergei Guriev & Daniel Treisman, New York Times](#)
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[But in recent decades, a new brand of authoritarian government has evolved that is better adapted to an era of global media, economic interdependence and information technology. The “soft” dictators concentrate power, stifling opposition and eliminating checks and balances, while using hardly any violence. THE standard image of dictatorship is of a government sustained by violence. In 20th-century totalitarian systems, tyrants like Stalin, Hitler and Mao murdered millions in the name of outlandish ideologies. Strongmen like Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire left trails of blood.](#)

These illiberal leaders — Alberto K. Fujimori of Peru, Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, Viktor Orban of Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia and Hugo Chávez of Venezuela — threaten to reshape the world order in their image, replacing principles of freedom and law — albeit imperfectly upheld by Western powers — with cynicism and corruption. The West needs to understand how these regimes work and how to confront them.

Some bloody or ideological regimes remain — as in Syria and North Korea — but the balance has shifted. In 1982, 27 percent of nondemocracies engaged in mass killings. By 2012, only 6 percent did. In the same period, the share of nondemocracies with no elected legislature fell to 15 percent from 31 percent.

This sea change might have started with Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, who combined parliamentary institutions with strict social control, occasional political arrests and frequent lawsuits to cow the press — but also instituted business-friendly policies that helped fuel astronomical growth.

The new autocrats often get to power through reasonably fair elections. Mr. Chávez, for instance, won in 1998 in what international observers called one of the most transparent votes in Venezuela's history.

Soaring approval ratings are a more cost-effective path to dominance than terror. Mr. Erdogan exploited his popularity to amend the Constitution by referendum and to pack Turkey's Constitutional Court.

The new autocrats use propaganda, censorship and other information-based tricks to inflate their ratings and to convince citizens of their superiority over available alternatives. They peddle an amorphous anti-Western resentment: Mr. Orban mocked Europe's political correctness and declining competitiveness while soliciting European Union development aid.

When their economies do well, such leaders co-opt potential critics with material rewards. In harder times, they use censorship. The new autocrats bribe media owners with advertising contracts, threaten libel suits, and encourage pro-regime investors to purchase critical publications.

They dominate the Internet by blocking access to independent websites, hiring "trolls" to flood comments pages with pro-regime spam, and paying hackers to vandalize opposition online media sites.

The new dictatorships preserve a pocket of democratic opposition to simulate competition. Elections prove the boss's popularity. In Kazakhstan, President Nursultan Nazarbayev was recently re-elected with 97.7 percent of the vote.

Above all, the new autocrats use violence sparingly. This is their key innovation. Hitler took credit for liquidating enemies. Mobutu hanged rivals before large audiences, while Idi Amin of Uganda fed the bodies of victims to crocodiles. Claiming responsibility was part of the strategy: It scared citizens.

The new autocrats are not squeamish — they can viciously repress separatists or club unarmed protesters. But violence reveals the regime's true nature and turns supporters into opponents. Today's dictators carefully deny complicity when opposition activists or journalists are murdered. Take

the case of the former Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma. A tape of him reportedly ordering the abduction of a journalist, Georgy Gongadze, who was later found dead, helped fuel the Orange Revolution of 2004, which brought Mr. Kuchma's rivals to power.

And violence is not just costly — it's unnecessary. Instead, the new authoritarians immobilize political rivals with endless court proceedings, interrogations and other legal formalities. No need to create martyrs when one can defeat opponents by wasting their time. Mr. Putin's agents have begun numerous criminal cases against the opposition leader Aleksei A. Navalny: He has been accused of defrauding a French cosmetics company and stealing wood and interrogated about the killing of an elk.

The West first needs to address its own role in enabling these autocrats. Lobbying for dictators should be considered a serious breach of business ethics. Western democracies should provide objective native-language news broadcasts to counter the propaganda and censorship. And because the information-based dictatorships are susceptible to the pressures of modernization and inevitable economic failings, we need patience.

Besides propaganda, citizens get information by their paychecks — in the Russian idiom, they can choose either “the television or the refrigerator.”

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