

The History of Authoritarianism and its Modern Day Connections

Authoritarianism is a form of government in which the rulers exercise authority without the consent of the governed. By this definition, the majority of régimes in history have been authoritarian. Ever since humans settled in large communities, people have predominantly lived under authoritarian-like societies that are strictly hierarchical and only grant political power to a very narrow stratum of political elites or individual leaders: Egypt's pharaohs, Chinese and East African emperors, Maya and Inca kings, French emperors and post-independence rulers of sub-Saharan Africa, etc.

Authoritarianism is mostly viewed today as contradictory to democracy, a system in which the supreme power of a government is vested in the people. Although democracy is a relatively recent phenomenon, since the second half of the 20th century much of the world has come to recognize it as a universal value. Rulers, elites and core supporters usually fare well under authoritarianism; while under democracy, at least theoretically all are granted equal political rights and civil liberties, even political opponents. While elites and supporters may not suffer under authoritarianism, democracy is arguably the best political regime type to ensure the least number of violent and politically caused deaths. Since World War II, more people have died at the hands of dictators and their repression than died of war.

Some of the most infamous authoritarian leaders in recent history include: Mussolini, Hitler, Augusto Pinochet, Francisco Franco, Muammar Qaddafi, and Mobutu Sese Seko, as well as contemporaries like Rodrigo Duterte, Vladimir Putin and Narendra Modi. Of course, these authoritarians have their differences. Some are seen as brutal and murderous men while others corrupt and sleazy. Today, authoritarians usually come to power via elections, using legal loopholes to consolidate their power. However, despite their differences, all of these men are anchored in a larger authoritarian tradition. Authoritarian leaders usually use tools such as propaganda and corruption once they begin to gain power. They attack established media, claiming it delivers false information and that only they speak the truth. They often pop-up during times of significant social progress--gender equality, racial equity, secularization--because they derive their support base from those who are anxious and angry over these social changes.

These authoritarian patterns are increasingly important to understand today. Recent trends signal that authoritarian rule has been increasing over the past two decades. Today, more than half of the world lives under authoritarian rule. Authoritarianism re-emerged in Russia under the seemingly omnipotent president Putin after a brief moment of democracy in the early 1990s. The re-strengthening of Chinese single-party rule and continued authoritarianism in other large and populous countries such as Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Iran, Nigeria and others also contribute to this trend. Even American democracy has not been immune to this growing authoritarian threat. Since the 2016 presidential election, many observers speculated that Donald Trump could undermine American democracy and move the country in an authoritarian direction. Many argue that Trump's actions--such as undermining American institutions like the Justice Department, the --follow the footsteps of many historical authoritarians. Looking back at how authoritarianism has taken hold throughout history is one way that we can take stock of present threats to democracy.

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Information gathered from Kenneth McLeish "Authoritarianism" in *Bloomsbury Guide to Human Thought* (Bloomsbury, 1993); Oliver Schlumberger and Tasha Schedler "Authoritarianisms and Authoritarianization" in *The SAGE Handbook of Political Science* (Sage UK, 2020); Francis Fukuyama's "Book Review: Authoritarians From Mussolini to Trump" in *The New York Times*, November 10, 2020; A "A History of Modern Authoritarianisms," New York Public Radio (www.wnyc.org) and Olivia B. Waxman's "Historian: Today's Authoritarian Leaders Aren't Fascists- But They Are Part of the Same Story" in *Time*, November 10, 2020.