

The Dictator's New Playbook

Why Democracy Is Losing the Fight

By Moisés Naím

Around the world, from the richest countries to the poorest, a dangerous new crop of leaders has sprung up. Unlike their totalitarian counterparts, these populists entered office through elections, but they show decidedly undemocratic proclivities. They propagate lies that become articles of faith among their followers. They sell themselves as noble and pure champions of the people, fighting against corrupt and greedy elites. They defy any constraints on their power and concentrate it in their own hands, launching frontal attacks on the institutions that sustain constitutional democracy, stacking the judiciary and the legislature, declaring war on the press, and scrapping laws that check their authority.

The new autocrats include current leaders such as Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, India's Narendra Modi, Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, Russia's Vladimir Putin, and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The label also applies to leaders who are no longer in power, such as the late Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Austria's Sebastian Kurz, and, yes, the United States' Donald Trump. All reengineered the old dictator's playbook to enhance their ability to impose their will on others. Despite the enormous national, cultural, institutional, and ideological differences among their countries, the new autocrats' approaches are uncannily similar. Bolsonaro and López Obrador, for example, could not be more different ideologically or more similar in their strategies to grab and retain power.

Turkey, home to early civilizations and once the cradle of empires, and the United States, the modern, mighty superpower, are lands of stark contrasts. Yet both Erdoğan and Trump waged unrelenting campaigns against the institutions that might hem them in. Kurz, the debonair former Austrian chancellor, who dressed in finely tailored suits, seemed nothing at all as a leader like Duterte, the brawling Philippine leader, yet both launched vigorous and calculated offensives to distort their countries' public spheres until, politically, up was down and down was up.

In essence, this cohort uses populism, capitalizes on polarization, and revels in post-truth politics to undermine democratic norms and amass power, preferably for life. These techniques are not new; in fact, they have always been part of the struggle for power. But the ways they are being combined and deployed worldwide today are unprecedented. Many of the new autocrats have successfully co-opted the free press in their respective countries, in some cases by having their business cronies snap up media properties. The explosion of information and media online, moreover, has created opportunities for deception, manipulation, and control that simply didn't exist as recently as a decade ago. Declining trust in the traditional institutions that once served as gatekeepers to the public sphere has vastly lowered the reputational costs of bald-faced lying. And the globalization of polarization has created new opportunities for alliances with leaders who are using similar wedge issues in other countries. The result is a crisis in the sustainability

of democratic government on a scale not seen since the rise of fascists across Europe in the 1930s.

PLAYING TO THE CHEAP SEATS

A commonality in the new breed of autocrats is how they portray themselves as embodying the will of the people, championing their cause against a corrupt elite. Populists work to collapse all political controversies into this “noble people” versus “venal elite” dichotomy, explaining any and every problem as the direct consequence of a dastardly plan by a small but all-powerful group harboring contempt for a pure but powerless people whom it exploits. Of course, if that is the case, what the people need is a messianic savior, a champion able to stand up to that voracious elite, to bring it to heel on behalf of the people.

It is a common mistake to treat populism as an ideology. It is better understood as a technique for seeking power that is compatible with a nearly limitless range of specific ideologies. Virtually any obstacle to autocratic rule can be characterized as another trick of the corrupt elite, and virtually any move to concentrate and amass power in the hands of the populist ruler can be justified as necessary to defeat the rich and powerful and protect the people. Populism’s adaptability is its strength: it can be deployed anywhere, because in the hands of the power hungry, resentment against the elite can be mobilized everywhere, especially in the many countries where economic inequality has spiked.

Polarization follows naturally from populism. Once the basic opposition between the noble people and the corrupt elite has been put at the center of political life, the priority becomes to sharpen the opposition between them. Marxists would call this “heightening the contradictions.” Polarization strategies aim to sweep away the possibility of a middle ground between political rivals, depicting compromise as betrayal and seeking to amplify and exploit any opening for discord.

Polarization warps the relationship between followers and their leaders. In a healthy democracy, citizens can support or oppose a given leader on a certain issue without necessarily feeling the need to support him or her on every issue. But when politics become deeply polarized, a populist leader redefines what it means to agree. As the representative of the people in the fight against the elite, the populist leader maintains the right to decide which views define membership in the true citizenry. That is why so many populist leaders manage to extract from their followers complete and unconditional loyalty to all their views—even those that contradict the ones they espoused the day before. Thus, the Brazilians who support Bolsonaro unquestioningly back their president both when he claims that there is no corruption in his government at all and when he claims that the corruption in his government is not his fault, because he doesn’t know about it.

Populism and polarization are old political tactics. Charismatic leaders dating back to Julius Caesar and Charlemagne built cults of personality. And fostering an idealized public image necessarily requires lying. But the post-truthism that the new autocrats are so apt at employing goes far beyond fibbing: it denies the existence of a verifiable reality. Post-truthism is not chiefly about getting lies accepted as truths but about muddying the waters to the point that it becomes difficult to discern the difference between truth and falsehood. Autocrats constantly spewing lies and half-truths get their followers to accept that things are true entirely because they have said them. The truth of an utterance is therefore independent from its correspondence with reality and derives instead from the identity of the person saying it.

There is a deep nihilism involved in a post-truth philosophy. Seemingly absurd ideas come to be regarded as gospel. In Bolivia, President Evo Morales got millions of his followers to accept as an article of faith that presidential term limits amounted to a fundamental human rights violation. In the Philippines, Duterte built support for extrajudicial killings by relentlessly portraying concern for human rights as an affectation of a corrupt elite. And Trump, of course, persuaded countless supporters that assaulting the U.S. Capitol to derail the certification of election results constituted a brave stand in favor of election integrity.

Such absurdities become accepted by autocrats' followers because their psychological relationship to the leader is distorted by the prism of identity. These are the politics of fandom: the supporters of an autocrat are much like the fans of a sports team who put their emotional identification with the club at the center of their sense of who they are. The melding of an individual's identity with the identity of the leader explains why it is often hopeless to try to reason with the followers of politicians such as Morales, Duterte, or Trump. When one's identity is built on identification with a leader, any criticism of that leader feels like a personal attack on oneself.

Here it is worth considering the tactics of Chávez, in particular his famously long-winded Venezuelan television show, *Aló Presidente*, which aired weekly for most of his tenure in office. In it, the president ranged broadly, zipping back and forth between telling stories, spouting political diatribes, singing songs from his childhood, phoning Fidel Castro, broadcasting from Moscow, and fulminating against enemies real and imagined. But at its core, the theme of the show was always the same: empathy. In each episode, Chávez would chat, one-on-one, with a few of his supporters, asking about their lives, their aspirations, and their problems, and always, always feeling their pain. If Trump liked to play a mogul on TV, Chávez liked to play Oprah.

Chávez's performances could be spellbinding. He would decry the rising price of chicken and then, teary-eyed, hug a woman over her trouble finding the money for school supplies for her children. He would sit and listen carefully as people described their problems, learning their names and asking them questions to draw out the details of their situation. It was during these moments of personally bonding with his followers, more than during his ideological tirades, that Chávez shifted the basis of allegiance to him from the political realm to the realm of primary identification. Such moments turned followers into fans, fans who in time would coalesce into a political tribe: people who crafted an identity out of their shared devotion to "El Comandante."

The adulation audiences showered on their star was the raw material Chávez turned into power, which he then used to dismantle the checks and balances at the heart of Venezuela's constitution. I grew up in Venezuela, and the experience of seeing Chávez transform his fame into power and his power into celebrity marked me. So when Trump's circus engulfed U.S. politics in 2016, I watched with a horror suffused with déjà vu. The histrionics, the easy answers, the furious denunciations by a nebulous elite that woke up to the danger far too late—I had seen this movie before. In Spanish.

POWER AT ANY PRICE

The spread of this new kind of autocracy around the world amounts to a new kind of challenge for the world's democracies. Whereas the tragic events that marked much of the twentieth century revealed the threats that democracy faced from the outside—fascism, Nazism, communism—the threats in the twenty-first century are coming from inside the house. The new

breed of autocrats corrode democracy by taking part in democratic politics and then hollowing them out until only an empty shell remains.

The new autocrats can do this because they have neither an interest in nor a need for a coherent ideology. Their agenda is to obtain and keep power at any cost. The result is quite different from the political movements that characterized the twentieth century. Fascists and communists challenged democracy based on all-encompassing alternative systems of belief that may have been morally abhorrent but were, at least, internally consistent. Today's autocrats don't bother with any of that. Instead of proposing an alternative ideology, they adopt the phraseology of the ideology they are seeking to supplant, debasing it in the process.

Rather than do away with elections altogether, the new pseudo-dictators hold pseudo-elections. That is, they hold events that mimic the appearance of a democratic election but that lack the essential elements of free and fair competition through the ballot box. In Nicaragua, President Daniel Ortega did not abolish elections; he merely jailed all his main opponents in the months preceding the election of 2021. In Hungary, parliamentary districts were manipulated to severely underrepresent areas opposed to Orbán. And in the United States, Republicans and, to a lesser extent, Democrats have turbocharged the venerable old gerrymander with sophisticated election-mapping software that will make an increasing share of congressional districts noncompetitive.

Not only are elections debased in this way, but the rule of law is also reliably drained of meaning through the use of pseudo-law. New laws are drafted in ways designed to apply to just one case—invariably undoing a constraint on the power of the leader. Examples abound: in 2001, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi helped change the rules on conflict of interest to exempt his own media ventures; in 2008, Putin evaded term limits by concocting a job swap with his prime minister.

These autocrats hound independent judges off the bench, intimidate them into silence, or render them powerless through court packing. Tribunals continue to hand down rulings that punctiliously observe all the conventions of normal legal procedure but that have predetermined outcomes based on political grounds. The biggest prize, of course, is the supreme court. Controlling it changes the game. In 2015, a group of Venezuelan legal scholars published an analysis showing that from 2005 to 2013, Chávez's handpicked supreme court handed down 45,474 rulings, and in every case, it sided with the executive branch. The Duma, the lower house of Russia's parliament, has exhibited a similar pattern in its dealings with Putin. No law that threatens his power or interests has been passed in two decades.

Soon, the public sphere is falsified, as well. Twentieth-century autocrats jailed dissenting voices and sent censors into newsrooms. Old-style dictators still behave that way today. The more recent breed of autocrats, however, often seek the same results but through less visible—and more democratic-looking—means. Rather than shut down newspapers and TV networks, they fine them into financial unsustainability or send ostensible private investors (who are in fact government cronies) to buy them outright. Orbán's allies, for example, have bought up and consolidated hundreds of private Hungarian news outlets. For anyone outside a very small, politically savvy circle of observers, it was easy to miss. But the media content gradually changed until it became difficult to distinguish the reporting from the regime's propaganda. Similar developments have taken place in Egypt, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Montenegro,

Nigeria, Pakistan, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Tanzania, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, and Venezuela, among other countries.

Over time, a pseudo-press arises, maintaining all the conventions and outward trappings of independent journalism but none of its substance. The combination of pseudo-elections, pseudo-law, and a pseudo-press yields pseudo-democracy: a system of government that mimics democracy in order to subvert it.

CAPOS IN CHARGE

But falsifying democracy is a means, not an end. The ultimate goal is to turn the state into a profit center for a new criminalized coterie and to use the proceeds of large-scale criminality to tighten its grip on power. The new autocrats go well beyond traditional corruption; they are not merely overseeing a system in which some criminals inside and outside government furtively enrich themselves. Rather, they use criminal actions and strategies to further the political and economic interests of their government at home and abroad.

Criminalized states put the usual repertoire of a mob boss, such as demands for protection money, overt intimidation, and back-street beatings, to political ends: silencing opponents, cowering critics, enforcing complicity, enriching allies, and buying political support internally and externally. A criminalized state combines traditional statecraft with the strategies and methods of transnational criminal cartels, and it deploys this mixture in the service of both domestic political goals and geopolitical competition. Some cases are infamous, such as the thick morass of business, intelligence, and political ties between the Trump Organization and Russian oligarchs and officials that led to Trump's first impeachment and is the focus of continuing investigations by various different U.S. agencies. In Russia, Putin has managed to turn the old Soviet system into a Mafia state in which a minuscule elite enjoys security and extraordinary wealth and answers to him alone. Venezuela provides an even more extreme example: in cahoots with the regime of President Nicolás Maduro, Colombian guerrillas in the jungles of Venezuela illegally mine gold that is then laundered in Qatar and Turkey, circumventing U.S. sanctions on financing the Venezuelan regime. This is organized crime, yes, but it is much more than that; it is organized crime as statecraft, coordinated by the governments of three separate nation-states.

SLEEPWALKING TOWARD AUTOCRACY

Democracies are at a structural disadvantage when it comes to combating the rise of this new breed of autocrats. Debate, forbearance, compromise, tolerance, and a willingness to accept the legitimacy of an adversary's bid for power are necessary for a functioning democracy. But in the age of politics as entertainment, these values continually lose space to their opposites, namely, invective, maximalism, intolerance, fandom, messianism, the demonization of opponents, and, too often, hate and violence.

The traditional separation of politics and entertainment imposed its own set of guardrails: formal institutions (such as laws, legislatures, and courts) and informal norms (of decorum, the dignity of office, and so on) were highly effective ways of hemming in power. But norms are unspoken and ill defined, making them vulnerable. When politicians are just public servants, it is much easier for the political system to impose restraints on their behavior. The new autocrats' celebrity status loosens those restraints. Their fans have so much of their own identities invested in their leaders that they can't allow them to fail.

Moreover, burgeoning discontent around much of the globe has created a fertile environment for these autocrats. This frustration is not limited to those in penury, for it is not just the poor who are disappointed with their lot in life. Nor is this anger solely attributable to economic inequality, although inequality, having acquired unprecedented potency as a source of social conflict, feeds the feeling of injustice that makes people angry. An important source of anxiety for those who have their basic needs covered (food, a roof over their heads, some regular income, health care, safety) is status dissonance: the bitterness that wells up when people conclude that their economic and social progress is blocked, and they are stuck on a lower rung than the one they expected to occupy in society. Status dissonance is amplified by the sense that rather than coming closer to your rightful place in society, you are falling further and further below your natural spot in the pecking order.

This experience of status dissonance ties together the outlooks of widely different people who have supported aspiring autocrats in very different contexts. The downwardly mobile schoolteacher in the Philippines, the displaced autoworker in Michigan, the unemployed university graduate in Moscow, and the struggling construction worker in Hungary may not have much in common, but they all feel the sting of disappointment from a life that doesn't live up to the expectations they had formed, to the future they had envisioned for themselves and their families. The story of the twenty-first century so far is of how the disappointed lash out politically, creating a series of crises that liberal political systems are ill equipped to process and respond to in a timely way.

Even when they are operating effectively, the best democratic systems rely on messy compromises that leave everyone somewhat—but never too—disaffected and dissatisfied. More and more, however, democracies are not at their best. Instead of involving messy but workable compromises, they are gripped by perpetual gridlock. Compromises, when they are found, are sometimes so minimal as to leave all sides seething with contempt. It is when this happens—when the capacity for problem solving dips below a critical threshold—that the terrain is ready for autocrats who promise simple solutions to complex problems.

This sclerosis can be chalked up in part to regulatory capture, in which industries, through lobbying and political contributions, are able to exert enormous influence over the regulatory agencies supposed to watch over them. This is sometimes seen as a purely U.S. disease, but it shouldn't be. In all mature democracies, well-organized interest groups increasingly own the decision-making processes in the issue areas of concern to them. It is nearly impossible for the European Union, for instance, to make significant changes to its agricultural policies without the approval of European agribusiness. Mining interests in Australia, telecommunications companies in Canada, and cement firms in Japan have all perfected the dark arts of regulatory capture, becoming by far the predominant voices in the policy debates in each of their areas. In the United States, Wall Street, Hollywood, and Silicon Valley are not just geographic locations; they are also home to the headquarters of large companies that have a tight grip on their regulators. The inability to contain regulatory capture means that as income inequality deepens, growth itself has become one of those policies that benefits a few people a lot and many people hardly at all. Hemmed in by more areas of policy that have been captured by industry interests, today's democracies find it increasingly hard to provide adequate responses to the demands of the voters. Recent evidence is the political upheaval in Chile, a developing country that had become both economically successful and a stable democracy. The dashed expectations of an already

frustrated middle class fueled the resentment that built gradually and then boiled over all at once, rocking the system that had been in place for three decades.

Weaknesses commonly found in democracies also make it difficult to mount a united front against the new autocrats. Look, for instance, at how voting structures in the European Union have prevented it from holding Orban to account or from stopping Hungary from blocking criticism of China and Russia. The Trump administration's frustrations with the challenges and democratic norms of multilateral diplomacy caused it to withdraw from various international bodies. In 2018, it pulled out of the UN Human Rights Council, citing the membership of malefactors such as China, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Venezuela. Yet as Eliot Engel, then a Democratic congressman from New York, noted, that withdrawal just allowed "the council's bad actors to follow their worst impulses unchecked." The way to strengthen democracy is not to withdraw from universalist bodies, which are the battlegrounds for influence, but to forge alliances within them and use them more effectively. For instance, democracies account for 80 percent of the funding for the World Health Organization: properly concentrated, such power could have blunted the effort of China, which contributes only two percent, to distort the organization's initial investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic.

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO US?

"We do not know what is happening to us," the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset wrote in the disorienting year of 1929, adding, "and that is precisely what is happening to us." The plight of democracy today recalls his admonition.

The defenders of democracy seem caught off balance not just by the blatant criminality of the new autocrats but also by the onslaught against democratic checks and balances. Political leaders and policymakers have failed to counter the illiberal, populist narratives; the polarizing tactics; and the poisonous power of post-truth deceit. They have not yet put forward a compelling case for liberal democracy under the rule of law—an institutional arrangement too many young people have come to see as a quaint throwback with little relevance to contemporary realities. Worse, disoriented by the multiple layers of dissimulation that modern autocracy involves, democratic societies have not even fully grasped that they are in a fight to protect their freedoms. This is a key strategic advantage for autocratic leaders: they know that they must undermine democracy to survive, whereas democrats have yet to realize that they need to defeat the new autocracy if they are to survive.

Fighting back will require determination and the mobilization of all types of resources—political, economic, and technological. Those battling on behalf of democratic institutions will need to fortify checks and balances and pass measures aimed at fostering fair political competition. Diplomats keen to preserve democracy will need to push for more effective rules in the international arena to check the spread of post-truth deception in media new and old.

None of this is possible without clarity. No problem has ever been solved without first being identified, and no fight has ever been won without first being waged. Recognizing the magnitude of the problem is an important first step; action must follow. If democracies wait until the new autocrats' endgame is unambiguous, it will be too late.

- MOISÉS NAÍM is a Distinguished Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, an internationally syndicated columnist, and the author of *The Revenge of Power*:

How Autocrats Are Reinventing Politics for the 21st Century (St. Martin's Press, 2022),
from which this essay is adapted.