HOW TO GET AWAY WITH DICTATORSHIP IN THE AGE OF DEMOCRACY

BY LAURA SECORUN PALET MAY 21, 2016

It was a frigid winter in Uzbekistan and Sanjar Umarov stood shoeless and shivering in the middle of the prison courtyard for hours, fighting the freezing cold. It was torture. But his punishment was light in comparison to the other prisoners, he knew. He could hear their bloodcurdling screams. Like him, a notorious opposition leader, many were guilty of simply standing up to the president, Islam Karimov.

Umarov and the men and women who shared his pain in that Uzbek prison are not alone, of course. Political repression has survived the end of the Cold War and the advent of the internet quite nicely, thank you — just look to Bashar al-Assad's Syria or Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe. Indeed, 2,600 years after its birth in Athens, democracy is having a tougher go of it than one might expect. In its 2015 Democracy Index, the Economist Intelligence Unit reckons that just 12 percent of the world's population lives in what it calls "full democracy," down from about 15 percent in 2014. Three in 10 people live under regimes where challenging the status quo is likely to land them in prison, get them tortured or worse. The headline of a survey by the nonprofit Freedom House tells a similar tale. Its title: "Discarding Democracy: Return to the Iron Fist."

No doubt that technology has made it harder for dictatorships "to stay isolated," says Natasha Ezrow, an expert in authoritarian regimes at the University of Essex. Repressive rulers now have to deal with insurgencies on Facebook and Twitter; a Whatsapp group can be tougher to quash than, say, an assembly in the town square (unless, of course, you don't mind shutting down the whole country's telecom, which, hey, happens). "But that doesn't mean they are going to disappear anytime soon."

The Democracy Index counts 51 dictatorships around the world. These are states without free elections, civil liberties and an independent media, governed by rulers who knock down Umarov and others who try to stand up. Few of these strongmen — and the vast majority are men — attract global attention. Surprisingly or not, the world's lesser-known rulers with an iron fist can be just as awful as, if not more so, the Kim Jong-uns of the world. Which is to say: Long after Vladimir Putin finally rides into his sunset — shirtless and bareback, of course — his tyrannical brethren will still be with us.

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There are those who argue that dictatorship has its benefits — and not just for the dictators. Authoritarians, they say, can stabilize volatile regions, where elections are often a gamble that risks sparking violent turmoil. Don't be surprised if you see Western powers turning a blind eye to Paul Kagame's ever-longer rule in Rwanda. Many, inside and out, credit him for restoring stability and a kind of harmony to the country, which lay in genocidal ruin 20 years ago, and for its economic growth.

The linchpin of the dictatorship-can-be-good argument is China. Economically, it has outperformed its equally populous but democratic neighbor India, and some political observers credit an authoritarian government that pushed through radical economic reforms. "This could not have been done without strong leadership bent on pushing such policies, perhaps even to the point of employing coercion

against opponents," argues Honorary Professor of Development Studies at the Graduate Institute of Geneva Claude Auroi in his book *The Role of the State in Development Processes*. The argument has its many critics, many of them Chinese.

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Of course, the line between democracy and dictatorship can be blurry. The Democracy Index rates the United States a full democracy — but only barely, thanks to race-based police violence, Congressional gridlock and wiretapping. Even in countries with regular elections, it's easy to question the legitimacy of an election when candidates are bankrolled by a handful of über-wealthy donors and no new parties stand a chance of entering the political arena. In recent months, commentators left and right have wrung their hands over Donald J. Trump's alleged dictatorial tendencies. Others argue that the American two-party system itself functions as a kind of repression.

"Dictators are not fundamentally different from democratic political leaders," argues Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, political scientist, professor at New York University and author of *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior Is Almost Always Good Politics*. "They operate in a different environment, but they want the same: to impose their will."

But *living* in a dictatorship is much different than living in democracy. It is to live in terror, to fear saying the wrong thing to the wrong person — and to accept that terror as the normal state of affairs. Whether in Southeast Asia or sub-Saharan Africa, our requests to interview citizens about their strongmen rulers were met with some version of the same answer: "Please don't contact me again," "I know you're just trying to do your job, but I can't help you," "This is completely off the record, right? Because I want to be able to go back..." And their press offices? Radio silence.

Autocratic regimes do not survive on brute force, intimidation and media control alone. Nearly all of them rely on a little help from their friends. Laos, for example, has buddied up with its autocratic neighbors Thailand, Vietnam and older brother China. Russia is a good patron to a number of small dictatorships, including Belarus, a country that's remained impermeable to democratic change despite its proximity to Europe. Sometimes the strategy can backfire if your sugar daddy goes broke — in the wake of Russia's economic downturn, Belarus President Lukashenko's throne is starting to wobble.

In dictatorships, like so much else, size matters. And smaller is better.

If bigger and badder allies are not an option, another way to get away with dictatorship is to have deeply troubled neighbors — ideally a combination of human-rights violators and terrorists. Ethiopia, for example, a repressive regime without a doubt, comes across like a prodigal child next to the bombshell that is Somalia. The same goes for Uzbekistan, which is being courted by both Russia and the U.S. despite its grisly body count of dissidents. Why? Afghanistan. Karimov's country is the geopolitical cork in the bottle of terrorism and heroin trafficking that no one is willing to pop. Hence the recent multimillion-dollar military donation to a man who is reputed for boiling prisoners alive.

In dictatorships, like so much else, size matters. And, with the exception of China, smaller is better. Rivers of ink flow about Zimbabwe's elections while nothing is written about the lack thereof in tiny Swaziland. Its king would likely be a monster if he ruled a large country, but with fewer subjects than residents of Manhattan, King Mswati's eccentricities may seem more cute than cruel. The same goes for

Nicaragua. The country that had the U.S. obsessed during the Cold War now flies comfortably under its radar, even as President Ortega continues to hoard power and threatens to split the country in two with a pharaonic new channel.

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Enough on how dictators stay in power. How to put an end to these half-forgotten black holes of human rights? The first step might be to dispense with the notion that a popular uprising is enough. The image of citizens flocking the streets demanding change makes for great television, but few autocrats have been toppled by protest, and the ensuing power vacuums can be dangerous. Five years after the wave of hope and outrage that was the Arab Spring, Syria has become the worst humanitarian crisis since World War II.

Similarly, international interventions aren't enough, either. Even NATO-freed Libya has descended into chaos, bad enough that citizens in the capital, Tripoli, "have started to look back on the Qaddafi period as one of stability," says journalist Callum Paton, who has been covering the conflict. The 174,000 dead civilians from the war in Iraq and Afghanistan show that planting the "seed of democracy" can be a bloody business.

Instead, ridding the world of dictators will likely require fresh, counterintuitive approaches. Like asking nicely. Seriously: Some believe that carrots work better than sticks, and their reasoning is sound. After all, being a dictator is a dangerous job: Two out of three are ousted and it must be hard to sleep knowing that, somewhere at International Criminal Court, there's a fat dossier with your name on it. Even democratic leaders need soft landings. Until last year, Boston University ran an "African President-in-Residence" program for ex-African presidents. And, as an incentive for democratic behavior, there's the Ibrahim Prize — a $5 million payment plus a couple hundred thousand every year — for a former African head of state or of government who sticks to his constitutionally mandated term.

"What needs to done is to bring everyone together, the ruler, the opposition, the civil society and the business community, and draw a road map toward genuine democracy," says Jeffrey Smith, an expert in small dictatorships and executive director of the Vanguard Africa Movement. The examples are few but encouraging. The king of Spain in 1973 was given total power yet decided to turn the country into a democracy. In the '90s, several West African nations drew such road maps. Olusegun Obasanjo in Nigeria, for example, gave away his power to later be democratically elected.

The other winning strategy is to strengthen the rule of law. Instead of backing rebels who are likely to become dictators as soon as they step into the presidential palace, why not help create an army of lawyers and judges? It's a fine idea, one that nearly everyone supports — but generating the resolve and long-term investments is another story. Judges, courthouses and clerks receive "very little funding," says Ezrow.

So democracy could, indeed, win someday. We only need to sweet talk megalomaniacs into letting go of their hard-won, and addictive, power while educating an entire generation of would-be law students. Just that.

The governments of Uzbekistan, Syria, Zimbabwe, Jordan, Oman, China, India, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Belarus, Russia, Somalia, Afghanistan, Swaziland, Nicaragua, Eritrea, Yemen, Libya, Spain and Nigeria did not reply to requests for comment for this story.

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