

Session 1-Reading 2b: Authoritarian Advantages and Standard Playbook

Perceived Advantages of Autocracy

Advocates of soft autocracy or authoritarianism often highlight what they perceive as advantages over liberal democracy (although these views can be controversial) including:

- Government Stability: Advocates argue that authoritarian regimes can provide stability and predictability in governance, which is crucial for economic growth and social order. They contend that liberal democracies may be prone to frequent changes in leadership and policies, leading to instability.
- Efficiency: Soft autocracies often tout their ability to make swift decisions and implement policies without the delays associated with democratic processes such as legislative debates and elections. Proponents argue that this efficiency can be advantageous in addressing urgent challenges.
- Economic Development: Some proponents claim that authoritarian governments can more effectively pursue long-term economic development goals, as they are less constrained by opposition parties, interest groups, and frequent elections. They point to examples like China's rapid economic growth under an authoritarian regime.
- Social Order: Soft autocracies often prioritize social order and the suppression of dissent. Advocates argue that this helps maintain stability and prevents social unrest, which can be viewed as an advantage, especially in countries with a history of instability.
- Nationalism and Unity: Authoritarian regimes may emphasize nationalism and unity as a means to maintain control. Advocates argue that this can foster a sense of national identity and purpose, which they believe is lacking in liberal democracies characterized by individualism and diversity.
- Protection of Traditional Values: Some proponents of soft autocracy contend that these systems are better equipped to protect and promote traditional cultural and moral values, often contrasting this with what they see as the erosion of values in liberal democracies.
- Effective Response to Crises: Advocates argue that authoritarian governments can respond decisively to crises, such as pandemics or natural disasters, without the need for prolonged political negotiations or public debate.
- Control Misinformation: Proponents argue that control over information and media outlets helps maintain social cohesion and prevents the spread of harmful/divisive ideas.
- Easier and Faster than Trying to Fix a Problem-plagued Liberal Democracy.

Standard Playbook for Converting to an Autocracy

The playbook employed by modern autocrats, like Viktor Orbán, Vladimir Putin, and others, often involves a range of strategies aimed at consolidating and maintaining power. While the specific tactics may vary from one autocrat to another and depend on the political context, here are some of the key actions commonly undertaken by autocratic regimes:

- Control Media and Information Flows
 - Restrict media freedom and limit independent journalism.
 - Increase state control over or influence on media outlets.
 - Control public discourse; suppress dissenting voices and critical reporting.

- Promote propaganda and state narratives. Even if sprinkled with easily disprove-able lies, at state expense, people will tend to believe it if that is all they hear.
- Manipulate Elections
 - Hold elections that lack genuine competition.
 - Reduce the influence of opposition parties; marginalize or disqualify opposition candidates.
 - Control electoral commissions to ensure favorable outcomes.
 - Engage in voter suppression and gerrymandering.
- Co-opt Institutions; Erode Checks and Balances
 - Emphasize loyalty to the ruling regime over constitutional principles.
 - Appoint loyalists to key government positions and institutions, regardless of competency.
 - Weaken the independence of the judiciary; stack the courts with loyalists; discredit unfriendly judges.
 - Control or influence the legislative process.
 - Expand executive powers and centralize decision-making authority.
- Repression and Intimidation
 - Target political opponents, activists, and organizations in civil society.
 - Use legal mechanisms to persecute dissenters.
 - Employ surveillance and cyberattacks against critics.
 - Foster a climate of fear and self-censorship.
 - Reville supposed existential enemies, both internal and external, such as homosexuals, Jews, Islamic immigrants, opposition parties, George Soros, etc.
- Economic Patronage
 - Award economic benefits and contracts to loyal supporters.
 - Create a system of crony capitalism.
 - Control state resources and use them for political gain.
 - Maintain a tight grip on economic sectors that yield significant profits.
- Nationalism and Identity Politics
 - Exploit nationalist sentiments to build support.
 - Promote a divisive "us vs. them" narrative.
 - Scapegoat minority groups or external enemies.
 - Foster a sense of victimhood or exceptionalism.
- Undermine Civil Society
 - Restrict the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).
 - Impose regulations and laws that hinder the work of civil society groups.
 - Label civil society as "foreign agents" or threats to national security.
- Weaken the Rule of Law
 - Do whatever you can get away with that furthers your cause, whether legal or not, moral or not. He who has the power makes the rules.
 - Weaken or dismantle democratic institutions and norms.
- Co-opt the Military
 - Purge the officer corps of any potential dissidents or rivals.
 - Give military units money-making activities, such as control of certain sectors of the economy.