University of Nottingham
Institute for Policy and Engagement

Predicting the behaviour of authoritarian regimes: the benefits of historical perspectives

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Introduction

The University of Nottingham is currently conducting interdisciplinary research on the comparative history of Authoritarian Regimes, or tyranny, from the modern day to its roots in ancient Greece.

This note is intended as a provocation to facilitate conversations between experts in history, political science and international relations, including research teams in the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and elsewhere, on the insights that this historical research can contribute to today's policy challenges.

Our aim is for these conversations to support the development of a set of resources for policy makers and other interested audiences, providing a deep, historical and global perspective on the trajectory of Authoritarian Regimes and the interests that govern their actions.

Authoritarian regimes: the historical perspective

Why did Herod the Great (72-4 BC) execute his own wife and sons? Why did the Roman emperor Caligula (AD 12-41) wish to make his horse a senator? Why did Saddam Hussein invade Iran in 1980 or Kuwait in 1990? Why in 2017 was Kim Yong Un's brother murdered in Kuala Lumpur International Airport with a deadly nerve agent?

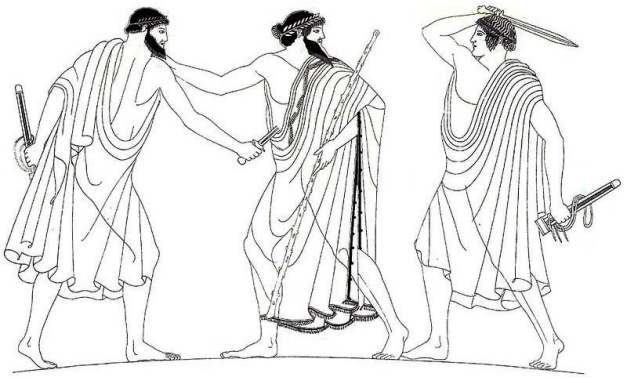
To better answer these questions, we believe that history can be a vital tool in understanding the workings and actions of Authoritarian Regimes in the twenty-first century. Conversations between historians and experts in modern non-democracies - analysts, policy-makers, and those who experience life in these regimes, whether as elite members, residents or dissidents - have enormous potential to enrich understanding and inform policy decisions. This note is intended as a provocation to facilitate a mutually beneficial exchange of ideas.

> 'One cannot understand modern tyranny in its specific character before one has understood the elementary and in a sense natural form of tyranny which is premodern tyranny.'
>
> Leo Strauss (1948) *On Tyranny*.

Authoritarian Regimes often seem reckless, unpredictable or even irrational (especially in the case of personalist dictatorships). It is easy to characterise the leaders of such despotisms as titanic, insane and almost inhuman monsters. But can their actions in fact be rational and, if so, also potentially predictable?

(Kim Jong-Un and Vladimir Putin meet at Vladivostok, Russia, in 2019 (source: www.kremlin.ru.)

What if this appearance of irrationality was due to *differences in the motivations and rationale* held by democratic and authoritarian leaders respectively? What if Authoritarian Regimes' behaviour is not only determined by the personality of individual leaders, cultural considerations, or ideology, but also the shared nature of Authoritarian Regimes? Regimes of a similar constitution would then behave in broadly similar ways across a broad range of case studies – and across time. The actions of regimes could be anticipated based on an understanding of how that regime is constituted.



(Drawing of an image from an ancient Greek vase showing the murder of Hipparchus, the brother of the Athenian tyrant Hippias, in 514 BC. © Wikimedia commons.)

Defining Terms: What are Authoritarian Regimes and how do they differ?

We define Authoritarian Regimes by the concentration of power into the hands of select group(s) or individual(s). Authoritarian Regimes and Democracies exist on a spectrum according to which power is *more* or *less* concentrated.

Authoritarian Regimes differ according to the extent to which power is concentrated and in whose hands. Ancient theorists distinguished between oligarchies and tyrannies; modern political scientists between party rule, military juntas and personalist dictatorships.

The behaviour of Authoritarian Regimes is often as contingent on power dynamics within the regime as on the personality and declared values of regime leaders.

Popular consent (or lack of it) is not an adequate measure of Authoritarianism. The popularity of an Authoritarian Regime cannot be measured accurately. All authoritarian regimes retain some core support, but power depends on the mobilisation not of the majority, as in a Democracy, but often *the best organised and resourced minority*.

(Herod the Great has his wife Marianne and his brother-in-law killed. © The Hague, KB, 78 D 38 II National Library of the Netherlands, via Wikimedia commons.)

But what determines the nature of a regime?

We argue that the **monopolisation of power**, and the extent to which power is concentrated, is the key underlining factor in cross-cultural and cross-temporal patterns of state behaviour.

This hypothesis is currently being tested by ongoing research carried out at the Department of Classics and Archaeology at the University of Nottingham. And we welcome all contributions from stakeholders and interested parties.

(Protests in Hong Kong © Guillaume Payen, CC 2.0 license)

Democracy in retreat: a new age of dictators

There is a pressing need to define and categorise Authoritarian Regimes more objectively and so better prepare policy makers in the UK, and other democracies, for encounters with the leaders of these states. In 2021 the pace of democratisation stalled globally. From Cuba, to Belarus, to Kazakhstan, to Hong Kong, pro-democratic movements have been suppressed. Regimes with non-democratic characteristics are increasing and levels of authoritarianism in affected states have worsened. Managing and negotiating with Non-Democracies is thus a key and growing challenge.

Our aim is to assist policy makers to make decisions that are both ***nuanced***, in recognising that Authoritarian Regimes differ and why they do so, and ***moral***, in recognising that **increased authoritarianism is a key threat to human happiness and peace**.

As Leo Strauss put it: ‘A social science that cannot speak of tyranny with the same confidence with which medicine speaks, for example, of cancer, cannot understand social phenomena as what they are.’ Our aim is to provide a surer and more objective diagnosis of tyranny with the view towards more reliable treatment.

Our Research

This project is the first comparative history of the effects of the monopolisation of power from ancient Greece to the present day. The Greeks and Romans were the first to name and theorise authoritarian power. Our English word tyrant is derived from the Greek word *tyrannos*, while 'dictator' is a Roman term.

This deep history of authoritarian regimes promises to reveal and empirically document common behavioural patterns. The progressive monopolisation of power by Vladimir Putin since 1999 or Xi Jinping since 2012 has been accompanied by worsening human rights abuses at home and belligerence internationally. A similar 'tyrant's progress' was first described by one of the earliest theorists of authoritarianism, the Athenian Plato, whose description of the 'tyrannical soul' was modelled on his knowledge of Dionysius, the ruler of Sicily (405-367 BC). The tyrant is not a new phenomenon.

A key insight of ancient philosophy, such as Plato, is that the distribution of power within a regime (i.e. its constitution) affects the actions of rulers and subjects. Similar regimes will produce similar behaviour. And while modern states' capacity and means of coercion greatly differ, the monopolisation of power nonetheless produces a common set of aims, motivations and interests. We argue that the first theories of authoritarianism can be substantiated empirically and, moreover, are a valuable tool for comprehending the actions of personalist dictatorships in the twenty-first century.

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(Front cover image: police officers tear the shirt of a protester at Sha Tin of Hong Kong on July 14, 2019. Photo by PHILIP FONG/AFP via Getty Images.)

Questions for discussion

- What is it like to experience life in an Authoritarian Regime, from the level of an ordinary citizen to the centre of the elite? How will these patterns affect the behaviour of regimes and their prospects for survival over time, and how should policy makers respond?
- In 1983 Ronald Reagan dubbed the Soviet Union an 'Evil Empire'. How can Authoritarian Regimes, and the varying levels of threat they pose, be identified and classified more objectively, in ways that support more nuanced policy responses to different regimes?
- Do Western leaders tend to underestimate the strengths and ruthlessness of dictators in negotiations, and to overestimate their own powers of persuasion?
- Can historical patterns assist policy makers in developing a franker appreciation for the strengths and weaknesses of Authoritarian Regimes? How can democratic policy makers better learn the lessons of past encounters with tyrants?

Further Reading

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