

EPO **FLIER** No. 14

The EPO-FLIER wants to provide staff with uncensored, independent information at times of social conflict

## The dictator's dilemma

It is not easy to be a dictator these days. Modern dictators face a dilemma: namely that behaving like a dictator creates problems for the dictator, not only for the people over whom he is being dictatorial. A modern dictator has the bad luck of being born at the wrong time in history. He needs to navigate through a complex environment. This paper looks at some of the research that has been done in this interesting area.

### Being a real (would-be) dictator, why should your rules and decisions make sense?

The following citations are taken from the book *Why Societies Need Dissent*, by Cass R. Sunstein<sup>1</sup>. Sunstein observes that “Some laws are rarely violated,” and poses the question: “When will people obey laws simply because they exist? When is vigorous enforcement necessary?” “Democracies, far more than tyrannies,” he writes, “can count on compliance without enforcement.” The main reason is that “... if the system is genuinely democratic, people know that the law is not an arbitrary imposition by a self-appointed elite. But when a tyrant issues an edict, people are likely to think that it represents the tyrant’s will alone. Unless the tyrant is thought to be wise, his edict will carry no signal about what should be done.” He concludes, “And when a law is so inconsistent with people’s values that it cannot, in a democracy, be much enforced, it loses its legitimacy. It has no claim to regulate conduct at all.” Or even worse: “Informed citizens might think that the law is asking them to do something senseless”. When people realise that the rules in force have no legitimacy, disobedience, anarchy, or even revolution, become more likely.



That's where the dictator's power comes into play: “If a tyrant is able to create a culture in which people are fearful of random but horrendous punishments, compliance is more likely.”<sup>2</sup>

William B. Snyderwine's *The Dictator's Dilemma*<sup>12</sup> puts forward some ways to help modern dictators stay longer in power. Snyderwine suggests: “Perhaps the best method of keeping a revolution at bay is to make the people happier by governing better.” Of course, for a real (would-be) dictator that is not an option. Such men are prisoners of their own ego. They believe that their power is unlimited, and their ego obliges them to show it. Governing better or resorting to the use of valid arguments to convince people could be seen as a sign of weakness. That's why making absurd rules is so important. By forcing people to obey absurd rules, the dictator demonstrates his power. It is equally important for him to take arbitrary decisions – to show that he can<sup>3</sup>.

But such strategy has a price. When rules and decisions carry no signal other than that the dictator (thinks he) has the power to enforce them, his authority depends solely on his ability to exert that power, for example by intimidation or corruption. Both measures can become expensive, and leave traces.

<sup>1</sup> *Why Societies Need Dissent* (chapter 2), by Cass R. Sunstein, Harvard University Press (2005)

<sup>2</sup> [https://econ.duke.edu/uploads/media\\_items/snyderwine-dictator-s-dilemma-final.original.pdf](https://econ.duke.edu/uploads/media_items/snyderwine-dictator-s-dilemma-final.original.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Any similarity with persons who are not real (would-be) dictators is pure coincidence

## Opposing forces: unhappiness and fear

A dictator faces a trade-off between repression and building the support he needs. The problem is that the number of unhappy people increases as a function of the number of people being punished or killed, and, as Snyderwine puts it, *"The 'intimidation' effect reduces the likelihood of a revolution while the 'unhappiness' effect increases it."*<sup>2</sup>

*"Severe censorship and the construction of firewalls is suggested as a countermeasure to avoid 'unhappiness' spreading via social media."*<sup>2</sup> A further countermeasure is propaganda; dictators like to disseminate misinformation. They hope that *"if censorship is strong and manipulative enough, people might not even know the things they are missing."*<sup>2</sup> But this approach is doomed to fail. People talk to each other, read (foreign) newspapers and consult the internet. Sooner rather than later they will find out. And if people suffer severely enough under a dictator, they will revolt, as history has shown.

*"When people lose faith in nearly everything ... they are more likely to take the streets."*<sup>4</sup>

Successful authoritarian regimes know this and react before unhappiness slips out of control: The world's leading example, the Chinese Communist Party, decided to increase freedom, justice and wealth step by step in order to keep people happy<sup>4</sup>.

## Incompatible requirements: brutality and democratic image

Dictators who are seen by a part of their subjects to behave in an acceptable way have more support. This support allows them to divide and rule. But in fact, behaving as a dictator puts an intolerable strain on any dictator's regime, a strain that is ultimately likely to lead to the regime's demise. If he stops punishing his people, his threats become less credible, and finally ineffective, while continuing or intensifying his brutal actions will damage his reputation.

---

<sup>4</sup> *The Dictator's Learning Curve*, William J. Dobson, Vintage (2013)

## All modern dictators fall - the question is when

The modern dictator walks on thin ice. And the ice is likely to get thinner and thinner as time passes. The dictator's dilemma will usually lead to his downfall, which can be provoked either by a massive uprising when unhappiness becomes unbearable, or by the pressure exerted by external parties. Or both.

Suppressed people learn how to apply measures everyone can take, to chip away at the dictator's authority and credibility: for example public demonstrations, strikes, caricatures, leaflets, boycotts, contributions to online debates, discussing with like-minded affected people, and sharing best practice one spots.

Knowing that every one of the dictator's mistakes accelerates his fall, his opponents will try to create situations where the dictator fails. They will, for example, ensure that their dictator does not meet his objectives. Of course, a good dictator will always try to blame others when things go wrong. Perhaps one of his partners is at fault, perhaps an opposition leader, or a whistleblower. Or he just invents someone. In the end, though, he won't get away with it:

*"That is the problem for authoritarian leaders everywhere. Eventually, you run out of scapegoats."*<sup>4</sup>

Where a dictator's authority depends on external partners, the dilemma is worse. He needs to keep them happy. If he does not respect human rights, he can become unacceptable for them. That's why modern dictators and authoritarian leaders try to give themselves a democratic image. For example, they often adapt and interpret (existing) legal systems to give them maximum power over their people. But at the same time, they need to pretend to observe international standards of the rule of law. These are manifestly incompatible requirements. Inconsistencies will sooner or later become visible. The international community will then start to observe his conduct with a more critical eye. At some point, his propaganda will start to fail. The dictator becomes unacceptable to foreign governments and other stakeholders. He then loses their respect, and later their support, ultimately becoming an embarrassment. Embargos and sanctions are likely to follow, finally pushing him towards his fall.

Even worse, an absolute ruler who tries to give himself a democratic image necessarily becomes ridiculous. And when his subjects realise that his rules have no purpose other than to serve as a threat or to express his arrogance, the rules lose their legitimacy. Then, disobedience can become frequent, and might eventually spread to rules which would be observed in an environment where the rule-of-law is respected. The slightest loss in power will then render the dictatorship unstable.

## Control is an illusion, total control an utopia

Democratically minded people are not going to be satisfied with 'freedom of thought' alone, but will demand to make use of their right to free speech. They know, or learn, how to use modern communication means in order to safely disseminate uncensored information. Think of the Arab Spring, where social media were uncontrollable by the people in power<sup>5</sup>. Also the internet provides sufficient ways to tell others about the things which are wrong. And there are ways to significantly improve internet privacy<sup>6</sup>. They will learn how to build safe communication networks in order to organise resistance.

<sup>5</sup> <http://blogs.worldbank.org/publicsphere/dictator-s-dilemma>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.torproject.org/>