

## **Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century**

Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, Published by Princeton  
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In today's day and age, the persistence and even resurgence of dictatorial regimes may seem perplexing, especially in the aftermath of the 21st-century democracy boom and rapid technological advancements. While this is partially true as traditional autocrats relying on violence and repression have largely ceased to exist, albeit with a few exceptions, a new breed of authoritarian leaders, termed 'Spin Dictators' according to the authors Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, is thriving globally.

In exploring contemporary authoritarianism, Sergei Guriev, a professor of economics at Sciences Po in Paris, and Daniel Treisman, a professor of political science at the University of California in Los Angeles, have analysed this evolving phenomenon. Their focus is on the means and methods employed by 20th-century dictators, including figures such as Hitler, Mao, and Stalin, who infamously used violent and coercive tactics to maintain control. This examination serves as a backdrop for contrasting these historical approaches with the strategies embraced by 21st-century authoritarian figures like Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orbán. Through this, the authors discerned a distinct model of authoritarianism emerging, characterised by a subtler form of manipulation, reliant on the distortion of information and the skilful imitation of democratic processes while marking a

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stark departure from the brute force commonly associated with earlier dictatorships.

The book is divided into three parts and eight chapters, with each section dedicated to exploring a different aspect of the 'Spin Dictator' model. Chapters are further divided into smaller sections, marked by subheadings, exploring different examples, each concluding with a section titled "Checking the Evidence," dedicated to detailing the statistical data supporting the authors' arguments. The initial section offers a comprehensive introduction to the subject matter and a brief overview of the history of authoritarianism. This serves to guide readers through the upcoming shifts. It also provides an opportunity for the authors to detail their writing and data collection process. It includes clarification of their criteria for what constitutes a 'Spin Dictator' rather than a 'Fear Dictator.'

The second section simply titled "How It's Done" clarifies exactly by delving in-depth into the means and methods of modern-day spin dictators. It explores distinguishing factors between modern-day spin dictators and traditional fear dictators by examining and categorising the differences in their preferred tactics, such as the use of overt or covert use of repression and violence, the differences in the use of propaganda, and manipulation of democratic institutions to maintain control. According to the authors, modern-day dictators vary significantly from 20th-century ones such as Hitler and Stalin who used mass repression and public displays of violence to set an example to any potential opposition arising. In contrast, spin dictators, influenced by Lee Kuan Yew's rule in Singapore in the 1970s generally employ a softer touch with more covert means of repressing opposition and consolidating their rule.

Similarly, the authors identify propaganda as a distinguishing factor between traditional fear dictators and newer spin dictators. While the use of propaganda remains an important facet in both models of authoritarianism, the way it is utilised is distinct. According to the

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author, traditional dictators such as Mao focused more on monopolising communication by repressing, censoring and in some cases even outright banning opposing media. In contrast to this, spin dictators tend to employ more covert means of achieving their goals. This includes bribing media executives through promises of money, power, or other benefits such as tax write-offs, to spin the narrative in their favour instead of overtly stamping down opposing voices. This allows such leaders to maintain control over the spread of information while also seemingly allowing the freedom of the Press, thus maintaining the veneer of democracy amongst the public.

Another way in which spin dictators vary from traditional autocrats is their preference for popularity. While traditional autocrats openly used violent and repressive tactics to demoralise any potential opposition, spin dictators are generally too concerned with their public perception to do the same. Spin dictators are commonly seen allowing polls and surveys to be regularly conducted within their states, demonstrating their popularity among their people and allowing the illusion of democracy to be maintained. However, despite outward appearances, the credibility of such surveys is often questionable and subject to tampering.

The third section of the book, titled "Why it's happening and what to do about it?" explores various arguments explaining the rise in spin dictators. The authors consider potential factors such as broader historical trends, a decrease in overall wars and violent conflicts, and the influence of the 'Civilisation Process,' before ultimately attributing the shift to a complex interplay of three main forces: the globalisation of economies and information, the shift from industrial to post-industrial societies, and the rise of an international liberal order through the growth of human rights movements. This is a phenomenon they dub "The Modernisation Cocktail."

All of this begs the question, how can democracies effectively defend against this new type of authoritarianism? Traditionally the West focused on containment and later shifted to economic development and integration after the Cold War ended, as their primary means of countering the spread of autocracy. While the authors do not discount the effectiveness of these methods entirely, particularly economic integration, they do propose a different strategy which they term “adversarial engagement.” According to this approach, the West must continue to engage with such authoritarian states and use their increased interconnectedness to slowly nudge these states towards free government, rather than decoupling from them entirely in defence of their interests. While this is likely a slow process, the authors encourage Western states to remain vigilant, coordinate with allies, collaborate with private sector entities, and welcome modernisation to see slow but sure change.

All in all, this book serves as a valuable addition to the existing literature on contemporary authoritarianism. Particularly, due to its unique data-driven approach to analysing and categorising the distinctive pattern of authoritarianism that has seen a rise in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The methodical approach towards examining this phenomenon by the authors, as well as the generous use of examples and supplementary reading material, makes this book a valuable asset for readers seeking insight into the intricacies of authoritarian rule as well as the potential means of countering their spread. ■