

VOLUME 1

D-HUB

# THE AUTHORITARIAN PLAYBOOK

Top plays mastered  
by new authoritarians



**ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN**

**TOOLKIT**

Greatest hits to defend  
and renew democracies

**D-HUB**

**VOLUME 1**

# **THE AUTHORITARIAN PLAYBOOK**

Top plays mastered  
by new authoritarians

**CURATION OF PLAYS:** Ricken Patel, Nika Kovač, Agustín Frizzera  
and Umanzor López-Baltodano

**EDITION:** Agustín Frizzera and Umanzor López-Baltodano

**DESIGN AND COVER:** Kalany Ballardin | Foresti Design

**D-HUB THANKS THE MEMBERS OF ITS COMMUNITY FOR THEIR FEEDBACK  
AND COMMENTS, WHICH HELPED IMPROVE THIS VOLUME.**

**D-HUB © 2026**

**D-HUB.ORG**

ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN TOOLKIT © 2026 BY DEMOCRACY HUB (D-HUB) IS LICENSED UNDER CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION-NONCOMMERCIAL-NODERIVATIVES 4.0 INTERNATIONAL. TO VIEW A COPY OF THIS LICENSE, VISIT [HTTPS://CREATIVECOMMONS.ORG/LICENSES/BY-NC-ND/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

 CC BY-NC-ND 4.0



Twenty-first-century authoritarian leaders follow a clear playbook. It's not a formula or a recipe but a dynamic set of strategies and tactics deployed across different contexts.

In response, we've started to crack open their playbook and crafted something of our own: an ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN TOOLKIT. Developed with insight from hundreds of frontline democracy defenders, scholars, and strategists, this 10-volume series is packed with the most effective plays to counter elected authoritarianism and safeguard our democracies.

This Toolkit is not a silver bullet. It's a catalyst designed to ignite your vision and creativity as you confront the challenges ahead. Its plays are archetypal but open to innovation and adaptation to the local context of those who use them.

We hope you use it and share it. Maybe the next big play, we'll learn from you.

**Ricken Patel**

CO-CHAIR, D-HUB

# CONTENT

**INTRODUCTION**

6

by Nika Kovač

## FEATURED GRAND STRATEGY

10

# SYNCRETIC POPULISM

**BASED ON THE CASES OF**

Najib Bukele - Narendra Modi - Viktor Orbán -  
Eduardo Bolsonaro - Jair Bolsonaro - Donald Trump  
- Javier Milei - Rodrigo Duterte - Pablo Marçal - Vladimir  
Putin - Abdel Fattah el-Sisi - Law and Justice Party (PiS) -  
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan - Yoweri Museveni - Thai Junta -  
Alexander Lukashenko - Benjamin Netanyahu -  
Alternative for Germany (AfD) - Daniel Ortega

**VOLUME 1**

**THE AUTHORITARIAN  
PLAYBOOK**

# 8 PLAYS

**1**

17

**A NEW DISRUPTIVE STYLE**

**2**

29

**A NEW COMMS ECOSYSTEM**

**3**

43

**FLOOD THE ZONE WITH SHIT**

**4**

53

**STRONG IDEAS,  
EMOTIONAL APPEAL**

**5**

65

**ENGAGING STORYTELLING**

**6**

75

**CALCULATED COMPASSION**

**7**

85

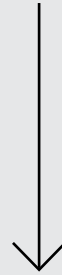
**WAR ON DISSENT**

**8**

99

**BENDING CHECKS  
AND BALANCES**

# INTRODUCTION



## HOW DO AUTHORITARIANS SUCCEED TODAY?

by Nika Kovač

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, D-HUB

## **THEY DON'T MAKE AUTHORITARIANS LIKE THEY USED TO.**

While closed regimes, military coups, and one-party systems persist, today's wave of authoritarianism is driven by a new breed of leaders ushering in **ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM** through democratic backsliding.

Scholars have extensively analyzed this trend. While invaluable, much of that work emphasizes denouncing its negative aspects, particularly regarding the impact of populist and polarizing rhetoric, the undermining of liberal institutions, and the repression of dissent.

This *Authoritarian Playbook* takes a different approach, aiming to understand what makes these leaders appealing. We don't advocate adopting authoritarian tactics, but we believe some of their methods—such as effective communication, mobilizing support, and reading public sentiment—can be adapted to defend democracy. Recognizing the authoritarians' strengths in key areas is vital to countering their influence, Volume 1 of

the Anti-Authoritarian Toolkit (AATK) explores how these leaders gain popularity, win elections, erode institutions, and attack activists, helping democracy defenders critically assess their strategies.

Not all the politicians depicted here are fully authoritarian. Some employ only parts of the plays described in this volume, and others do so in contexts where democratic institutions constrain their actions. Additionally, not all authoritarian plays are covered. However, this volume offers an initial roadmap to break down the strategies used by this new type of authoritarian leader or movement you may be confronting in your context.

You are not alone. The D-Hub community is here to connect all of us, learning from each other's successes and mistakes. Unveiling the Authoritarian Playbook is the first step. The next volumes of the Toolkit provide the best plays to respond to authoritarians and defend our democracies.

**WE CAN DO IT TOGETHER.  
WELCOME TO THE DEMOCRACY  
HUB COMMUNITY.**

# HOW THIS PUBLICATION WORKS

Democracy defenders are busy and practical people. That is why we designed this publication to be concise and engaging.

This volume includes **ONE GRAND STRATEGY** and **EIGHT PLAYS**.

## GRAND STRATEGY

A guiding framework that aligns all actions and tactics with the long-term goal of power and control consolidation. The foundation of the grand strategy provides coherence and effectiveness to individual plays.

## PLAY

An action that can be adapted to different moments and contexts. It may be a strategy, tactic, or tool. The key criteria for its inclusion are its deployment, effectiveness, and relevance in supporting authoritarian agendas.

FOR EACH, YOU WILL FIND THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION →

# THE PLAY

Description of the strategy, tactic or move



## WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

A more detailed depiction of the play, with basic steps of implementation



## WHO'S DONE IT?

Examples of how the play has been deployed in real life



## WHAT CAN DEMOCRATS LEARN?

Basic lessons and recommendations from the play



## LEARN MORE

Links to resources

The concluding section, **"WE CAN HELP YOU,"** provides contact details for those needing help confronting elected authoritarian politics.

**FEATURED GRAND STRATEGY**

# **SYNCRETIC POPULISM**

**OPPORTUNISTICALLY  
SYNTHESIZING IDEOLOGIES**

# THE PLAY

**“Syncretic populism” is all about using a masterful blend of elements from different aspects of the political spectrum to create a compelling, broad-based appeal to lead. In practice, this approach transcends traditional left-right or progressive-conservative boundaries, engaging a diverse constituency through a mix of policies and rhetoric.**

**By exploiting widespread disillusionment with traditional political labels, elected authoritarians craft a relatable narrative and present themselves as “one of the people,” genuinely attuned to the public's concerns and lived experiences.**

**In some cases, syncretic populism goes beyond mere words as it also manifests in actions. It is a rhetoric that, once in power, sometimes translates into tangible material benefits for the people, addressing their immediate needs.**

**By providing practical solutions and showing responsiveness to everyday issues, new authoritarians reinforce their appeal and foster loyalty among a diverse base of supporters.**



# WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

## 1 A LEADER ABOVE TRADITIONAL POLITICAL DIVISIONS

Syncretic populism involves creating a multifaceted political persona that transcends traditional ideological divisions. This blending is crafted so that the leader appears responsive to a wide range of societal needs and people's concerns in everyday life. The ideological mixture helps cultivate an image of the leader as an all-encompassing protector of the people, capable of addressing a diversity of public desires.

## 2 DIRECT COMMUNICATION

New authoritarian leaders exploit direct communication channels, particularly social network platforms, to bypass traditional media. In this way, they directly engage with the public and can target specific audiences.

### **3** **POLICIES THAT DELIVER FOR A WIDE SPECTRUM OF CONSTITUENCIES**

Once in power, syncretic populism transforms the narrative used to gather support into policies that strategically combine different ideological elements. This approach is both opportunistic and deliberately structured to secure the leader's base by addressing a range of issues that matter to various voter groups. For instance, a leader might adopt conservative positions on issues like nationalism and immigration, while leaning left on topics such as economic populism and social benefit policies.



# WHO'S DONE IT?

**NARENDRA  
MODI**

INDIA



## Syncretic Policy Making

Modi's approach adopts a strong nationalist stance, heavily emphasizing Hindu cultural pride and India's global stature. Right-wing policies like the Citizenship Amendment Act appeal to these nationalist sentiments by prioritizing non-Muslim immigrants in the citizenship process. Concurrently, Modi has

launched numerous initiatives that resonate with traditionally left-leaning economic agendas by addressing the needs of the underprivileged and economically disadvantaged. For example, the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala scheme provided free cooking gas connections to 103 million poor households. Additionally, he introduced programs that led to the opening of 450 million zero-interest bank accounts for the unbanked and the construction of 25 million low-cost, affordable homes for those without shelter. These policies allow Modi to show his government transcending traditional left-right divides for the welfare of all Indians.

**"When people see that we are putting national interest above politics, the support for our policy becomes broad-based."  
→ Narendra Modi**

**NAYIB  
BUKELE**

EL SALVADOR



### **Breaking Away from Failed Ideologies**

Although his political origins were linked to one of the main parties in El Salvador, Bukele won his first presidential term presenting himself as an independent and new candidate who went beyond the traditional divide, “Left (FMLN) vs. Right (Arena),” that had ruled the country since the 1980s.

To achieve this, Bukele surfed the wave of citizen discontent with the two traditional parties, portraying them as equally corrupt and out of tune with the population’s needs. In contrast, he staged a fresh new era in which traditional divides were overcome, breaking old paradigms and focusing on solving the problems of the Salvadoran people.

**“The future that we are building today does not depend on the Right or the Left; it does not depend on the failed ideologies from the eighties.”  
→ Nayib Bukele**

**VIKTOR  
ORBÁN**

HUNGARY



### **Syncretic Communication**

Orbán masterfully links popular social policies with nationalist and conservative messages. His rhetoric strongly emphasizes Hungarian national pride, Christian values, and the preservation of Hungarian culture against perceived external threats like the European Union or immigration. Simultaneously, he effectively communicates the implementation of social and economic policies, such as family subsidies and housing assistance, which appeal to lower-income and working-class voters – groups traditionally associated with the left.

**“Family is at the centre of the Hungarian government’s vision of the future. Strong families will create a strong and competitive society and economy, a strong and competitive Hungary and Europe.”  
→ Viktor Orbán**



**1**

# **A NEW DISRUPTIVE STYLE**

Away from traditional politics  
towards a more 'common touch'

# THE PLAY

**New authoritarians have a peculiar style of political leadership. They usually tell lies and make outrageous statements, contradict themselves, and promise what they know they will not deliver. They also identify new enemies among minority segments.**

**Like a tornado, they came onto the scene to challenge our notions of institutional politics, branding it as inherently corrupt and flawed while presenting themselves as 'common people.' They question standard ideas of right and wrong, promising to ruthlessly sweep away everything that does not work.**

**These leaders deliberately try to distance themselves from the image of traditional politicians, from their vocabulary to their attire, manners, and practices. These efforts operate in campaign mode 24/7, where everything revolves around the leader's personality, leaving little space for other officials.**

**Thanks to their distinctive use of social media, all their messages, once unacceptable in traditional media and perceived as too disruptive for a reasonable editorial line, can now be spread. In the digital realm, they act not as traditional leaders but as celebrities.**



# WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

## 1 CHALLENGE TO TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Authoritarians intentionally distance themselves from traditional political institutions as part of their narrative against the 'establishment' or 'elites.' They challenge the legitimacy and functionality of institutions, portraying them as corrupt, outdated, inefficient, or controlled by special interests. While their critiques may contain some truth, experience shows their true goal is rarely reform. Instead, they use this rhetoric as a pretext to replace existing institutions with their own corrupt networks, consolidating power rather than promoting genuine change.

## 2 PRIVATE LIFE MADE PUBLIC

These leaders leverage social media to portray themselves not as distant politicians but as relatable, everyday people. They share intimate details of their personal lives, turning private moments into public spectacles. This strategy humanizes them and builds a sense of closeness with their audience, making them seem more authentic and trustworthy.

### **3** **GENUINE STYLE AND MIDDLE FINGER ENERGY**

New authoritarians tend to embody a unique identity, with a distinct style. From their wardrobe to their personal habits, they often purposely distance themselves from the typical political archetype. In doing so, they seek to project an 'outsider' image. They claim to say what politicians 'don't dare to say' and proudly exhibit a 'middle finger energy' to reinforce the idea that they tell it like it is—no bullshit here. Ultimately, authoritarians know that their base, and many other voters, dislike the political elites and will applaud when someone gives them the finger in response.

### **4** **PLAIN SPEAKING**

To reinforce their anti-elite image, authoritarian leaders use plain, jargon-free language to connect with broad audiences. This style makes them appear relatable and accessible. They offer simple explanations for complex issues, presenting straightforward solutions that project decisiveness and competence, while avoiding nuance and portraying themselves as leaders who get things done.

### **5** **24/7 CAMPAIGN MODE**

These leaders operate in perpetual campaign mode, blurring the lines between electioneering and governance. For them, the battlefield never rests—the 'us vs. them' cycle is constant.

### **6** **EVERYTHING REVOLVES AROUND THEM**

New authoritarians cultivate a personalized leadership style, leaving little space for other officials to gain visibility. They turn political parties into personal vehicles, making the party's identity and survival dependent on their popularity. They are clearly "in charge." When decisions prove unpopular, they shift blame to subordinates and adjust course to stay aligned with their base.



# WHO'S DONE IT?

**DONALD  
TRUMP**

USA



## Plain Speaker

Trump is not a typical strong speaker. In fact, his rhetoric is a parade of scattered thoughts, sudden departures from themes, odd side remarks, and hard-to-follow tangents. Yet this apparent chaos is calculated. In his choice of language, Donald Trump has a deliberate method. His way of speaking (he calls it "the weave") follows a stream-of-consciousness approach that, if you know what he's talking about, is incredibly easy to

follow—and his audience usually does. His honest-sounding style sends the signal that he goes "with his gut," appearing fresh and unscripted, as if he is shooting from the hip. But it's all purposeful—Trump knows this style resonates and exploits it to build rapport. Trump's simple speaking style, with the repetition of graphic imagery and vivid words, gives the impression that politics is straightforward and easy.

**"Take back the oil. Once you go over and take back that oil, they have nothing. You bomb the hell out of them, and then you encircle it, and then you go in."  
→ Donald Trump**

## **EDUARDO BOLSONARO**

**BRAZIL**



### **Public Intimacy**

Eduardo, son of Jair Bolsonaro, leverages social media to present himself not as a distant politician but as a relatable, everyday person. He has embraced this strategy, sharing personal milestones online. He even posted family photos and shared the intimate moment of his wife, Heloísa Wolf, giving birth to their son. His calculation is that by humanizing himself, he fosters a deeper connection with his followers. By exposing these private moments, Eduardo Bolsonaro blurs the line between politician and person, reinforcing his authenticity and building a loyal follower base, as supporters feel they share his personal joys and life journey.

**“By the grace of God, it was a calm, natural birth without anesthesia. (...) Endless happiness! Thank you @drafernandamallmann for guiding me through this beautiful journey for the second time, and to our wonderful team, and to the brilliant photographers for the beautiful shots once again.”**  
→ Eduardo Bolsonaro

**JAVIER  
MILEI**

ARGENTINA



### The Ultimate Outsider

Time will tell whether Milei fully embraces authoritarianism, but for now, he exemplifies the disruptive populist style that authoritarians have brought to the political scene. During his campaign, he deliberately crafted the image of a rock star rather than a traditional presidential candidate. He entered rallies by moving through the crowd to loud, evocative music, creating a spectacle. On television, he adopted a populist showman persona—disruptive, rude, and highly aggressive. His demeanor and expressions sharply contrasted with political elites, ensuring high TV ratings and, more importantly, the creation of short, viral-ready clips, particularly on TikTok.

**“The political caste  
is parasitic, crooked,  
and useless!”  
→ Javier Milei**

**NARENDRA  
MODI**

INDIA



### Campaign Mode, 24/7

Despite years in power, Modi remains fixated on staying at the center of public attention. While avoiding press conferences, he ensures his omnipresence through constant media exposure, a vast network of influencers and WhatsApp groups, and frequent appearances at high-profile public events. At these events, he employs emotional and symbolic rhetoric. As a former “chai wallah” (street tea seller) with no wife or children,

he cultivates the image of a self-made man from humble origins, devoted entirely to the nation. His direct and immediate communication strategy culminates in Mann Ki Baat ("Talking from the Heart"), a monthly radio program where he addresses the Indian people. This fuels his followers' engagement and enthusiasm while deflecting attention from criticism and internal issues.

**"Mann Ki Baat allows me to showcase the best of India to the people of India."  
→ Narendra Modi**

**RODRIGO**

**DUTERTE**

**PHILIPPINES**



### **All power in one man**

Duterte cemented his image as a quintessential strongman during his presidency, dominating Philippine politics with an iron grip. From the moment he took office in 2016, Duterte positioned himself as a plain speaker and a tough leader. His approach to governance revolved around his personal authority, portraying himself as the ultimate figure, unafraid to make tough decisions and enforce them with ruthless efficiency, no matter the cost. He was not just a government leader; he embodied the government. His word was the law, and his persona was linked to every major policy and initiative. Revered by his supporters as a father figure, Duterte's leadership style combined populist appeal with authoritarian tactics. Even after stepping down in 2022, his legacy as a strongman leader continues to shape the nation's political landscape, with his authority and vision deeply ingrained in the public consciousness.

**"If you destroy my country, I will kill you. To those who destroy the young people of my country, I will kill you. I will run after you because I love my country."  
→ Rodrigo Duterte**



# WHAT CAN DEMOCRATS LEARN?

## 1 CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP IS REQUIRED

Democrats must position themselves as central figures and key points of reference. Voters in at-risk countries seek strong leadership—someone who can take action, a ‘change-maker’ who demonstrates the ability to deliver real results. They respond to authentic leaders who connect on a personal level and inspire passionate support.

## 2 COMPLEX PROBLEMS CAN BE SIMPLIFIED

Speaking clearly and directly is crucial in a world where information is consumed rapidly and the attention span is limited. Simple and direct language positions leaders as accessible and approachable figures, offering simplified explanations for complex issues. Simplification does not necessarily mean giving up on correctness or precision; it means distilling complex issues into clear, understandable terms without sacrificing the depth or accuracy of the underlying ideas. Do not try to please the experts; talk to the people.

### **3 PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS NEED TO RENEW TRUST AND PURPOSE**

In today's political landscape, parties and institutions have lost much of their public credibility. Many people believe the status quo must be challenged—and with good reason. A strong pro-democracy message must acknowledge this frustration, directly addressing widespread dissatisfaction with political parties and representative institutions. At the same time, it must offer a renewed vision for politics and a clear, actionable plan for the future—one that resonates with the needs and aspirations of ordinary people.

### **4 THE CAMPAIGN NEVER ENDS**

Today, there is no distinction between 'campaign period' and 'governing period'—the political battle is nonstop. To stay competitive, we must operate in permanent campaign mode, maintaining constant influence over the political narrative. This ensures our message and presence remain at the center of public attention.

## 5 TANGIBLE RESULTS

Elected authoritarians dominate public debate through compelling storytelling. They may flood the discourse with rhetoric, but ultimately, what matters most is whether people can put food on the table. Their success or failure ultimately depends on their ability to deliver policies that improve people's well-being. For democracy defenders, the lesson is clear: it is not enough to expose authoritarian rhetoric. They must craft their own compelling narratives—grounded in real solutions—that address people's everyday struggles. And once in power, they must deliver tangible results through policies that improve lives, proving that democracy is not just an ideal but a system that works for the people.

## 6 BE ONE OF THE PEOPLE

The perception of democratic leaders as 'the elites' is killing us. To counter this, they must genuinely reconnect with the people they represent—not as a strategy, but as a way of functioning. This means being present in communities, listening firsthand, and demonstrating through daily actions that they understand and share the struggles of ordinary citizens. Only authentic engagement can dismantle the idea that democratic leaders are out-of-touch elites. This connection must be consistent and real—any attempt to fake it will be exposed, and once trust is lost, it is nearly impossible to regain.



# LEARN MORE

## D-HUB RESOURCES



D-Hub. 2024. "The Triumph of the Outsider." *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles, Volume 2.* 



– 2024. "Influencer-in-Chief." *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles, Volume 4.*

## OTHER RESOURCES



El Faro. 2022. "How Bukele Crafted a Best-Selling Political Brand."



Franz, Erica; Andrea Kendall-Taylor & Joe Wright. 2024. "The Origins of Elected Strongmen."



Guriev, Serge & Daniel Treisman. 2022. "Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century."



Gaslit Nation. 2023. "How to Stand Up to a Bully."



Klein, Ezra & John Ganz. 2024. "The Rise of Middle Finger Politics." *The Ezra Klein Show.*



**2**

# **A NEW COMMS ECOSYSTEM**

**Communications infrastructure  
for message distribution**

# THE PLAY

New authoritarian leaders were the first to understand that social media had fundamentally reshaped public discourse. They recognized the shift in how people gather information, communicate, and form opinions. Operating by its own logic and rules, social media has become the modern-day agora.

To profit from this shift, they have built a sophisticated digital communication ecosystem that enables distribution channels to disseminate their messages effectively. In this ecosystem, they place themselves at the center and behave as “influencers-in-chief”, leading an army of supporters who amplify their narratives and reinforce their dominance. Additionally, new authoritarians swiftly adapt to emerging social media platforms, staying constantly up-to-date with the latest trends and technologies.

While social media drives their strategy before election day, many seize control of legacy media once in power—crucial for cementing their narrative, expanding influence beyond digital platforms, and dominating public discourse.



# WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

## 1 INFLUENCERS-IN-CHIEF

New authoritarian leaders exhibit a distinctive approach to social media. They command a network of influencers to dominate the online discourse. These influencers are strategically chosen for their ability to reach specific demographics or communities and their credibility and relatability within those groups. Acting as multipliers, they directly connect with their followers to build a loyal support base, exponentially expanding the leader's influence and reinforcing the agenda.

## 2 DECENTRALIZATION OF CHANNELS

The media landscape, once dominated by major news corporations and gatekeepers, is now fragmented with countless information sources, weakening the influence of traditional media. This shift allows authoritarian leaders to push their narratives beyond conventional norms. They weaponize social media, maximizing every platform's potential, adapting to its rules, and flooding phones with their content. They stay ahead—when TikTok emerged, they mastered it. They invest, personalize, and constantly evolve, ensuring they always have the upper hand.

### **3** **CONSTANT COMMUNICATION**

Unlike traditional media, which is bound by news cycles and formal political coverage, social media enables a continuous stream of communication at any time. This constant presence across platforms keeps authoritarian leaders in the public eye. Beyond the digital space, their online presence spills into real life—picnics, festivals, dancing, and singing—all designed to create a sense of community and belonging. In doing so, they transcend politics, embedding themselves into popular culture and becoming cultural icons.

### **4** **MESSAGE DIVERSIFICATION AND TARGETING**

The digital ecosystem allows for tailored messaging to target specific demographics. A careful study of audiences allows this segmentation to favor the “syncretic populism” grand strategy, by addressing each group’s concerns, desires, and even using their language.

## 5 RELATABLE CONTENT AND EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

New authoritarians prioritize content that is visually striking and emotionally charged. At times, this content looks like ordinary citizens could have produced it. Simple, memorable slogans and messages that evoke strong emotional responses ensure higher engagement and a more profound impact.

## 6 COMBINATION OF TACTICS TO CONSOLIDATE THE ECOSYSTEM

In building this digital ecosystem, authoritarians employ several tactics:

- **CONSTRUCTION:** They create a plethora of new brands and communication channels, including fake digital newspapers, sensationalist blogs, and pseudo-news sites. These platforms often mimic the aesthetics of legitimate news but serve propagandistic purposes. It also involves extensive networks on social media, WhatsApp groups, etc., sometimes supported by bot armies.
- **ACQUISITION:** Recognizing the value of established credibility, authoritarian regimes often buy out existing media channels and social media profiles that boast significant followings, thereby co-opting their audiences.
- **ADVERTISING:** They invest in sophisticated, targeted advertising campaigns designed to reach key demographics. Extensive data analytics often underpin these campaigns to maximize impact and conversion rates.

These tactics to develop and maintain this ecosystem involve a significant investment. Thus, the result is a robust infrastructure of channels in order to shape the public conversation, sustain influence, and counter criticism.

# 7

## MONETIZATION

New authoritarian leaders leverage the digital ecosystem to fund their operations and expand their influence. By building large online followings, they monetize their presence through partnerships with platforms like YouTube and TikTok, generating income while amplifying their reach. They also sell exclusive content, such as online courses or training programs, and engage in targeted advertising to further boost their financial resources.

Additionally, by creating business models around extremist content, they attract individuals who may otherwise remain uninvolved, offering financial incentives or a sense of purpose to spread their ideology. This approach strengthens their authority and builds a loyal, financially invested support base.



# WHO'S DONE IT?

**NAYIB  
BUKELE**

EL SALVADOR



## Influencer-in-chief

From his early days as mayor, Nayib Bukele noticed the remarkable surplus in mobile connections in El Salvador and grasped the relevance that social media holds in everyday life. For him,

social media is not merely another pillar in his communication strategy; it is the backbone of his government. Bukele built a fundamentally digital-driven political project and carefully crafted his image, both visually and conceptually, positioning himself as the country's biggest influencer. By actively creating and promoting a vast array of digital channels, Bukele has solidified his presence as a leader who leverages these platforms to engage directly with the public, making him a central figure in shaping the public conversation.

### THE PRESIDENT OF A COUNTRY OF 6 MILLION PEOPLE HAS:

- 10.2 million followers (Tik-Tok)
- 9.8 million followers (Instagram)
- 7.8 million followers (X)

### IN EARLY 2022, THERE WERE ATTRIBUTED TO BUKELE AT LEAST:

- 1,500+ YouTube Channels
- 1,056+ Facebook Pages
- 520+ WhatsApp Groups
- 62+ Digital Media Outlets

**VIKTOR  
ORBÁN**

HUNGARY



### The Owner

Orbán and his allies have systematically acquired control over Hungary's media landscape. The Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), which is aligned with his ruling party, Fidesz, owns and controls almost all the media.

#### **ORBÁN CONTROLS:**

→ 500+ media outlets

**NARENDRA  
MODI**

INDIA



### The Strategic Investor

Renowned for his relentless 24/7 campaign mode, Narendra Modi is also a major investor in strategic communication. His approach is meticulously crafted: his personal accounts receive heavy investment to amplify vivid rhetoric and political slogans, while official accounts are used to showcase his government's achievements in welfare, social justice, and economic growth.

#### **THE BJP GOVERNMENT SPENT:**

→ \$783+ million (₹6,491 crore) on advertising across digital and traditional media over the past eight years.

→ \$4.65+ million (₹387 million) on Google ads alone, in four months leading up to the 2024 elections.

**PABLO  
MARÇAL**

BRAZIL

**The Monetization Guru**

The far-right Brazilian influencer-turned-politician has adeptly monetized his extensive online presence to fund his political ambitions, blending self-help coaching with nationalist and anti-establishment rhetoric. Boasting over 25 million followers, he leverages this vast audience to generate revenue through paid mentorships, exclusive courses, high-ticket seminars, and branded merchandise. Marçal gamifies loyalty, turning followers into ambassadors who recruit others. During his 2024 São Paulo mayoral campaign, he paid prizes to supporters to create viral campaign content, effectively transforming his base into paid promoters. This self-sustaining cycle of monetization,

mobilization and digital reach fuels both his financial success and political ambitions, ensuring that his followers are not just engaged—but financially invested.

**MARÇAL'S PRIZE STRATEGY  
BY THE NUMBERS:**

- 200K+ people participated in the prizes.
- 20K+ pieces of content generated.
- 8 million+ followers across content-distributing accounts.
- 1 billion views on YouTube and TikTok alone.

**ALL ACHIEVED WITHOUT USING HIS OFFICIAL CHANNELS AND WITH AN INVESTMENT OF JUST \$4,000.**



# WHAT CAN DEMOCRATS LEARN?

## 1 SOCIAL MEDIA IS THE MODERN PUBLIC SQUARE

Mobile connectivity and widespread internet adoption have propelled social media to the forefront of political communication—often outpacing traditional media. While conventional outlets continue to wield influence in certain contexts, social platforms now shape public discourse and dominate content distribution. The most effective strategy merges the credibility of traditional media with the expansive reach of social media, creating a comprehensive communications ecosystem that maximizes both trust and mass distribution.

## 2 GET IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA GAME

One thing is clear: simply being on social media is not enough. To succeed, democracy defenders must understand its rules and embrace the playful dynamics that define these platforms. With few exceptions, social media favors anti-democratic leaders. Perhaps because, at first, it was their only pathway to power, they recognized its potential earlier. They invested heavily in building their digital ecosystem, using creativity and playfulness—even when their tone is aggressive or rude.

### 3 SET UP DIVERSE AND RESILIENT CHANNELS

A diverse communication infrastructure includes multiple information channels that can effectively disseminate the message of democracy defense. Just like authoritarian leaders do, acknowledge this: it is crucial to diversify channels and ensure they become accessible and appealing to each specific audience.

### 4 REACH THE AUDIENCES WHERE THEY ALREADY ARE

Instead of creating new channels, introduce your messages into existing spaces where people are already engaged. Influencers can amplify your reach within different communities. So, map out key influencers and involve them in participatory ways, giving them creative freedom. This approach can turn influencers into organic distributors, reaching audiences receptive to your messages that would otherwise be impossible to access.

# 5

## LEVERAGE THE “AURA OF TRUST”

Authoritarians create WhatsApp communities for a reason: they know that messages from known contacts carry more credibility than those from strangers. This is due to the 'aura of trust'—people are more likely to believe information from familiar sources. In an era of diverse channels and fragmented identities, leveraging trust is key to increasing a message's reach, impact, and acceptance.

# 6

## SPEND MONEY SMARTLY

When funding is limited, resources must be used wisely by leveraging different voices to spread a unified message while still allowing each to keep their unique style to maximize reach and engagement. Continuously track the performance of each post and judiciously use paid advertising to boost content that has already shown organic effectiveness, targeting it towards audiences likely to be receptive.



# LEARN MORE

## D-HUB RESOURCES



D-Hub. 2024. "Influencer-in-Chief." *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 4.



– 2024. "Gains made, Momentum lost." *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 8.



– 2024. "Defusing the Far-Right Bomb." *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 9.



– 2024. "Big Challenge Ahead." *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 10.

## OTHER RESOURCES



Siegle, Joseph. 2024. "Winning the Battle of Ideas." *National Endowment for Democracy*.



Protect Democracy. 2022. "The Authoritarian Playbook."



3

# FLOOD THE ZONE WITH SHIT

It's not about persuasion;  
it's about disorientation

# THE PLAY

**New authoritarians overwhelm the public and opposition with an overload of conflicting information. Steve Bannon’s phrase “flood the zone with shit” perfectly captures their strategy: saturating the media with endless content—false, exaggerated, or decontextualized but always strategic—to create confusion and shift focus away from critical issues.**

**By flooding the media with policy announcements, provocations, disinformation, and smear campaigns, they dominate public discourse and keep themselves at the center of attention. This relentless flow ensures that no issue gains enough traction to seriously damage them, leaving the opposition disoriented and trapped in a cycle of constant reaction, diverting energy from advancing a positive agenda.**

**Moreover, by normalizing extreme rhetoric, elected authoritarians blur the line between truth and fiction, discrediting institutions, media, and experts. This erosion of trust breeds confusion and fatigue, making it harder for the opposition to mount a coherent response. Be warned: The rise of AI could supercharge this strategy.**



# WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

## 1 FLOODING

New authoritarians saturate the media scene with a deluge of content. This overwhelming flow of information muddies the waters of public attention with an avalanche of competing stories. As our brains tend to associate repetition with truthfulness, they make use of their distribution channels to flood the ecosystem with stories—true or false—to gain traction and control the conversation. This tactic ensures support for their narrative and that no single scandal gains enough attention to harm them.

## 2 STRATEGIC PROVOCATION

This feature involves calculated moves designed to provoke shock, incite responses, and garner attention. By leveraging controversial remarks or radical policy announcements, authoritarians seize control of media cycles, directing the public's and media's focus wherever they desire. This tactic keeps opponents busy countering these provocations, often sidelining their own agendas in favor of responding to the authoritarians' latest actions. Moreover, regular media coverage of provocative and polemical remarks can sometimes normalize rather than debunk them.

### **3** **DISINFORMATION**

Authoritarians often inject disinformation into the public discourse to disrupt rational debate. By crafting stories that blend truth with fiction, they play with the audience's ability to discern reality, trapping them in a climate of doubt and confusion. This tactic injects skepticism and nihilism into the population. When faced with different versions of the same story, people either become apathetic or rely on tribal and polarized heuristics to make sense of things. Over time, this persistent dissemination of falsehoods erodes the trust in institutions, established news sources, and experts.

### **4** **SMEAR CAMPAIGNS**

Authoritarians perfect the art of the smear, and much of their misinformation fosters dislike and distrust toward opposition leaders and oversight institutions. Typically starting with a kernel of factual truth, smear campaigns amplify outrage through careful exaggeration, distortion, and spin. In this way, they seek (and often succeed) to silence critical voices and create the perception of high costs for potential dissenters. Even when debunked, smears and false accusations leave a "belief echo" that sustains and perpetuates a negative attitude toward the target.



# WHO'S DONE IT?

**VLADIMIR**

**PUTIN**

**RUSSIA**



## The Tzar of Disinformation

The Kremlin has mastered the art of using state-controlled media first, and then digital media, to shape public perception by spreading fake news. For Putin, disinformation is not just a byproduct of political discourse but rather a central strategy. The goal is not just to sell an ideology or a vision of the future; instead, it is to convince people that the “truth is unknowable” and that the only sensible choice is to follow a strong leader.

**“We are often told our actions are illegitimate, but when I ask, ‘Do you think everything you do is legitimate?’ they say ‘yes.’ Then, I have to recall the actions of the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya.”**  
**→ Vladimir Putin**

Putin has an inclination toward the “Tu Quoque” tactic, known today as “whataboutism.” This tactic involves deflecting his own violations by addressing those of Western countries. The ultimate goal is not reaffirming a rule-based order but rather pointing to its insignificance.

**DONALD  
TRUMP**

USA



**The Flooder**

Since entering politics, Trump has mastered flooding the zone—not just with an endless stream of tweets but through a relentless tsunami of media spectacles, policy shocks, and political feuds. His political persona is synonymous with a daily barrage of controversies, executive orders, and inflammatory rhetoric, ensuring he dominates the news cycle—sometimes with just a few tweets. What Steve Bannon calls “muscle velocity” makes it nearly impossible for opponents and journalists to focus on any single issue long enough for meaningful scrutiny. By leveraging a far-right media ecosystem, Trump floods public discourse with narratives that keep him in control while eroding trust in institutions.

**“The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit.”  
→ Steve Bannon**

**RODRIGO  
DUTERTE**

PHILIPPINES



**Strategic Agitator**

Duterte frequently used strategic provocation to dominate media narratives and rally support in the Philippines. His provocative statements on issues ranging from drug policy to international relations, often laced with vulgarity and threats, kept him in the headlines, galvanized his base, and intimidated critics. This tactic not only solidified his image as a decisive leader unafraid to challenge the status quo but diverted attention from more substantive policy critiques, allowing him to control the conversation.

**“Hitler massacred three million Jews. Now, there are three million drug addicts. I'd be happy to slaughter them.”  
→ Rodrigo Duterte**



# WHAT CAN DEMOCRATS LEARN?

## 1

### DON'T ALWAYS BE REACTIVE

Choosing if, when, and how to engage in the presence of strategic provocation is crucial. Sometimes, covering up and responding to outrageous comments from an authoritarian can be more harmful than beneficial. To be effective, democracy defenders must practice selective engagement. You should respond based on the scale of the provocation, its relevance to your agenda, and the timing and context.

If a provocation is likely to fade away without significant impact, ignoring it might be the best option. And remember, when dealing with a new authoritarian, it is essential to have your key messages crystal clear so that when the alarm of strategic provocation goes on, you can hold on to them like the mast of a ship.

## **2** **FACT-CHECKING IS NOT ENOUGH**

In this over-flooded ecosystem, the sheer abundance of messages and news makes debunking a particular false statement have little impact on the public conversation or public opinion. By the time the denial arrives, the conversation has already moved to another topic. Thus, it is more effective to work alongside journalists, opinion leaders, and influencers to expose the true purpose of these tactics so the general population does not fall for these distracting maneuvers.

## **3** **DON'T DISMISS AUTHORITARIAN NARRATIVES AS "MERE DISINFORMATION"**

Yes, they often lie. But if democracy defenders simply respond with 'That's a lie' and move on, they miss the real reason authoritarian narratives are effective: they tell people what they want to hear, reinforcing their existing beliefs. Rather than countering these narratives with rational, abstract arguments, a more effective approach is to use personal stories and testimonials that directly challenge authoritarian claims and resonate emotionally.

## **4** **DON'T TAKE THE BAIT AND DON'T COPY THE MODEL**

Research suggests that escalating radical rhetoric—on any side—fuels delusion, deepens polarization, and erodes faith in politics. This, in turn, demobilizes and breeds apathy among moderate voters. As tempting as it may be to counter authoritarian misinformation with the same tactics, it's essential to recognize the core of their strategy: undermining truth and trust. By engaging in this same assault, democracy defenders risk reinforcing authoritarianism. If nothing can be believed, authoritarianism thrives.

## 5 PLAY THE GAME

Flooding the zone with shit is partially the result of strategic decisions, but it is also one of the consequences of how the communication ecosystem works nowadays. There is no way back to the era of information gatekeepers and reasonably calm and clear waters. The game now is about memes and narratives, and the only way to confront new authoritarians is to recognize that political messages must blend substance with entertainment and forge emotional connections with the public.



# LEARN MORE



Applebaum, Anne. 2024. "Autocracy, Inc."



– 2022. "Twilight of Democracy."



Illing, Sean. 2020. "Flood the zone with shit': How misinformation overwhelmed our democracy." *Vox*.



Klein, Ezra. 2025. "Don't Believe him." *The Ezra Klein Show*.



Pomarantzev, Peter. 2019. "This Is Not Propaganda."



The New York Times. 2025. "Trump's 'Flood the Zone' Strategy Leaves Opponents Gasping in Outrage."



The Technology and Social Change Project. 2023. "Distributed Amplification". *The Media Manipulation Casebook*.



**4**

**STRONG  
IDEAS,  
EMOTIONAL  
APPEAL**

Fueling passion in the public debate

# THE PLAY

**New authoritarian leaders have mastered the art of stirring emotions. Their ideas and ideology may be harsh and forceful, but they are wrapped in an emotional package that amplifies their impact. Their formula lies in seamlessly blending ideas with emotions to maximize influence.**

**Their emotional cocktail—a mix of fear, hope, fury, and even empathy—reinforces their message. For elected authoritarians, maintaining high emotional intensity and commanding attention is essential to sustaining political control.**

**This emotional appeal provokes a visceral, fervent response among their followers, generating euphoria that starkly contrasts with the apathy of other social groups. Many simply ‘tune out’, overwhelmed by the relentless intensity and feeling that their concerns are drowned out in a space dominated by authoritarian rhetoric.**



# WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

## 1 TO STIR EMOTIONS WITH IDEAS

New authoritarians seek to evoke emotional appeal while communicating their ideas. As a result, their messages are carefully crafted in simple, direct forms designed to instantly capture attention and provoke an affective response to their proposals—even if those proposals are sometimes misleading, false, or outright lies.

## 2 WHAT MATTERS IS WHAT MOVES PEOPLE

Their approach is often pragmatic, prioritizing adaptability over consistency. If they need to change their positions to align with what is most advantageous at a given moment, they simply do so—even if it means openly contradicting themselves.

### **3** **TURNING PEOPLE'S FEARS INTO ANGER**

New authoritarians tap into their audience's deepest fears by exploiting societal anxieties—economic instability, cultural change, or perceived threats to national identity and security. They amplify these fears through relentless repetition, drowning out more nuanced discussions. Once fear takes hold, they direct it toward a target—specific groups or failed institutions—channeling frustration into anger. This anger creates the illusion of empowerment, fostering unity and a sense of purpose among their supporters.

### **4** **ENTERTAINMENT AND JOY TO KEEP THE BASE ENTHRALLED**

Authoritarian leaders cultivate euphoria and a strong sense of identity among their base. Symbols, slogans, and rituals create a sense of belonging and purpose, while national or cultural identity celebrations keep followers engaged and motivated. Mocking adversaries becomes another source of unity and entertainment, often reinforced through humor and merchandise. In this euphoric atmosphere, complexities are dismissed, and the leader is seen as the only one capable of solving everything.

### **5** **THE APATHY OF "THE OTHERS"**

New authoritarians have learned that apathy and cynicism among certain social groups are powerful tools for maintaining dominance. Their goal isn't to win over those who oppose them but to cultivate a sense of helplessness that leads to disengagement. For authoritarians, the apathy of their opponents is the necessary counterpart to the constant euphoria of their base. By fostering political nihilism—the belief that all politicians are corrupt and that change is impossible—they ensure that opposition feels demoralized and powerless. When people believe nothing can be changed, authoritarian dominance remains unchallenged.



# WHO'S DONE IT?

**DONALD  
TRUMP**

USA



## A Bridge to the Unconscious

Trump's speeches are driven by emotion and carefully crafted in alignment with public opinion studies, social listening, and sentiment analysis. His appeal lies in his masterful salesmanship tactics and catchphrases that resonate deeply with the audience's unconscious mind. Trump employs inflammatory slogans and provocative tones to stir anger, fear, and indignation.

By harnessing these emotions, he ensures he captivates public attention, keeps his audience euphoric and mobilized, and dominates the news cycle.

**"When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best (...) They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists."**

**→ Donald Trump**

**JAIR**

**BOLSONARO**

**BRAZIL**



### **God and Brazilian Pride**

Bolsonaro's style, characterized by its informality and intensity, appealed to people's visceral instincts. His dramatic expressions and gestures reinforced his image as a "common Brazilian man" fighting against a corrupt and dangerous enemy. Bolsonaro's campaign did not emphasize public policies but relied heavily on disseminating polarizing slogans and imagery steeped in nationalistic and religious overtones designed to evoke deep-seated emotions.

**"We are going to unite the people, rescue the family, respect religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, combat gender ideology, conserving our values."  
→ Jair Bolsonaro**

**ALTERNATIVE FOR  
GERMANY (AFD)**

**GERMANY**



### **Exploiting Fear and Rage**

The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party has weaponized fear and resentment to boost its support, portraying immigrants as threats to Germany's security while simultaneously attacking mainstream parties. Unapologetically, the party seizes on violent incidents—such as the deadly attack in Saxony-Anhalt and the stabbings in Mannheim and Solingen—to fuel anti-immigrant sentiment and blame politicians for what it calls "a monstrous political failure." Using these tragic events, AfD leaders call for mass deportations of migrants under the banner of "remigration" and promote cohesion for "Germans and Christians." By stoking outrage and fear, the AfD positions itself as the only political force defending "ordinary citizens."

**"Burkas, girls in headscarves, knife-wielding men on government benefits and other good-for-nothing people are not going to ensure our prosperity."  
→ Alice Weidel**

**JAVIER****MILEI**

ARGENTINA

**Rock the Boat**

Milei understood that people do not want to see long faces; they seek joy and enthusiasm. As traditional political speeches are boring, his campaign was primarily organized around “caravans,” where he paraded in a convertible, showcasing symbols and physical metaphors representing his key campaign mes-

sages. He famously wielded a chainsaw to symbolize the cuts a “bloated state run by the elite” needed. Milei embraced the power of visual storytelling. As president, he continues to be a populist showman, even hosting rock concerts.

**“I’m a fan of the Rolling Stones and I use their energy to carry my message of freedom and break away from old politics.”**  
→ Javier Milei

**NAYIB**

**BUKELE**



EL SALVADOR

## **The Art of Inducing Apathy**

Bukele deliberately fosters apathy and political nihilism among non-supporters to maintain control. In the last election, his strategy was clear: energize his base while discouraging his opponents. By creating an atmosphere of disengagement and cynicism, he ensured that detractors felt powerless and disillusioned, convinced that resistance was futile. With his supporters in a state of euphoria and his opposition demoralized, Bukele dominated the narrative space and consolidated power with little resistance. His calculated use of apathy and nihilism allowed him to operate unchallenged, reinforcing the belief that there was no viable alternative to his rule. By making opposition seem pointless, he tightened his grip on power.

**The voter turnout in El Salvador was about 52%, a low turnout compared to recent elections in Central America, where participation is around 60% and far from the 73% of the rest of the region.**



# WHAT CAN DEMOCRATS LEARN?

## 1 COMMUNICATE POLITICS THROUGH EMOTIONS

Today, more than ever, creating emotional responses is crucial for maintaining influence. Thus, the emotional relevance of a political message is key to mobilizing and keeping a loyal base of supporters. It's not that rationally grounded messages are no longer helpful, but they must be reinterpreted through an emotional lens to be effective.

## 2 WHAT MATTERS IS THE CAKE, NOT THE RECIPE

Focus on the outcome, the visible and comprehensible impact of the actions you want to undertake, rather than the process entailed to achieve it. The detailed description of proposals or public policies is less critical than the tangible impact these can have. Therefore, center your speech and narrative on how specific measures improve everyday well-being and consolidate emotional support.

### **3** **RESPOND TO FEAR** **WITH HOPE**

Fear is a powerful tool in political communication, and new authoritarians wield it skillfully. When addressing fear, it's crucial to strike the right balance—excessive fearmongering can backfire and damage credibility. If authoritarians overplay their fear tactics, humor can be a powerful tool to expose their exaggerations and deflate their narrative.

But ultimately, the best way to counter fear is to offer hope. Fear may position you as an option, but a positive, inspiring agenda will make you THE option.

### **4** **CREATE SPACES PEOPLE** **CAN BELONG TO**

In an era of often superficial and shallow connections, people yearn for spaces where they can genuinely feel they belong. Cultivate a sense of community in environments where followers can experience the warmth of unity and shared identity. Fun and enjoyment are crucial to motivating the base and fostering group cohesion.

### **5** **WAKE UP CALL AGAINST APATHY**

Your base must feel that the fight is meaningful and directly involves them. The more people believe that change is impossible, the more this belief becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy—ensuring that no change occurs. Countering apathy and nihilism is crucial. Passivity benefits authoritarians, allowing them to operate unchecked and without significant resistance.



# LEARN MORE

## D-HUB RESOURCES



D-Hub. 2024. "Learning from Authoritarians." *Working Papers* #1.



– 2024. "Defusing the Far-Right Bomb." *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 9.

## OTHER RESOURCES



Curtis, Adam. 2016. "HyperNormalisation."  
*BBC Films*.



Osborne, Danny & Chris Sibley. 2022.  
"The Cambridge Handbook of Political  
Psychology."



Wagner, Francisca & Zsolt Enyedi. 2024. "They  
can do it. Positive Authoritarianism in Poland  
and Hungary." *Frontiers in Political Science*.



Westen, Drew. 2008. "The Political Brain."  
*Public Affairs*.

**5**

# **ENGAGING STORYTELLING**

The narrative formula that sticks

# THE PLAY

**New authoritarian leaders excel in articulating an engaging story that connects emotionally with their base. Their storytelling effectively galvanizes support by creating a sense of urgency, identifying an enemy, and positioning the leader as the indispensable hero with the needed solutions.**

**This narrative approach not only simplifies complex issues but also fosters a strong sense of unity and purpose among followers. By tapping into deeply held fears and aspirations, these leaders craft a compelling vision that resonates widely, ensuring their messages dominate the public discourse and overshadow alternative viewpoints.**



# WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

## 1 CRISIS ENHANCEMENT

Leaders often begin by highlighting or exacerbating a sense of crisis. This could be an economic downturn, a perceived threat from external forces against the nation, or social changes that unsettle and challenge traditional norms and values. The crisis is framed in a way that makes it feel urgent and existential, thereby justifying extraordinary measures to address it, even at the cost of democratic rights.

## 2 NAMING THE ENEMY (REAL OR IMAGINED)

The next step involves identifying an enemy responsible for or benefiting from the crisis. This enemy can be internal, like political opponents – the elites, “the deep state,” specific ethnic or social groups – or external – other nations or international organizations. Thus, the “us vs. them” dynamic strengthens in-group loyalty and stigmatizes opposition.

### **3** SIMPLE REMEDIES

The solutions offered are typically simplistic and direct, appealing to emotions rather than detailed policy discussions. They often promise to restore order, protect the family or the nation, bring back lost greatness, or rectify injustices. The simplicity of the solutions makes it accessible and attractive to a broader audience, bypassing the complexities that real solutions often entail.

### **4** WHO WILL SAVE US NOW?

The solution can only come from the hands of a leader, the only one capable of delivering and often styled as a strongman, protector, or savior. This persona is crafted to resonate with the “ordinary people,” with a touch of nostalgia that invokes a glorified past to which only they can bring back to us.



# WHO'S DONE IT?

**DONALD  
TRUMP**

USA



## Immigration as an Existential Crisis

From his early days as a contender in the Republican primaries for the 2016 presidential election until today, Trump has positioned immigration and the southern border as a continuous crisis and existential threat to the U.S. He has frequently

employed stark and dramatic rhetoric to emphasize the urgency and danger he claims immigration poses, and as the years go by, he has succeeded in making this the Republican party's stance on the matter, making immigration one of the top issues in the political agenda and the streets.

**"We MUST have strong borders and stop illegal immigration. Without that we do not have a country. Also, Mexico is killing the U.S. on trade. WIN!"**  
→ Donald Trump

**VIKTOR  
ORBÁN**

HUNGARY



### **Soros is the Enemy**

Viktor Orbán has consistently portrayed immigrants, especially Muslims, as a threat to Hungary's Christian cultural identity. He also frames the European Union's policies, particularly around migration and sovereignty, positioning Hungary as a victim of EU bureaucracy and liberalism. Furthermore, he accomplished embodying "the enemy" in a particular person behind the curtains: George Soros, the Hungarian-born Jewish financier and philanthropist.

**"We are fighting an enemy that is different from us. Not open, but hiding; not straightforward but crafty; not honest but base; not national but international; does not believe in working but speculates with money; does not have its own homeland but feels it owns the whole world."  
→ Viktor Orbán**

**JAVIER  
MILEI**

ARGENTINA



### **Easy Fixer**

After a decade of economic crisis and soaring three-digit inflation, attributed to the "political caste" by Javier Milei, the libertarian candidate was elected, offering a simple combo solution: a dollar bill and a chainsaw. The dollar stood for the dollarization of the economy and the end of inflation. At the same time, the tool signified the severe reduction of the state structure, including the Central Bank, filled with "thieves" and "slackers" who take advantage of honest Argentinians.

**"The Central Bank is an immoral entity because it steals from the people through inflation, and the only way to end this theft is by eliminating the Central Bank."  
→ Javier Milei**

**ABDEL FATTAH****EL-SISI**

EGYPT

**Here Comes the Savior**

After the Arab Spring, Egypt faced significant political instability and a surge in terrorism, particularly from Islamist militants in the Sinai region and other parts of the country. Sisi frames terrorism as an existential threat not only to the security of the Egyptian state but also to its cultural and religious foundations. In this context, he has positioned himself as the indispensable leader capable of restoring order and stability.

**“I am responsible for protecting this nation and its people. I will do whatever it takes to restore peace and stability.”**  
→ Abdel Fattah El-Sisi



# WHAT CAN DEMOCRATS LEARN?

## 1 **CRISES ARE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEMOCRACY AS WELL**

The crisis we face is not just a crisis of democracy—it is a civilizational crisis that will persist for years to come. However, these challenges also create opportunities for democracy defenders to demonstrate the strength and resilience of democratic values. The key is to focus on community-driven responses that tackle real issues. Start with shared values, aim for common goals, and highlight success stories and practical solutions to show that democracy can deliver.

## 2 **REDEFINE POLARIZATION**

In politics, storytelling isn't just about logic; it's about creating a strong sense of belonging to one side and defining opposition to the other. Every story needs an adversary, and drawing a line between "us" and "them" helps unite supporters and clearly identify the opposition. Highlighting shared enemies, such as corruption or injustice, clarifies where people should stand in the face of a common threat.

### 3 KEEP IT SIMPLE

Simplification does not mean losing accuracy—it is possible to present truthful, practical solutions in a clear and direct way. Using symbols and metaphors makes messages more memorable and impactful. You can engage a wider audience without compromising integrity by breaking down complex policies into clear, honest, and relatable terms.

### 4 PERSONAL LEADERSHIP IS ESSENTIAL

The trend in contemporary politics is that political references and allegiances are increasingly built around individuals rather than parties. Building such personal references is crucial for effective political communication today. Leaders who embody different audiences' values and aspirations can create powerful and compelling narratives that engage and move supporters.

### 5 TELL THE STORY OF THE PEOPLE

To counter authoritarian storytelling, democrats must craft narratives that highlight the resilience, ingenuity, and power of ordinary citizens. Start by understanding precisely what people need and how to respond effectively to those needs, then portray them through the direct testimonies of everyday citizens. Illustrate how communities, by working together, have overcome challenges and driven positive change. By telling the story of common people, you can inspire a sense of agency and solidarity, reminding citizens that they are the true protagonists of democracy while contrasting this with the cult of personality found in the narrative of authoritarian.



# LEARN MORE

## D-HUB RESOURCES



D-Hub. 2024. "Learning from Authoritarians." *Working Papers* #1.

## OTHER RESOURCES



DiMauro, Daniel & Morgan Pehme. 2017. "Get Me Roger Stone."



Matovski, Aleksandar. 2021. "Popular Dictatorships."



Seargeant, Philip. 2020. "The Art of Political Storytelling."



Throughline. 2024. "The Conspiracy Files." *NPR*.



# **CALCULATED COMPASSION**

The authoritarian approach  
to welfare policies

# THE PLAY

Traditionally, strong welfare systems were associated with more democratic societies. Today, however, some elected authoritarians use welfare policies not just to provide support, but to consolidate power. These programs serve as tools to reinforce public loyalty and as a key pillar of their syncretic populism strategy.

In many cases, when confronted with popular demands, new authoritarians obsessively emphasize economic growth, job creation, and poverty reduction. Focusing on these issues strengthens their connection with the people and reinforces the perception that they deliver results. Moreover, these welfare programs are often framed as personal gifts from the leader, strengthening the bond between the leader and the voters.

Whether authoritarians genuinely improve people's lives is relative and depends on the context. Often, these measures amount to little more than handouts, yet they are consistently framed as monumental achievements – positioning these leaders as the ultimate champions of the people's will.



# WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

## 1 SPEAKING TO POPULAR DEMANDS

Elected authoritarians use flagship schemes to mark their initiation in power, often introducing new and flashy schemes accompanied by much fanfare. These often relate to key societal concerns and aspirations, and by addressing a genuine demand shared by the people, authoritarians can use their new schemes to bolster their claims of being heralds of a new wave of popular change.

## 2 REMOVAL OF INSTITUTIONAL CHECKS AND BALANCES

A key strategy authoritarians use to expand their capability of delivering on social welfare includes removing sources of opposition and undermining institutions that serve as a check and balance or bypassing accountability bodies like parliamentary committees. Usually, they introduce new laws designed to strengthen their capability of rolling out such projects and clamping down on anybody who can serve as a 'veto player' to their ambitions.

### **3** **TOP-DOWN DECISION MAKING**

The approach to social welfare involves a top-down process, with powers being increasingly centralized in the hands of authoritarians. In federalistic arrangements, attempts are often made to either curtail the ability of individual states to roll out similar schemes or are otherwise attacked by the authoritarian for being flimsy or populist without really understanding the people's needs and aspirations.

### **4** **ALIGNMENT WITH THE ELECTORAL CYCLE**

Critical welfare scheme rollouts and announcements are often timed to coincide with electoral cycles to maximize public support. These schemes address issues and topics that are personal concerns for the majority: pensions increase, cash transfers, or day-to-day sustenance like food rations. By targeting these critical areas, authoritarians can emotionally appeal to a broad spectrum of voters and sway support across different groups.

### **5** **CLIENTELISM**

Authoritarians also selectively or disproportionately use social policy to favor one group over another. Clientelistic practices are often adopted, as social benefits and welfare policies are used for patronage and political favoritism.

### **6** **PROPAGANDA**

Authoritarian welfare policies are aggressively marketed both online and offline. These campaigns frame them not as government programs, but as personal initiatives of the leader. Welfare is portrayed as a gift from the leader rather than a public right. The messaging is filled with grand promises of a glorious future where the people's interests are safeguarded. It blends nationalistic pride with a paternalistic narrative, casting the authoritarian as the nation's savior and provider.



# WHO'S DONE IT

## LAW AND JUSTICE PARTY (PiS)

POLAND



### Expanding Voter Base through Social Welfare

Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS, Law and Justice Party) consolidated its popular support by rolling out new social welfare measures that addressed popular demands and aspirations. While, at a narrative level, they convinced voters that they were the only political party that took welfare seriously; their policy measures, such as reversing unpopular pension policies and lowering the retirement age, reinforced this perception. Also, they increased the minimum wage and provided monetary support for families with children, expanding access to daycare facilities. PiS enhanced spending on social welfare

and catered to popular demands for improved living standards and economic security, thereby solidifying its control and broadening its voter base, particularly among rural voters.

**“The government’s social policy has completely changed people’s lives. Our great commitment is not only to maintain social programs, but to develop them even further.”**  
→ Mateusz Morawiecki

## RECEP TAYYIP ERDOĞAN



TURKEY

### Selective Distribution of Islamist Welfarism

Erdoğan implemented an Islamist welfarism model, blending religious and family values with populist welfare to expand support and foster clientelism. A key initiative, the 2003 Health Transformation Program, provided universal health coverage by expanding free healthcare for low-income citizens and consolidating insurance into the Social Security Institution. His government also doubled pensions for the elderly and disabled. Ahead of the 2023 elections, Erdoğan lowered the retirement age to 40, adding 2 million beneficiaries and boosting his support.

These measures fuel concerns about clientelism. Welfare is openly framed as a personal gift from Erdoğan—beneficiaries even receive text messages "from Erdoğan." Additionally, aid is disproportionately allocated to ruling-party municipalities, reinforcing the perception that aligning with Erdoğan ensures access to benefits.

**"We are making preparations for the new period and striving to ready our country in a very different way for the new period... Be aware that today is better than yesterday, and tomorrow will be better than today. Let you have no doubt!"**  
→ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

## NARENDRA MODI

INDIA



### National Propaganda to Promote a “New India”

Under Prime Minister Modi, a new brand of social welfare has expanded government services into areas previously considered private. Flagship schemes like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (toilet creation), Jan Dhan Yojana (zero balance bank accounts), Ayushman Bharat (health insurance), and Ujjawala Yojana (clean cooking fuel) have bolstered the Modi government’s popularity and electoral success.

Modi’s real achievement goes beyond policy—it lies in shaping public perception. The official BJP party has successfully framed these programs as Modi’s personal gifts rather than

government initiatives, portraying him as the direct benefactor of the underprivileged. Ahead of the 2024 election, they launched Viksit Bharat Sankalp, a mass awareness campaign branding these schemes as Modi’s guarantees. By controlling the narrative, they have ensured that his image, not just his policies, remains central to India’s development story.

### THE IMPACT OF MODI’S SOCIAL WELFARE PROGRAMS:

- Zero-interest bank accounts: 450 million
- Households gaining access to cooking fuel: 103 million
- Beneficiaries of free food grains: 813 million
- Low-cost affordable housing units provided: 25 million
- Farmers receiving annual transfers of ₹6,000 (\$70 USD): 110 million



# WHAT CAN DEMOCRATS LEARN?

## 1 WELFARE AS A TOOL OF EMPOWERMENT, NOT PATRONAGE

While authoritarians often use welfare as a means of control and patronage, democrats should approach social policies as tools for empowerment. Welfare should not be about creating dependency, but about fostering independence, dignity, and opportunity. Thus, democrats can build a strong, sustainable support base rooted in genuine progress and social equity.

## 2 EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS IN POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

The authoritarian approach to welfare is often used as a platform through which they respond to the people's underlying emotional and aspirational needs. Democratic forces should recognize and address these emotional dynamics by framing their policies not just as practical solutions, but as pathways to fulfilling people's aspirations and hopes for the future.

### 3 RECLAIM HISTORY

From a narrative perspective, authoritarians use revisionist rhetoric to cement their position as leaders, ushering in a glorious era while undermining previous administrations' efforts to address the people's needs. To counter this stance, democrats should (re)build their own historical narrative, reinterpreting democratic traditions in ways that resonate with today's majority, connecting past democratic successes and values to the current aspirations of the people.

### 4 DECENT LIVES MATTER MOST

Narratives alone are insufficient to win the public over; people need tangible improvements in their daily lives. Effective welfare policies must address basic human needs for survival and a decent standard of living. By prioritizing policies that improve living standards and that are valued and appreciated by the people, democrats can foster inclusive communities and create a compelling vision of a society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive. This not only strengthens the social fabric but also counters authoritarian narratives that offer superficial or reckless solutions.



# LEARN MORE

## D-HUB RESOURCES



D-Hub. 2024. "Learning from Authoritarians." *Working Papers* #1.

## OTHER RESOURCES



European Centre for Populism Studies. 2024. "Erdogan's winning authoritarian populist formula and Turkey's future."



Financial Times. 2023. "The patronage network behind Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's bid for third decade in power."



Vaishnav, Milan. 2023. "Decoding India's 2024 Election Contest." *Carnegie India*.



# WAR ON DISSENT

Authoritarian offensives against  
opposition and civil society

# THE PLAY

Authoritarians deploy multiple tactics to suppress opposition and neutralize civil society threats to their power. They limit these groups' influence by restricting resources, engineering defections, controlling information, launching personal attacks—mostly verbal but sometimes physical—and abusing litigation.

New authoritarians delegitimize independent voices by attacking their credibility, framing them as enemies of the national interest, and undermining their moral standing. To emotionally break opponents, they expose personal details and target families or social circles, sending a broader message to instill fear and deter dissent.

By making a few high-profile examples, authoritarians create a climate of fear-driven self-censorship. Opponents internalize the risks of resistance and dissent, leading many to stay silent even when others are targeted.



# WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

## 1 **OPPOSITION RESTRAIN**

In restraining opposition, authoritarians employ several tactics:

- **ADMINISTRATIVE AND FINANCIAL PRESSURE:** targeting vulnerable organizations with the use of regulations that make day-to-day administration more complex, including regular audits and donor and beneficiary information, and impeding their long-term sustainability and scalability by forcing these groups to concentrate their limited resources towards compliance with the regulations.
- **REPRESSIVE LEGISLATION:** including “foreign agent laws,” these are often deployed by the state to attack the financial viability of their opponents and overburden them with red tape that impedes their ability to function.
- **ENGINEERING DEFECTIONS & CO-OPTING:** by using a combination of carrots (bribes, easing of legal pressures, making offers relating to enhanced power and stature) and sticks (intimidation and pressurizing through both legal and non-legal routes like blackmail and the deployment of legal and enforcement agencies under their control) authoritarians often try to fragment and break up opposition groups, particularly when such groups seek to come together and forge alliances.
- **ABUSIVE USE OF LITIGATION:** court cases and litigation are other tools used to pressure the capabilities of oppo-

sition parties and civil society organizations, forcing them to relocate their resources to fight these cases. The impact of this tactic is often exacerbated by the state's disproportionate influence over judicial decisions and delays in reaching verdicts.

- **BUILDING A COALITION AGAINST THE ENEMIES:** with the aim to undermine and attack these groups, often, these coalitions are assembled with stakeholders who hail from a similar background—certain sectors of the civil society landscape or the media—to attack their compatriots. When faced with a challenge from within their own domain, these groups often lose the public perception battle and face further erosion of their day-to-day viability.

## 2 POLITICAL DELEGITIMIZATION OF OPPONENTS

In delegitimizing opposition, authoritarians employ several tactics:

- **NARRATIVE**, portraying them as groups working against popular aspirations, typically representing them as actors working at the behest and reporting to foreign interests, elites not in sync with or representative of the masses. The narrative is that they are partisan actors seeking to further their political interests. Often, when confronted with topics that are otherwise common interests, these groups struggle to fight back and win public support.
- **TROLLING**, deploying their supporters, often organized in digital squads, to amplify the narrative that their opponents are actively seeking to undermine the interests of their nations. The focus of these attacks often uses disinformation and fake news to portray opponents as part of a cabal working in nexus with antagonistic elements, including foreign interests, with the underlying aim of attacking the prosperity of the state.
- **CONTROLLING INFORMATION**, often using (and dominating) both traditional and digital media to further narratives spun by authoritarians, leaving little or no room for these groups to present their side of the story.

### 3 DEFAMATION

Authoritarians engage in character defamation to discredit opposition leaders and undermine their moral standing. To accomplish this, they reveal or fabricate scandals to damage the reputation of opposition figures, focusing on alleged unethical behavior, financial misconduct, or personal vices. By attacking private lives or personal relationships, authoritarians aim to erode public trust and caricature these individuals as unfit to represent the people. The goal is to tarnish their image so thoroughly that their credibility is irreparably damaged in the eyes of the public.

### 4 PHYSICAL PERSECUTION

In some cases, authoritarians escalate their tactics by directly targeting opposition figures and civil society leaders with physical attacks. These actions may range from intimidation and harassment by security forces or unofficial paramilitary groups to more severe measures, like unlawful arrests and even extrajudicial killings. These attacks are often carried out under the guise of maintaining “public order” or fighting “terrorism”. Thus, the regime sends a chilling message to both opposition leaders and their supporters.

### 5 ELIMINATION

Authoritarian leaders leverage legal and law enforcement mechanisms to clamp down on civil society and opposition leaders, accelerating intimidation and pressure tactics, including placing them under arrest, suspending licenses to carry out activities and their ability to continue functioning in the public domain.



# WHO'S DONE IT

**YOWERI**

**MUSEVENI**

UGANDA



## Transnational Repression

For Museveni, repression of dissent knows no borders. In November 2024, prominent opposition leader Kizza Besigye was abducted in Nairobi, Kenya. Days later, he reappeared in Uganda, facing charges before a military court under Museveni's orders.

**“Romans 1:32 states:  
‘Though they know  
God’s righteous judgment—that those who  
practice such things  
deserve death—not  
only do they continue  
to do them, but they  
also approve of those  
who practice them.’”  
→ Yoweri Museveni**

## NARENDRA MODI

INDIA



### Institutionalized Suppression

Under Prime Minister Modi, the Indian government has employed a multi-pronged strategy to silence dissent and suppress political opposition. Laws originally designed for counterterrorism, such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and sedition laws, have been weaponized to detain activists and opposition figures without trial. Those accused face criminal charges without due process, often left in legal limbo for extended periods. In fact, only 2% of those charged are convicted, while 97.2% are eventually acquitted—after spending years in jail.

Other laws, like the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (FCRA), have crippled civil society, particularly organizations reliant on foreign funding. Media censorship laws have also been used to target independent and critical journalists. Beyond the judiciary, state agencies—including the Income Tax

Department, the Enforcement Directorate, and the Central Bureau of Investigation—have been weaponized to pressure political opponents. Conveniently, cases against opposition leaders are often dropped once they switch political allegiance.

#### **UNDER PRIME MINISTER MODI:**

- 20,000+ NGOs have had their permits to receive foreign funding revoked.
- 8,719+ cases have been filed against activists and dissidents under (UAPA).
- 805 internet shutdowns have been enforced.
- 121 political leaders—95% from the opposition—have been investigated.

## ALEXANDER LUKASHENKO



BELARUS

### Portraying Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as a 'Foreign Agent'

After challenging Lukashenko's regime in the 2020 presidential election, which observers claim was rigged in favor of the President, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya became the focus of a state-run smear campaign. Belarusian authorities and pro-government media accused her of being a puppet of foreign governments attempting to destabilize Belarus. The regime also tried to discredit her as inexperienced and unfit for leadership, while framing her movement as advocates for extreme measures and dangerous to national stability. Tsikhanouskaya had to flee the country, and once in exile she was sentenced to 15 years in absentia.

**“Differentiate between real politicians, the real opposition, and wooden puppets. You can't lead the country by appearing out of nowhere. (...) [These] unfortunate girls don't understand what they're talking about or what they're doing. But we see who is behind them.”**  
→ Alexander Lukashenko



## DONALD TRUMP

### Pressuring Universities and Critics

USA

After returning to office in 2025, Donald Trump used the presidency to pressure institutions and organizations he saw as hostile, especially universities and some civil society groups. His administration launched a broad offensive against higher education, using funding freezes, visa revocations, DEI bans, foreign-funding investigations, and accreditation threats to go after universities across the country. Under the banner of combating antisemitism and restoring merit, the White House warned dozens of schools and tied federal support to changes in protest rules, hiring, admissions, curriculum, and campus oversight. Harvard and Columbia were the most visible examples, but they were part of a much wider campaign.

The same strategy extended beyond campuses. In February 2025, Trump ordered a review of federal funding to NGOs. After Charlie Kirk's assassination in September, he escalated further, casting antifa and allied networks as a terrorist threat and promising investigations into their alleged funders. This was a strategy of repression by

pressure: cutting funds, opening investigations, stigmatizing critics, and making examples of visible targets so others think twice before resisting.

**"Harvard should lose its Tax Exempt Status and be taxed as a Political Entity if it keeps pushing political, ideological, and terrorist inspired/ supporting 'Sickness'"**  
**→ Donald Trump**

## THAI JUNTA

THAILAND



### **Abusive Litigation**

The ruling party and military have used courts to suppress opposition. A key case was the 2020 Constitutional Court ruling that dissolved the Future Forward Party over an alleged illegal loan, removing a major political threat. Opposition leaders, including Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit and Pita Limjaroenrat, have been banned from politics over media shareholding claims. Sedition and lèse-majesté laws— which criminalize insults or defamation against the monarchy—have also been used to jail critics. These tactics have severely weakened the opposition and reinforced the military's grip on power.

**The Thai Constitutional Court has dissolved or banned over 100 political parties on charges of electoral violations.**



# WHAT CAN DEMOCRATS LEARN?

## 1 MULTIFACETED STRATEGIES REQUIRE A COMPREHENSIVE RESPONSE

Authoritarians use a combination of tactics —legal, financial, and narrative-based— to weaken the opposition systematically. Developing dedicated counter-strategies for each of these tactics is something democrats must focus on, as it becomes imperative to protect themselves from the multifaceted approach that characterizes all authoritarians.

## 2 BUILD ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE

Preparing in advance, through the development of alternative leadership structures, financing models, legal readiness, communications backups, and digital security fortification, can help groups adapt to challenges and ensure their ability to function even in the face of repressive efforts.

### **3 THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY COALITIONS**

Authoritarians often co-opt segments of civil society and media to delegitimize independent voices. This can be particularly damaging to opposition credibility, but can be fought back through the development of transpartisan coalitions that can be used both as solidarity and support networks and pushback against efforts to dent the credibility of opposition voices.

### **4 DECONSTRUCT THE NARRATIVE OF TRANSPARENCY**

Authoritarians co-opt the rhetoric of transparency and anti-corruption to delegitimize opposition, framing it as corrupt or foreign-influenced. Developing counter-narratives that expose the real motivations behind authoritarian efforts and repeal the disinformation ecosystem employed by those authoritarians in power can help counter such efforts.

## 5 PROTECT CRITICAL VOICES

Authoritarian leaders want to silence the most vocal and influential critics from the civil society, the media, or the political opposition. Protecting these critical voices is essential in order to preserve the democratic discourse. To counter these authoritarian tactics, it is crucial to establish legal, financial, and communication support networks that can help safeguard individuals and organizations under threat. This may involve providing legal defense against unjust litigation, securing safe channels for whistleblowers, and ensuring that independent journalists and opposition leaders can access platforms to amplify their voices.

## 6 BUILD INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY NETWORKS

International solidarity networks are crucial for protecting civil society, opposition politicians, and activists under authoritarian rule. These networks connect dissidents, journalists, and organizations across borders to share resources, amplify voices, and coordinate advocacy. You must partner with human rights groups, independent media, and democratic governments, as they provide visibility, protection, and diplomatic support.

Diaspora communities and exiled opposition figures are also key in applying international pressure, organizing campaigns, and lobbying institutions. Strengthening cross-border alliances ensures that when authoritarians try to isolate your organizations, their voices reach the world—turning local struggles into global causes.



# LEARN MORE

## OTHER RESOURCES



Applebaum, Anne. 2024. "Autocracy, Inc."



Franz, Erica. 2018. "Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know."



Guriev, Serge & Daniel Treisman. 2022. "Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century."



Protect Democracy. 2022. "The Authoritarian Playbook."



8

# BENDING CHECKS AND BALANCES

Authoritarian tactics to undermine  
democratic institutions

# THE PLAY

**New authoritarians maintain power by systematically weakening key institutions and eroding checks and balances. This includes targeting independent authorities, oversight bodies, constitutional safeguards, and internal mechanisms within political parties that could limit their control.**

**While traditional autocrats openly dismantle institutions, elected authoritarians take a subtler, slower approach. They justify their actions with reasonable-sounding rhetoric, claiming to be “fulfilling the people’s mandate”, “cleaning up the system,” or “ushering in fresh, uncorrupted leadership.”**

**Despite these justifications, their goal is clear: cripple accountability. By co-opting, weakening, or defunding oversight bodies and party structures, they eliminate resistance, expand executive power, and ensure their dominance remains unchallenged.**



# WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

## 1 EROSION OF CONSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS

A key step in weakening checks and balances is the undermining or dismantling of constitutional safeguards. Using their legislative majority, new authoritarians pass laws that reinterpret or rewrite key constitutional rules, targeting judicial appointments, the separation of powers, and executive authority. These measures allow them to expand executive power, override judicial rulings, and erode the independence of oversight institutions. In doing so, they weaken both political opposition and civil society, ensuring that resistance is systematically neutralized.

## 2 STACKING AND ATTACKING THE JUDICIARY

High courts are a key target for elected authoritarians. They use a range of tactics to undermine judicial independence, including packing courts with loyalists, interfering with judicial appointments, creating parallel judicial networks, and manipulating public opinion to discredit independent judges.

### **3** **CO-OPTING AND COERCING INDEPENDENT INSTITUTIONS**

These leaders target agencies and bodies related to transparency, accountability, and enforcement. Authoritarians use various strategies, such as promoting loyalists, sidelining independent bureaucrats via punishment postings and transfers, and manipulating appointment terms. They also employ financial controls to restrict the functionality of these institutions and resort to traditional pressures like intimidation, harassment, bribery, and other practices.

### **4** **EXPLOITING EMERGENCY POWERS**

Authoritarians exploit emergency powers, crises, or security threats to expand executive authority and bypass constitutional checks. They may declare states of emergency, enact emergency decrees or legislation, and centralize decision-making under the guise of protecting national security or public safety. These measures often result in the erosion of civil liberties and the concentration of power in the hands of the executive.

## 5 UNDERMINING COMPETITIVE ELECTIONS

They also take steps to restrict or undermine the electoral process by targeting their political opponents through both legal and extralegal measures, including the dissolution of opposition parties and the disqualification of opposing candidates. They also target institutions in charge of conducting elections. By packing these bodies with loyalists, for instance, authoritarians can control electoral timing and its procedures.

## 6 TAKING OVER THE MEDIA

Authoritarians strategically seize control of the media to dominate the narrative, suppress dissent, and discredit the opposition. They use state influence, legal pressure, and financial leverage to weaken independent outlets while building a loyalist media ecosystem. They achieve this by acquiring or influencing private media, subjecting independent journalism to regulatory scrutiny and monetary penalties, and turning state-aligned outlets into propaganda tools. By consolidating media control, authoritarians ensure that only their version of reality prevails.

## 7 PERSONALIZING THE PARTY

New authoritarians reshape their parties around themselves and weaken internal party checks, ensuring that the party serves as a vehicle for their rule rather than an institution with democratic norms. They limit internal dissent by promoting loyalists who owe their political careers to the leader rather than the party's ideology or principles. They eliminate horizontal constraints that could challenge their authority by eroding internal mechanisms for leadership selection, decision-making, and accountability. Over time, the party loses its autonomy, becoming fully subordinate to the leader's will.



# WHO'S DONE IT

**BENJAMIN  
NETANYAHU**

ISRAEL



## The subtle art of weakening the separation of powers

In Israel, where the judiciary serves as the primary check on executive power, Prime Minister Netanyahu's far-right government has pushed judicial reforms designed to weaken oversight. Framed as measures to enhance democratic governance, the reforms—approved in 2023—sought to limit the Supreme Court's ability to strike down laws and grant the ruling coalition greater control over judicial appointments, effectively removing key constraints on government power. In January 2024, the Supreme Court struck down the law, reaffirming its role as a safeguard against executive overreach. However, Netanyahu's far-right government remains determined to push forward with judicial changes, keeping the battle over Israel's judiciary far from over.

**“The decisions should be left to the government that is elected by the people. Let the people decide. If you make the wrong decisions, you will be booted out.”  
→ Benjamin Netanyahu**

**NAYIB  
BUKELE**

EL SALVADOR

**'Cleaning up' the House**

Bukele has consolidated power by leveraging genuine popularity while systematically bending institutions and rewriting laws to his advantage. In 2021, immediately after securing a legislative supermajority, his government purged the entire Constitutional Court and the Attorney General. Within weeks, the newly appointed court—stacked with his loyalists—issued a controversial ruling allowing Bukele to seek reelection, despite six constitutional articles explicitly prohibiting it. In 2023, Bukele adjusted the electoral system to his advantage, passing reforms that undermined proportionality, ensuring overrepresentation for his party while effectively sidelining the opposition. He framed these moves as a necessary reform to clean up institutions, dismissing critics outright.

**“With all due respect: we are cleaning our house ... and that is none of your business.”**  
→ Nayib Bukele

## LAW AND JUSTICE

## PARTY (PiS)



POLAND

### Stacking and Undermining the Judiciary

PiS has used a broad set of tactics to seize control of Poland's judiciary, particularly the Constitutional Tribunal. In addition to defying Tribunal rulings, PiS has pursued a multipronged strategy that includes blocking opposition-backed judges, packing the court with loyalists, and passing laws that undermine judicial independence. Beyond the Constitutional Tribunal, PiS has moved to reshape the Supreme Court and the National Council of the Judiciary (KRS), the body responsible for judicial appointments. By stacking KRS with loyalists, the party has secured disproportionate control over judicial appointments and promotions. Additionally, PiS lowered the retirement age for Supreme Court judges, forcing out numerous judges and creating an Extraordinary Chamber with the power to punish judges for their rulings—fostering a climate of fear and compliance within the judiciary.

**“There is indeed a problem with the rule of law in Poland. It is our duty to ensure that rulings which violate the law are quickly overturned, and the judges who issued them brought to disciplinary responsibility and, consequently, removed from the profession.”**  
→ Jarosław Kaczyński

**DANIEL  
ORTEGA**

NICARAGUA



### **Erosion of Constitutional Safeguards**

In 2014, President of Nicaragua Daniel Ortega and the ruling party passed a massive Constitutional amendment. Term limits on the presidency were removed, allowing him to seek re-election indefinitely. Other amendments included removing the minimum number of votes to be elected (35% of total votes cast), allowing the president to issue legally enforceable decrees, and reinforcing the president's grip on the Police and Army. More recently, a "Foreign Agents" law was passed, which dissolved more than 5000 civil society organizations. Besides, a "Cybercrime Law" allows the government to prosecute citizens who post negative messages on social media. Around 500 people have been imprisoned for political reasons in the last four years.

**"Those who are in jail are  
the sons of bitches of the  
American imperialists."  
→ Daniel Ortega**



# WHAT CAN DEMOCRATS LEARN?

## 1

### BE PREPARED FOR THE WORST

The authoritarian approach to dismantling checks and balances adopts an all-encompassing strategy that looks at institutions collectively and develops individual tactics to undermine each of them. Working with a potential worst-case scenario regarding institutional atrophy allows groups to stay alert and develop counter strategies to fight back.

## 2

### BUILD COALITIONS

Given the scale of authoritarians' all-pervasive approach to democratic undermining, potential victims of such efforts must build coalitions to boost their collective capacity to fight back. From opposition forces uniting to building bridges between the political class, civil society, the media, and institutions like the judiciary, a united front has a better chance of countering authoritarian attempts.

### **3 ANTICIPATE LEGAL LOOPHOLES AND BUILD COUNTER-STRATEGIES**

Authoritarian regimes exploit legal loopholes and wield influence over institutions like the judiciary. To counter this, anticipate these moves and prepare strategies to block them before they take hold. Have legal defenses ready and prepare the media to respond quickly, exposing abuses and rallying public opinion against unconstitutional actions.

### **4 EMPOWER CIVIL SERVANTS AND INSTITUTIONS TO DEFEND THEMSELVES**

The civil service can play a crucial role in resisting authoritarian tactics. It is essential to support and encourage key institutions, such as courts and oversight bodies, to defend their mandates. Supreme Courts and other independent institutions have often been at the forefront of standing up to authoritarian overreach. Civil servants, including judges, can be vital by staying committed to their responsibilities and refusing to bow to coercion or intimidation.

### **5 WHEN YOU HAVE THE CHANCE, DON'T BE LIKE THEM**

When in power or given the opportunity to make appointments, do not emulate authoritarian tactics by appointing loyalists or weakening oversight institutions. Instead, prioritize building strong, independent institutions that hold power accountable—even when it is politically inconvenient. Upholding the integrity of democratic systems is essential to ensuring their resilience against future threats.



# LEARN MORE

## D-HUB RESOURCES



D-Hub. 2024. "Influencer-in-Chief." *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 4.

## OTHER RESOURCES



Applebaum, Anne. 2024. "Autocracy, Inc."



-. 2022. "Twilight of Democracy."



Franz, Erica; Andrea Kendall-Taylor & Joe Wright. 2024. "The Origins of Elected Strongmen."



Guriey, Serge & Daniel Treisman. 2022. "Spin Dictators."



Navot, Suzie. 2024. "An Overview of Israel's 'Judicial Overhaul'". *Israel Law Review*.



Protect Democracy. 2022. "The Authoritarian Playbook."

# WE CAN HELP YOU.

At the Democracy Hub, we understand the emotional and strategic challenges of confronting modern authoritarianism—uncertainty, confusion, pressure, and relentless attacks on democratic values.

But you are not alone.

D-Hub is a vibrant community dedicated to defending and renewing democracy. We have the knowledge, tools, and experience to help you fight back effectively.

Our mission is to increase the effectiveness of those fighting authoritarianism. We emphasize collaborative peer-to-peer learning, comprehensive training, coaching, strategic support, and fostering networks of solidarity and exchange. We aim to ensure that democracy advocates worldwide are equipped with the vital relationships, deep knowledge, and essential skills they need to fulfill their mission.

→ IF YOU NEED SPECIFIC ASSISTANCE, PLEASE CONTACT US AT [CONTACT@DHUB.ORG](mailto:CONTACT@DHUB.ORG)



SIGN UP FOR OUR [NEWSLETTER](#) AND RECEIVE UPDATES ABOUT OUR WORK WORLDWIDE.



JOIN THE [COMMUNITY](#) AND HAVE ACCESS TO INSIGHT BRIEFS, WORKING PAPERS, VIDEOS, PODCASTS, AUDIOBOOKS, AND MORE RESOURCES DESIGNED TO [EQUIP](#) DEMOCRACY DEFENDERS WITH THE LATEST SKILLS AND STRATEGIES.

Reach out to us. Together, we can defend democracy.

# **D-HUB IS A VIBRANT COMMUNITY COMMITTED TO DEFENDING AND RENEWING DEMOCRACY.**

Our mission is to improve the effectiveness of those who fight against authoritarianism. We emphasize collaborative learning among peers, comprehensive training, coaching, strategic support and the promotion of networks of solidarity and exchange.

Our goal is to ensure that democracy advocates around the world are equipped with the vital relationships, deep knowledge, and essential skills they need to fulfil their mission.

**D-HUB**

[DHUB.ORG](https://DHUB.ORG)