



In Praise of Dictators: A Swiftian Perspective

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries
INSEAD, manfred.ketsdevries@insead.edu

This article takes a “Swiftian perspective” to the question of dictatorship. Using satire to expose people’s idiocy in supporting dictatorships, it celebrates the benefits of this form of governance. At the same time, it highlights some of the downsides of democracy. It makes the tongue-in-cheek argument that democracies are unwieldy castles in the sky. The subtext, however, draws attention to the dangers of autocratic rule. It highlights how dictators contribute to the destruction of civil society, instigating corruption, terror, war, and even genocide. Furthermore, the article points out how dictators cement their autocratic rule, using fear to keep their citizens compliant. It also highlights how they will suppress free speech by controlling the flow of information. At the same time, the article emphasizes the fragility of democracies and the need to support them through a well-informed citizenry, an independent judiciary, a free press, free speech, solid civic institutions, and the right to demonstrate. The article ends by iterating that all these things are sacrificed in maintaining a dictatorship and how easily it can happen.

Keywords: Dictatorship; Autocracy; Democracy; Free Press; Free Speech; Independent Judiciary; Right to Demonstrate; Corruption; Terror; War; Genocide

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Introduction

Why do so many decadent Western democracies just not get it? Why are people so hung up on democracies, anyway? Remember what John Adams, one of America's Founding Fathers, said: "Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide." And he was right. Democracies are so unstable. All around us we see the slow extinction of democracies, worn out through apathy, impassivity, indifference, and undernourishment. As the French philosopher Montesquieu put it, "The tyranny of a prince is not so dangerous to the public welfare as the apathy of a citizen in a democracy." Democracies can also be quite boring. Orson Welles famously observed, "In Italy for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love; they had five hundred years of democracy and peace and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock."

Fortunately, an increasing number of countries are seeing the light and for some time now democracies have been on the decline. Their number peaked at 42 in 2012, and presently there are just 34, home to only 13 percent of the world population, according to V-Dem, a nonprofit that studies governments. Autocracy is on the rise as many enlightened leaders have realized that democracies simply don't function well. They recognize that indifferent, apathetic, and poorly informed voters don't have what it takes to make them work. And they agree with Winston Churchill, who said, "The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter." One of these leaders is President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, who has made it very clear that dictatorships

are so much more appropriate and effective than democracies: “We will never resolve serious national problems with this irresponsible democracy.” It has been said that a state is the reflection of its citizens, which should mean that the more decent the citizens, the more decent the state. But is this just wishful thinking? The French novelist Gustave Flaubert maintained that it is: “The whole dream of democracy is to raise the proletariat to the level of bourgeois stupidity.”

It's about time we started giving dictators their due and acknowledged their virtues. Many people fail to realize it, but dictators can be so public spirited. Isn't it moving to hear President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt say he “would never stay in office against the will of the people? My ethics and patriotism do not allow me to do so?” That's a real man of the people. So many enlightened dictators make similar worthy and insightful statements, like “It's better to be a dictator than gay” (President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus). Those for whom dictatorship is a family tradition can add the weight of experience to their words. Here's Kim Jong-un, the supreme leader of North Korea: “There is no force in the world that can block the powerful march of our army and people, who are holding high the banner of the suns of great Comrade Kim Il Sung and great Comrade Kim Jong Il and continuing to advance under the leadership of the party and with strong faith in sure victory.” If any ditherers remained to be convinced, he could cite his party's “policies of respecting the people and loving them and the people's hearty loyalty of trusting and following the Party as they would do their mothers.” From a very young age, he'd learned from his father and grandfather how to tell it like it is.

Monstrous democracy

When we take a long, hard look at democracy we can see what a monstrosity it is—a crazy idea, first enunciated in the 17th century, that people need to tolerate fellow citizens whose views differ from their own and give them the freedom to express them. It's an open invitation to disaster, a form of governance with halfwits in charge. Luckily, others with brains in their head know that people are no good at picking their leaders and that democracy means mess.

How can leaders in a democracy begin to think they can manage a country effectively if they need to create compromises between different constituencies? It's all so much blah blah blah—plenty of talk and little or no action. To put it bluntly, democracy is a social experiment without a future. As the ex-prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, said so pointedly, “The exuberance of democracy leads to undisciplined and disorderly conditions which are inimical to development.” Great insight from another enlightened leader!

Democracy cannot succeed unless those who choose are prepared to choose wisely. What misguided advocates of democracy seem to forget is that making democracy work is dependent on having a well-educated, psychologically well-adjusted, highly engaged, and well-informed population. And not only that: a population that is also passionate about equality and liberty and has an unshakable belief in the dignity of the individual. As well as being as rare as hen's teeth, these people also must subscribe to the bizarre idea that all citizens will have an equal vote and equal say in the formation of a government. These

delusional ideas rest on the premise that the collective wisdom of the majority will prove to be right more often than it's wrong. Collective and binding decisions will be honored! The people will make the rules and laws that govern them all as citizens! They will honor, tolerate, and respect each other's opinions! They will elect well-educated, morally grounded, and enlightened leaders! Welcome to Cloud Cuckoo Land.

And what about the criteria needed to make this vision of democracy work? Well, they appear to be empathy, sound judgment, selflessness, and informed. But how many are really capable of putting themselves in other people's shoes? Who decides what makes a judgment good or bad? Who's honestly going to think about their neighbors before thinking about themselves? As for being informed—what a joke! How many people are truly educated? As Chairman Mao Zedong—someone who knew all about human nature—used to say, “To read too many books is harmful.”

The average voter has no sense

When we add up all the criteria needed for a well-functioning democracy, it's natural to wonder whether such people really exist. We all know human beings don't function like this. We know that most people are more interested in the antics of the movie stars, TV anchors, sports personalities, and social influencers than what makes a democracy work. If we accept that a democracy is only as good as its citizens, it follows that a democracy of the ignorant will be not only substandard but also dangerous.

Defenders of democracy fail to see that “one person, one vote” is more like a bizarre experiment than an effective governance tool. Votes need to be weighed rather than counted. The former premier of the Soviet Union, Josef Stalin, hit the nail on the head when he said, “I consider it completely unimportant who in the party will vote, or how; but what is extraordinarily important is this—who will count the votes, and how.”

Does it make sense to give the ignorant the same vote as the well-informed? Isn't it wiser to leave the serious matter of ruling a country to a selected, well-qualified few? The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau seemed to think so: “In the strict sense of the term, a true democracy has never existed, and never will exist. It is against the natural order that the great number should govern and that the few should be governed.” Rousseau figured out that too many fools get votes in a democracy. He was echoed more than a century later by the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, who said, “Democracy is a device that ensures we shall be governed no better than we deserve.” Isn't it fair to conclude that even a relatively incompetent dictator is likely to be less stupid than most of a country's population?

For Rousseau, democracy is an invitation to mediocrity, given that most voters are ignorant. To have the majority make decisions on things about which they know nothing is plain foolish. Living in a democracy means being at the mercy of the flavour of the month. The same thing applies to the choice of leaders in a democracy. They are fated to reflect the faults of their constituency. Believing that conscientious, courageous, and wise leaders will emerge from within a democratic structure is an impossible logic. As the

Reichskanzler Adolf Hitler maintained, "There is a better chance of seeing a camel pass through the eye of a needle than of seeing a really great man 'discovered' through an election." He knew that dictatorship would be a so much better option.

Homo hierachicus

Isn't it time for us to accept that human beings are naturally hierarchical creatures, and that democracy is an unnatural state? Just look at our closest relatives, the great apes. Do you think silverback gorillas or orangutans have a democratic mindset? Are you kidding? Every ape knows its place in the hierarchy. And even though some among us may claim to have a democratic mindset, just scratch a bit and we'll soon see their intentions are only skin deep. We need more honesty about human nature. Given the chance, wouldn't most of us like to be a dictator, to be in charge, to order people around, and always get our own way? The heart of an autocrat beats in most of us. The truth is, most people don't want to think independently or have to make decisions. They may say they don't want to be led, but unconsciously they're craving it. They just love the idea of somebody else making decisions for them. It may sound harsh, but most humans are herd animals, with a herd mentality. In every society some people are born to rule and others to follow. We want authority figures we can look up to. The Italian leader Benito Mussolini acknowledged this succinctly: "Yes, a dictator can be loved. Provided that the masses fear him at the same time. The crowd love strong men. The crowd is like a woman." Benign dictatorship makes so much more sense than dumb democracy.

The advantages of dictatorship

Dictatorship has so many advantages—far too many to list here. But a good way to start is with the “Seven Pillars of Autocracy.” And the first pillar is, a simple life. Dictatorship makes life so much simpler for everyone. The nice thing about being a dictator is that you don’t have to worry about the welfare of the masses. Granted, it might sometimes be a challenge to keep the stomachs of the citizenry full and their heads empty, but it’s far more important to make the few people who count—family and friends—happy. That’s why it makes sense to put those people in lucrative governmental positions, a practice that’s inexplicably frowned upon in democracies, where there’s no concept of loyalty. Loyalty always trumps competence. That’s how you create an effective, functioning government. That’s how you really motivate people. Besides which, it saves time and streamlines government. As the German American writer Charles Bukowski said so appropriately, “The difference between a democracy and a dictatorship is that in a democracy you vote first and take orders later; in a dictatorship you don’t have to waste your time voting.”

Second, fast decision-making. Those difficult but critically important public policies that are needed to move a society forward can be implemented much more rapidly by a dictator. This has even been acknowledged by someone who tried to run one of the largest democracies in the world, US President Harry Truman, who said, “When you have an efficient government, you have a dictatorship.” Truman could only feel sorry for his successor, President Dwight Eisenhower. Having had his own problems dealing with opposition to his presidential authority, he knew that what he’d experienced would be

small potatoes compared to those of his successor, a former five-star general. Truman remarked, “He’ll sit here, and he’ll say, ‘Do this! Do that!’ And nothing will happen. Poor Ike—it won’t be a bit like the Army.”

Third, save time and energy. The defenders of democracy never seem to realize or acknowledge how tiring democracy is. Democracy isn’t a spectator sport—far from it: it requires engagement and it’s exhausting. It takes a huge amount of effort just to keep it on its feet. As a political system, its design is completely illogical. Just think about it—after winning an election, the victors must uphold the institutions that will enable their enemies to win the next time around. How does that make sense? Why make life easier for the opposition? Who wants to be a loser?

Four, no opposition. To quote the British statesman Benjamin Disraeli, “No [democratic] government can be long secure without a formidable opposition.” In a democracy, there is always talk about the need for checks and balances, for compromise, for maintaining equilibrium. Can you imagine always having to deal with an opposition? All it really means is that everyone obstructs everyone else, all the time. What a pain. A one-party state makes life so much easier.

Five, control of the media. Democracies are always going on about the need for a free and independent press, free speech, and freedom of expression. Apparently, liberty and good government cannot exist without them. But this is pure idiocy. Freedom of expression is an invitation to misery and simply confuses the electorate. Control of the flow of information is essential. People need to know what is good for them and what isn’t.

They need to know who is for them and who against them. A good journalist is not someone who reports what people say, but someone who writes what they should think. As Sigmund Freud put it, “Words have a magical power. They can bring either the greatest happiness or deepest despair; they can transfer knowledge from teacher to student; words enable the orator to sway his audience and dictate its decisions. Words are capable of arousing the strongest emotions and prompting all men's actions.” This is why words need to be managed and statements need to be simple. Control of the media leads to a united citizenry.

Six, religion—OK, as far as it goes. Of course, it shouldn't be allowed to go too far. As the visionary leader of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, said so sagaciously, “First and foremost we should be governed by common sense. But common sense should be based on moral principles first. And it is not possible today to have morality separated from religious values.” Putin has had good company, for example, that of US President Donald Trump. During his term in office, Trump regularly consulted and prayed with evangelical advisors, demonstrating what a principled, highly moral person he is. It was his misfortune to be the leader of a democracy: certainly, he had what it took to become president-for-life.

Seven, the last but not the least of the Pillars of Autocracy, patriotism. Despite the efforts of dictators to make sure that the people know their leaders have their best interests at heart, some people can be so ungrateful. There are always a misguided few who fail to recognize the advantages of dictatorship and prefer to rebel. Of course, these people

must be kept in line. That's why we need vigilant and discreet security forces to find these people out and keep them under control. As Chairman Mao said so thoughtfully, "Power comes from the muzzle of a gun, those that have the guns have the power, those that have the power dictate what type of government theirs shall be." President Putin agreed, commenting, "You can do a lot more with weapons and politeness than just politeness." Sometimes, a "special military operation" is needed to focus people's minds on the benefits of dictatorship, the presence of an enemy and remind them of what they stand to lose, as President Putin has done with his patriotic incursion into Ukraine.

The disadvantages of democracy

The advantages of dictatorship are so self-evident that we hardly need to think about the disadvantages of democracy. However, there are some eccentric democratic practices that are worth looking at. The first is demonstration. People in democracies take to the streets at the drop of a hat to protest against something or other and assert their right to "free speech", whatever the cost to social stability and the general infrastructure. But there is no such thing as peaceful demonstration; it's simply an invitation to chaos. Protests always get out of hand and casualties are par for the course. Effective dictators know how to protect their people from such disruptive uprisings and keep them in check.

Another oddity is the emphasis democracies put on the rule of law and an independent judiciary. What nonsense! Don't you want the judiciary firmly on your side? And isn't it better to have an enlightened dictator who sends out clear edicts that keep people on the right path? Knowing the rules and what might happen to you if you are foolish enough to

break them keeps things simple. And a dedicated, hard-working dictator with his people's interests at heart—like the late, great Soviet leader Josef Stalin—will make sure that dissenters do not disrupt the smooth functioning of a country. As he put it so succinctly, “No man, no problem.”

“Nobody’s perfect”

Of course, the success of dictatorships inevitably draws criticism from those looking in from the outside. A false accusation frequently made is that dictators come to power in troubled countries where ignorance, prejudice, intolerance, and suspicion flourish and people stop thinking for themselves. But isn't strong guidance and clear vision exactly what's needed in those circumstances? Decision-making is easier when people follow orders. It is the way to get things done. Again, detractors like to say that dictators rule through fear. They talk about genocide, imprisonment and torture and trot out the old chestnut about “the terror of the early morning knock on the door”—insinuating that the person ringing will not be from Amazon. They forget that, as a rule, dictatorships guarantee safe streets. Everyone knows that respect and awe are great management tools, highly effective ways of maintaining stability and governing in an exemplary way. And nobody gets a surprise visit unless they deserve it.

Democracies are unnatural constructs, products of western culture that do not really fit regions of the world with very different cultural, religious, sociological, and historical backgrounds. President Putin indicated this when he said, “Russian democracy is the power of the Russian people with their own traditions of national self-government, and

not the realization of standards foisted on us from outside.” Both Russia and China have attracted many admirers and emulators, given their success in adopting a strongman rule and choosing to have presidents-for-life. Fortunately, in nation after nation, autocracies are replacing democracies. For example, it’s heart-warming to know that Africa now has more dictators per capita than any other continent.

Even Western statespersons are beginning to admire autocracy. As former US President George W. Bush said, “A dictatorship would be a heck of a lot easier, there’s no question about it.” And former President Donald Trump, truly a political trailblazer, agreed. For example, referring to President Xi Jinping of China, he said, “We love each other.” He added, “He’s now president for life, president for life. And he’s great... Maybe we’ll have to give that a shot someday.” How disappointed he must have been that he was unable to reach that goal. Encouragingly, many authoritarian practices are being smuggled into previously democratic governments. Enlightened autocrats, like prime minister Narendra Modi of India, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, and Viktor Orbán, prime minister of Hungary, have seen the light and are moving toward turning their countries into well-run dictatorships. As a starting point, they have found ingenious ways to control elections and maintain their power base.

Unfortunately, there have always been dissenters who don’t realize the greatness of dictatorships. Winston Churchill would have it that “democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” Other misguided souls quote the old adage that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts

absolutely. But isn't it logical that people who love power become leaders and people who admire power become followers? Others suggest that there is no such thing as a benevolent dictator. They come out with soundbites—like “The chief support of an autocracy is a standing police force and army; the chief support of a democracy is an educated people”—that have no basis in fact.

Another common theory of pro-democracy commentators is that dictators always come to a bad end. They cite leaders like Iraq's Saddam Hussein, Rumania's Nicolae Ceaușescu, or Libya's Mu'ammar Al-Qadhdhāfī, all brave men who were doing a high-risk job and who, despite their good intentions, came to the saddest end. Yet we see around the world that dictators who hold firm and succeed in controlling the pointless indulgences that contribute to the chaos of democracies—freedom of speech, freedom of opposition, freedom of information, judicial freedom, educational freedom—continue to thrive, as do the countries they govern. As the American writer H.L. Mencken observed, “Democracy is a pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance. No one in this world, so far as I know—and I have researched the records for years and employed agents to help me—has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people.”