

THE IN A HURRY SERIES

# Dictators

## *in a Hurry*

How they take power, and how they lose it

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# The Whole Thing in One Page

The dictator in the public imagination stands alone on a balcony. Below him is a crowd, behind him a flag, and somewhere out of sight are the prison cells. The image is useful to the dictator and misleading to everyone else. A ruler can sign an order alone. He cannot arrest, tax, censor, command, distribute favours or count votes alone. The people surrounding him are not scenery. They are the regime.

Dictatorship denies citizens a free, fair and reliably enforceable way to replace those who govern. It can centre on a monarch, military council, ruling party or elected president. Some autocracies permit real contests and can lose. What distinguishes them is the systematic suppression or distortion of competition, not guaranteed victory.

There are several doors in. Soldiers seize command centres. Revolutionaries defeat the old state. A dynasty inherits. A foreign power installs a client. More often than the legend admits, existing institutions open the door. Conservative politicians invited Mussolini and Hitler into government because they expected to use them. Elected leaders have dismantled courts, legislatures, media freedom and electoral safeguards from inside the office they won.

Once in power, dictators face two conflicts. The public may resist. Insiders may defect, conspire or stage a coup. Governing coalitions must hold together despite rivalry within them. Personal rulers try to make their allies strong enough to govern and too divided to replace them. Officers receive commands, careers and watchers. Party officials receive advancement and discipline. Citizens encounter services, fear and permission. Some also believe in the revolution, nation, faith or hierarchy the regime claims to embody.

This is why dictatorship cannot be explained by terror alone. Repression matters, sometimes on a murderous scale, but regimes also co-opt rivals and seek legitimacy. Parties, legislatures, courts and elections distribute rewards, recruit talent, reveal weakness and organise participation. Ideology

can create sincere loyalty and sacrifice as well as public ritual. Propaganda may persuade, crowd out alternatives or demonstrate that the state can compel repetition. Visible obedience is evidence of behaviour, not a clean measure of belief.

The machinery carries a bill. Censorship obstructs coordination below and bad news travelling upwards. Purges remove enemies and competent servants. Parallel security forces can protect the ruler while weakening the state. Personal loyalty settles today's dispute and makes tomorrow's succession harder. A leader who has destroyed every independent centre of judgement eventually depends on reports produced by people punished for being honest.

Dictators lose power through coups, elections, uprisings, insurgencies, foreign intervention, state collapse and death. Crowds matter most when they change what officers and insiders expect everyone else to do. A regime that looked solid can then empty at speed. Yet three events must remain separate: the fall of a ruler, the fall of his governing system and the arrival of democracy. One dictator is often replaced by another.

The balcony is the final product. The subject is the network holding it up, the bargains and beliefs inside it, the people kept apart beneath it, and the moment enough of them discover that the structure can move.

That is the book.

# Why You Should Care

For much of humanity, dictatorship is neither an old newsreel nor an exotic interruption of normal life. It is the government that issues the passport, sets the school curriculum, licenses the employer and decides which complaint becomes dangerous. The scale is easy to underestimate from somewhere else. In its 2026 report, the V-Dem Institute classified ninety-two countries as autocracies and eighty-seven as democracies at the end of 2025, placing roughly three quarters of the world's population under autocratic rule. Some countries sit in a statistical grey zone. Even allowing for those disputed boundaries, this is an ordinary condition of human life, not a collection of historical exceptions.

Understanding that government requires widening the question that dominates most biographies: what does the ruler want? Personal conviction matters. It can define enemies, acceptable costs and the future a regime seeks to build. The further questions are who can remove the ruler, whose cooperation he needs, what information reaches him, how rewards are allocated and what citizens believe other citizens will do. No belief, however intense, explains by itself how an order travels from a desk to a border post, why a general obeys, why a judge supplies legal language or why millions repeat a slogan they mock at home.

The distinction matters outside established dictatorships. Democracies rarely disappear at a single ceremony. An elected executive attacks referees, changes appointment rules, intimidates media, converts the civil service, disadvantages opponents and presents each step as a response to sabotage or emergency. Any one measure may have a lawful defence. The pattern lies in whether opponents retain a fair chance and can make a victory count. Studying completed dictatorships makes the sequence easier to see without pretending that every forceful government is already one. The diagnostic test is not whether a leader sounds alarming. It is whether opponents can still organise, learn, compete and remove the government without first obtaining permission from the government itself.

It also improves how collapse is read. News coverage tends to discover fragility on the day a crowd fills a square or a president boards a helicopter. The preceding years then look like a countdown. They were not. Most failed protests are forgotten. Most elite quarrels are contained. Most economic crises do not end regimes. An internal collapse can begin when several uncertain actors change their expectations together: demonstrators believe numbers can protect them, officers doubt an order will be obeyed, insiders seek a place in the next arrangement and foreign supporters recalculate. The visible event is late in the mechanism.

That mechanism explains why moral courage is necessary and insufficient. A dissident may expose a lie and remain isolated. A million private opponents may produce no opposition if each believes the others are loyal. A controlled election may strengthen a ruler by identifying supporters, or weaken him by giving scattered opponents a common number. An army may defend the state, defend the ruler or decide that the distinction has become inconvenient. Institutions that look decorative can become the channels through which a system either adapts or breaks.

Then comes the warning after victory. Removing a dictator does not remove the officers, officials, fortunes, fears, borders and habits that organised his rule. The successor inherits a state shaped to prevent trust and independent power. Sometimes that inheritance is rebuilt into democracy. Sometimes a junta replaces a president, a party replaces a junta or civil war replaces both. Celebrating the fall before identifying what has fallen is how one mistakes a change of portrait for a change of system.

This book therefore treats dictators as dependent rulers rather than political monsters from another species. Once the machinery is visible, the man on the balcony stops blocking the view.

# The Core Ideas

## No Dictator Rules Alone

The first correction is grammatical. A dictator rules, but a dictatorship is organised by a plural.

A ruler may monopolise the final decision. He still needs officers to command soldiers, police to make arrests, officials to collect taxes, judges to process enemies, broadcasters to repeat claims, managers to keep electricity running and local brokers to know which family matters in which district. Even a leader who has reduced ministers to frightened messengers remains dependent on the people carrying the message. Political power is not possession of a palace. It is the reliable production of other people's behaviour.

That dependence creates two different conflicts. One runs downward, between the regime and the population it governs. Citizens may resist taxes, evade orders, strike, demonstrate, vote against the ruler or join an insurgency. Political scientists call this the problem of authoritarian control. The other runs sideways, among the people who govern together. Generals, party bosses, relatives, financiers and security chiefs may support the ruler while competing over money, office, policy and influence. They can also remove him. This is the problem of authoritarian power-sharing.

The second conflict is easy to miss because the regime works hard to hide it. Public unanimity is part of the product. Yet insiders face a permanent commitment problem. They help a leader seize power because he promises rewards, protection or a shared project. Once rivals have been crushed, he may no longer need to honour the bargain. The insiders know this, so they seek offices, rules, armed followers or information that can restrain him. The ruler knows that those safeguards could become the machinery of a coup. Both sides need one another and have reason to fear what the other will do later.

Different dictatorships settle the bargain differently. A junta may reserve

major decisions for senior officers. A ruling party organises careers through committees; a monarchy through family and inheritance. A personalist ruler makes access depend on himself. Personal rule means the coalition has become less able to bind the ruler, not that it has vanished.

The public also matters in several forms. Some citizens oppose the regime; some benefit; some believe it defends their class, nation, religion or revolution. Most mix adaptation, private judgement and selective compliance. A worker may depend on a state wage, resent the official who allocates housing and fear the disorder promised by the opposition. A business owner may dislike arbitrary regulation and profit from a protected licence. Conviction and advantage are different sources of support, but they can inhabit the same person.

Dictatorship is therefore not the absence of politics. It is politics in which rulers suppress or systematically distort the competition that could hold them publicly accountable. Bargaining continues behind official unity. Interests and beliefs operate alongside one another. Ideology may conceal privilege, but it can also define enemies, duties and acceptable sacrifice. The crucial decisions concern who belongs inside, what each member receives or hopes to build, how discontent is detected and what happens when an ally says no.

Who belongs shapes what rulers can do. A revolutionary party may survive poor performance through shared commitment and durable organisations. A palace network may lean more heavily on money and access. Coalition size matters, but so does what holds its members together.

The solitary strongman is a useful emblem because it conceals all of this. His portrait hangs alone. His survival never does.

## **Power Has More Than One Door**

The standard entrance has tanks at an intersection and an announcer reading a communique. Coups deserve their place in the picture, but they are one route among several, and the difference matters because the people who open the door usually shape what follows.

Erica Frantz's comparative data identify seven broad routes by which authoritarian regimes came to power after 1945: dynastic takeover, coup, insurgency, popular uprising, incumbent takeover, a change in the ruling group, and foreign imposition. Some began at independence, when a new state inherited borders and offices before competitive institutions had taken root. Of 250 authoritarian regimes that began between 1946 and 2010 in her classification, 46 per cent replaced another authoritarian regime.

Twenty-nine per cent displaced democracies. The remainder began with independence. Dictatorship often succeeds dictatorship rather than arriving as democracy's dramatic opposite.

A coup takes the state from the top. A small group already located near organised force captures leaders, communications and command centres, then tries to persuade the rest of the armed apparatus that the transfer is complete. Speed is part of the method. Officers who wait to learn which side has won may help decide the answer by waiting.

An insurgency takes power from outside and brings an organisation built for clandestine discipline and war. Movements born from violent social revolution often arrive with cohesive parties, loyal security bodies and weakened rivals; comparative research finds such regimes unusually durable, though not invulnerable. A popular uprising can drive out an incumbent but leaves an immediate question: who controls the interim authority, the ministries and the guns once the square empties?

Incumbent takeover can happen by instalments or in one abrupt assault. A leader wins or inherits an office, then alters the conditions under which it can be lost. Courts are packed or bypassed. Independent media face ownership pressure, licensing rules or selective prosecution. Electoral commissions are captured, opponents disqualified and emergency powers normalised. Each move can be presented as law enforcement, administrative reform or defence against enemies. The regime changes before the title of the office does.

Existing elites have often supplied the key. In October 1922, Italy's king appointed Benito Mussolini prime minister after Fascist mobilisation and

elite pressure rather than ordering a decisive defence of the existing government. In January 1933, conservative politicians helped place Adolf Hitler in the chancellorship because they expected to contain him. Neither episode was a dictator battering down an intact constitutional door by personal force. Men with lawful authority opened it and discovered that their own keys no longer worked afterwards.

No route guarantees consolidation. Coups fail, insurgent coalitions split, hereditary successors disappoint their sponsors and elected executives encounter courts or voters that still resist. Nor does crisis produce dictatorship on its own. Economic collapse, war and public anger create opportunities; organisations and choices convert them into a regime.

The difference between a flawed democracy and an authoritarian incumbent takeover is often visible only across time. One altered rule may be reversible. A sequence that removes independent oversight, blocks genuine challengers and makes defeat practically unenforceable changes the regime. Labels should follow the working route to removal, not the leader's preferred constitutional description.

The entrance leaves a durable imprint. Soldiers retain claims as soldiers; insurgents bring wartime command into government; incumbent takeovers leave familiar institutions doing unfamiliar work. To understand how a dictatorship will govern and may fall, begin with who arrived together and what they promised one another.

## **The Armed Forces Are Both Shield and Threat**

A dictator needs armed organisations for the reason every state does: somebody must enforce law, defend territory and confront violence. He needs them for an additional reason: rules without an independent route of dismissal eventually depend on force. The complication is immediate. The organisation capable of protecting the ruler is also the organisation best equipped to replace him.

Military officers possess personnel, weapons, communications and a language of national rescue. They may see themselves as guardians of the

state rather than servants of one government. In weakly institutionalised systems, a crisis can turn that self-image into a claim to rule. This is why coups have been so common among authoritarian exits and why rulers who appear obsessed with their own generals are responding to a genuine threat.

The response is coup-proofing. James Quinlivan's study of Middle Eastern regimes identified a recognisable set of methods: recruit through family, sectarian or regional loyalties; build presidential guards and parallel forces; divide responsibility among competing security agencies; monitor officers; rotate commands; reward loyal units generously; and deny any single organisation enough information or capacity to coordinate a seizure. The ruler does not want one perfect sword. He wants several blades pointed partly at one another.

These measures can work, but they purchase political security with other forms of weakness. Parallel chains of command create confusion. Promotion for loyalty displaces competence. Officers conceal problems because an honest report can look like disloyalty. Units kept apart to prevent conspiracy may struggle to cooperate in war. Resources flow towards guards and intelligence bodies whose main battlefield is the capital. Coup-proofing does not always ruin military performance, and evidence from one region cannot settle every case, but the trade-off is built into the design.

Police, intelligence services and militias create a similar problem. Dividing coercion prevents one chief from owning the state, yet competition among agencies can produce duplicated surveillance, fabricated threats and escalating violence. A security official who proves vigilance by discovering enemies has an incentive to keep discovering them. The ruler receives more reports and less knowledge.

When mass opposition appears, the decisive question is therefore not whether the regime has more weapons than the crowd. It is whether those carrying the weapons expect orders to be obeyed, whether they fear punishment for refusal and whether they believe the ruler can protect them

afterwards. A unit may repress because its members share the regime's identity, depend on its rewards, fear prosecution under a successor or expect other units to fire. It may stand aside when command fragments and the political future changes faster than orders can travel.

Romania in December 1989 exposed the mechanism. Nicolae Ceaușescu still had police, army and state television. What collapsed was the expectation that these instruments would continue to act as one system under him. Once parts of the military shifted and the ruling network began to empty, the state's physical capacity did not disappear. Its direction changed.

Professional identity can restrain repression or justify intervention. Officers may refuse illegal orders because they serve the nation, or seize government while invoking the same duty. A doctrine supplies a reason to act, not a guaranteed response.

This gives armed loyalty a peculiar quality. It looks strongest when rarely tested. A parade proves that soldiers can march past the ruler. It does not prove what they will do when firing on citizens may save him, condemn them or fail. Dictators spend heavily to remove that uncertainty and never remove it completely.

## **Fear Cannot Organise Everything**

An arrest can remove an opponent. It cannot fill the vacant job, teach a class or explain why a supporter volunteers for a dangerous campaign. Fear can make people obey, but governing requires more than obedience at gunpoint. Someone must want the promotion, believe the promise or decide that the available alternative is worse. The prison is part of the system. It is not a complete account of why the system keeps working.

A useful framework separates repression, co-optation and legitimization. Repression raises the cost of resistance. Co-optation gives selected groups office, money, access or limited influence. Legitimation argues that the regime has a right to rule because it restored order, won a revolution, defends a faith, embodies the nation, delivers prosperity or follows an authorised procedure. The mixture differs across countries and periods.

Legitimation is not the same as free consent. A claim repeated under censorship cannot be measured like an open electoral choice. Yet treating belief as a mask is another error. Ideology can define who belongs, turn opponents into enemies of a whole people and make costly action appear necessary. A committed revolutionary may accept shortages as the price of building a different society, then regard criticism of those shortages as betrayal. That is an illustrative possibility, not a diagnosis of every supporter. It explains why sincerely held ideas can sustain coercion rather than soften it. Totalitarian projects sought social transformation as well as obedience; their believers wanted a particular world, not just another month's wages.

Institutions organise these sources of support. A ruling party recruits believers and careerists, trains officials, distributes jobs, carries campaigns into local organisations and makes advancement depend on service. Membership can express conviction, calculation or both. The party also gives insiders a ladder and a way to bargain without settling each dispute by force.

Legislatures can perform similar work. Under dictatorship they seldom possess democratic sovereignty, but they can provide seats, information and access to policy for business groups, regional notables or tolerated opposition. Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski argue that such institutions help rulers secure cooperation from people they cannot govern efficiently through exclusion alone. The chamber is constrained, yet the bargains inside it can be real.

Elections are the most misunderstood institution. A rigged election can display strength, mobilise supporters, identify weak districts, measure local officials and force opponents to reveal themselves. Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party held regular elections whose national outcomes were long predictable. Beatriz Magaloni shows that the contests still tied careers, public spending and expectations to the ruling party. Citizens did not need to believe every race was fair for the machinery to shape their choices.

Controlled elections also carry risk. They create dates, numbers and campaign networks around which discontent can coordinate. Chile's 1988

plebiscite was designed to secure another term for Augusto Pinochet. The opposition used the permitted campaign, the No option won about 56 per cent of valid Yes and No votes, and divisions within the ruling apparatus helped make the result effective. An institution built to renew authority became a route out because enough actors treated its announced rules as binding.

Performance and distribution complete the order. Regimes claim credit for growth, welfare, independence or national restoration. They direct contracts, land, licences and education towards constituencies whose support matters. Patronage can fasten people to the system, while selective prosecution keeps insiders dependent. Predation can also consume investment, revenue and trust.

None of this proves a free mandate. The regime helps create the conditions under which its rewards become valuable, and support cannot reveal its motives cleanly. It does explain why terror alone is an incomplete model: dictatorship needs participants, not just people too frightened to object.

## **Information Becomes a Controlled Substance**

Censorship solves an obvious problem for a dictator. Citizens who cannot share grievances, compare evidence or organise publicly are harder to coordinate. It creates a less obvious problem for the same ruler. A system that punishes unwelcome speech eventually produces the information safest to report, not the information needed to govern.

Václav Havel captured the public side with an imagined greengrocer. In his 1978 essay *The Power of the Powerless*, the shopkeeper displays the slogan "Workers of the world, unite!" among the vegetables. Havel does not ask us to believe the man has been persuaded. The sign says that he knows the ritual and will not cause trouble. Because everyone else performs similar rituals, the display also makes the system look unanimous. Each person's compliance becomes evidence used to secure everyone else's.

Political economists call the concealment of private views preference falsification. It is not confined to dictatorship, but coercion raises the price of

honesty. The result can be a society in which millions privately dislike a government and each sees only public support. Opposition then appears weak until an event reveals how many hidden preferences were alike. What looks like a sudden change of mind may be a sudden change in what people dare to reveal.

Propaganda works inside this gap. Some messages seek belief. Others crowd out alternatives, set the subjects worth discussing or associate the ruler with competence and nation. Crude claims can perform another task: they show that the state can require newspapers, teachers and citizens to repeat something implausible. The display of obedience may deter resistance even when the content fails to persuade. A lie can communicate power truthfully.

The upward problem is harsher. Local officials want promotion and freedom from blame. Police bodies are rewarded for detecting threats. Economic managers know which targets the leadership has announced. Each has reason to edit reality before sending it higher. Bad harvests become temporary shortfalls, unpopular policies become implementation problems and failed operations become victories requiring more resources. Personalised rule intensifies the pressure because disagreement is read as disloyalty to a person rather than criticism of a policy.

Dictatorships build partial repairs. They conduct surveys, count complaints, monitor social media, permit bounded criticism, rotate inspectors and use elections to compare local turnout. Competing intelligence agencies can check one another. These devices explain why censorship is seldom total. A ruler needs enough speech to detect failure and not enough to organise an alternative. The boundary moves with confidence and threat.

Rumour, humour and private language develop in the gaps. A joke can reveal that a slogan is not believed, but not how many people will risk acting on the knowledge. Regimes therefore police ambiguity as well as opposition, while citizens learn that a raised eyebrow may carry more truth than a newspaper.

Digital surveillance increases the quantity of available data without settling its meaning. A government may know who forwarded a message and still misread why. Officials can drown in reports selected by algorithms, subordinates and political assumptions. Citizens also adapt, shifting language and channels. Perfect observation remains a fantasy because the decisive information concerns what people will do under conditions that have not yet arrived.

This is the dictator's information trap. The appearance of unanimity discourages opposition and reassures the ruler. That reassurance can become false. When a crisis breaks the public script, both ruler and ruled learn at once that yesterday's visible loyalty contained fear, habit, interest and private doubt in unknown proportions. Censorship kept the parts apart. It also prevented the regime from knowing how weak the joins had become.

## **Personal Power Writes a Succession Crisis**

Dictatorships differ most in where power sits when the ruler leaves the room. In a military regime, senior officers may retain a corporate claim to decide. In a single-party system, committees, promotion rules and doctrine can organise careers beyond one leader. A monarchy uses dynasty to narrow the succession contest. A personalist regime concentrates appointments, money, intelligence and force around an individual whose preferences outrank any settled procedure.

These categories are tendencies, not sealed boxes. Parties acquire dominant leaders. Juntas create presidents. Monarchs sideline relatives. Personal rulers keep constitutions and cabinets. The useful question is whether other insiders can coordinate, constrain and replace the leader without destroying their own governing arrangement.

Personalisation offers immediate advantages. A ruler who controls appointments can divide rivals and reward loyalty directly. Informal access allows rapid decisions. Security chiefs who owe everything to one patron have reason to defend him. Institutions that might bind the leader are weakened before they can become alternative centres of power.

The method also alters who rises. Competent officials with independent standing become dangerous. Relatives, old associates and politically dependent technicians become safer. Ministers learn to anticipate the leader's wishes rather than defend an institutional position. Policies can swing because no recognised body has the authority to say that yesterday's instruction still governs. The state becomes responsive to one person and less capable of correcting that person.

Succession then concentrates every unresolved bargain. An established party can promote a successor while assuring senior figures that their careers and property will survive. A royal family can define an heir and give excluded relatives positions within the dynasty. Neither arrangement guarantees peace, but both supply a script. A personalist ruler often avoids naming a credible successor because doing so creates a rival with a name, network and date. Waiting protects him today and enlarges the contest after illness, defeat or death.

Dynastic succession is one answer, and it is not confined to formal monarchy. North Korea transferred supreme leadership from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il and then Kim Jong Un through a party-state organised around the ruling family. Syria moved from Hafez al-Assad to his son Bashar in 2000 after constitutional and elite coordination. Such transfers require institutions and insiders; blood alone issues no orders. They work when the family can become the focal point around which the coalition expects others to settle.

Other regimes survive a leader precisely because power was never fully his. The Soviet system endured Stalin's death, ended the most extreme terror and continued under collective party authority. Spain's institutions after Franco's death were transformed through decisions by the monarchy, reformers, opposition forces and inherited officials rather than being mechanically determined by his succession plan. A dead dictator leaves constraints, not instructions that execute themselves.

Personalisation should not be confused with total control of society. A ruler may dominate the summit while local officials, families, firms and informal

networks retain wide autonomy. What matters is that no independent institution can settle the highest conflict against him. The state can be weak in administration and concentrated in political veto at the same time.

Personal rule therefore produces a paradox. It can make the leader harder to challenge while alive and the regime harder to preserve without him. The more thoroughly he has prevented anyone else from becoming authoritative, the fewer trusted mechanisms remain for deciding who comes next. A succession crisis is not an accident at the end of dictatorship. It is often the accumulated result of how the dictator survived every day before it.

## **Dictators Fall When Coalitions Move**

A dictator's death can leave his system in excellent health. That is why death does not appear among the seven kinds of regime failure in Erica Frantz's classification. Between 1946 and 2014, 239 authoritarian regimes fell. Coups accounted for one third; elections, uprisings, insurgencies, changes in the ruling group, foreign imposition and state dissolution made up the rest.

Internal challenges turn on expectations about what others will do. A coup succeeds when enough commanders accept the new authority. An election removes a regime when votes can be counted, defended and translated into office. An uprising can lower fear for later participants and raise the cost of repression. But superior force can destroy a regime without persuading its core supporters to abandon it. Nazi rule ended in Allied military defeat in 1945. Coalition analysis explains dependence; it does not make armies, territory and material destruction disappear.

Crowds are therefore neither powerless theatre nor an independent force that makes armies irrelevant. Their size can persuade officials that repression will be costly, signal hidden opposition, protect defectors and give insiders a visible alternative. Yet large protests have also been dispersed, exhausted or massacred. The response of the coercive apparatus and the cohesion of the ruling coalition usually separate a dramatic demonstration from a regime change.

Elections can create the same convergence without a square. They provide a date when dispersed citizens act together and a number around which insiders must position themselves. The opposition still needs monitors, communication and some leverage over enforcement. A dictator can lose the count and keep the office if the coalition around him remains willing to falsify, repress and absorb the cost. He can also win the official count and reveal weakness if manipulation becomes too visible for allies to defend.

The regime's survival methods shape the break. Purges leave frightened insiders with fewer safe ways to negotiate. Parallel forces make it harder to know which command will prevail. Patronage networks can hold during ordinary scarcity and unravel when revenue disappears. Censorship delays coordination, then allows a public shock to reveal hidden opposition across the country at once. Personalisation leaves no agreed successor when the ruler becomes a liability. The same machinery that prevented gradual challenge can make correction impossible and collapse abrupt.

Three outcomes must remain distinct. A leader can fall while the regime survives, as when a party replaces its secretary or officers retire one general and appoint another. A regime can fall into another dictatorship, as happened in many coups that displaced authoritarian rulers. Comparative data on postwar transitions show that movement from one autocracy to another accounts for about half of autocratic regime changes. Democratisation is one possible result, not the definition of collapse.

Exiles, sanctions, aid and foreign patrons can change expectations, but outside pressure has no uniform effect. It may cut resources or let the ruler organise siege politics. Such pressure often works through the internal coalition. Direct conquest can destroy it.

Democracy demands a further bargain: today's winners must accept rules that can remove them tomorrow, and armed bodies must accept that outcome. Toppling a ruler does not settle either question.

The dependency with which dictatorship begins can therefore become its undoing. Personal rulers divide allies, monitor them and prevent them from

coordinating without permission. Those measures can sustain rule for decades. Under shock, they can also leave officers uncertain which order will hold and citizens watching for proof that obedience is no longer compulsory. An institutionalised party may avoid that particular trap by replacing its leader and preserving the regime. Both outcomes repay the same lesson: power was never contained in one body.

In a sudden internal collapse, enough parts of the system stop expecting the others to keep it standing. The ruler may be the last person to receive the news.

## How It Actually Works

### **The cheer that broke**

On 21 December 1989, Nicolae Ceaușescu appeared on the balcony of the Communist Party headquarters in Bucharest. The regime had summoned workers to condemn unrest in Timișoara, where security forces had fired on demonstrators. State television carried the rally live. Ceaușescu began speaking in the familiar cadence, and the crowd supplied the familiar applause.

Then the sound changed. There were shouts, whistles and movement beyond the orderly front rows. Ceaușescu stopped. He raised a hand and tried to recover the script while television struggled with the image. For years, applause had been an administrative output: people were transported, placed, watched and cued. Now the same machinery had assembled a national audience for its own failure.

The regime did not fall because one crowd made a noise. Protests spread, party officials deserted, the armed forces fractured and Ceaușescu's orders lost their certainty. The next day he left the roof by helicopter. He and Elena Ceaușescu were captured, subjected to a summary military trial and executed on 25 December.

The sequence looked impossibly fast because the public event revealed

private changes that the system had concealed. To see how a ruler reaches such a balcony, and why the floor can vanish beneath it, the story must begin with what the word once meant.

## **The emergency office**

In the Roman Republic, a dictator was an extraordinary magistrate appointed for a defined emergency or task. The office carried concentrated authority, but it belonged inside a constitutional order and was expected to end, traditionally within six months. The modern insult began as a temporary job description.

The Roman safeguard was not kindness. It was expiry. Lucius Cornelius Sulla used dictatorship after civil war to remake the state, and Julius Caesar accumulated the title until he was made dictator perpetuo, dictator in perpetuity, in 44 BCE. His murder followed within weeks. The office demonstrated both attractions of emergency power: decisions could be concentrated when ordinary procedures seemed too slow, and the person holding that concentration could decide that the emergency was not over.

Modern dictatorships retain the argument and discard the clock. War, revolution, disorder, corruption, national humiliation or economic collapse is presented as the condition that makes ordinary competition unsafe. The ruler promises that exceptional control will restore a normal future. The practical question is who retains the power to announce that normality has returned.

## **The mass state**

Before the modern bureaucratic state, a ruler's claims could reach farther than his officials. Distance, slow communication and thin administration left much of daily government to local landowners, religious authorities and communities. The balance varied enormously. Modern dictatorship acquired instruments that could close some of those distances: censuses, conscription, schools, police files, railways, telegraphy and then radio. A government could identify populations, move officials, standardise language and address millions at once.

Mass parties added an organisation between the capital and the household. Fascist and communist regimes used them to recruit, educate, distribute, watch and turn doctrine into a career structure. Twentieth-century totalitarian projects went further than ordinary authoritarian rule by claiming the right to remake society and private life around an ideology. Belief was never universal and the ambition was never fully achieved, but conviction could organise sacrifice, denunciation and long campaigns of transformation. Many other dictatorships sought obedience rather than a new human type. A censoring military junta and a revolutionary party-state can both suppress competition while asking different things of citizens and building different kinds of durability.

Colonial administrations also left concentrated executive offices, coercive forces and borders that new governments inherited at independence. Where representative institutions were shallow and armed movements held unusual prestige, restricting competition could be presented as national consolidation rather than personal seizure.

## **The invitation**

The most consequential seizure may occur without a seizure scene. In October 1922, Fascist squads mobilised and threatened the Italian state. Prime Minister Luigi Facta sought emergency measures. King Victor Emmanuel III declined the decisive confrontation and appointed Mussolini prime minister. Mussolini entered office through the crown, at the head of a coalition, before converting appointment into dictatorship.

Germany repeated the error in a different setting. By January 1933 the Nazi Party was the largest party in the Reichstag but had no majority and had lost votes in the previous election. Conservative politicians around President Paul von Hindenburg supported Hitler's appointment as chancellor because they believed traditional elites could contain him. His first cabinet contained just three Nazis, including Hitler himself. But one of the others, Wilhelm Frick, held the Interior Ministry. Counting ministers was a poor substitute for asking which powers they controlled. The men who supplied the office mistook numerical strength in the cabinet for command of the government.

Other entrances begin outside the constitution. A coup captures the people and channels needed to issue orders, then announces that the transfer has already happened. That announcement is a wager on obedience. Officers who hesitate while discovering where their colleagues stand can give the plotters time to make their claim true. Insurgents face a different problem: their wartime organisation must take over offices it did not previously control. Seizing the centre and governing the country are separate achievements.

An incumbent can instead use powers already in his hands. Peru's president Alberto Fujimori won election in 1990 and, with military support, dissolved Congress and suspended constitutional rule in the 1992 self-coup. Later elections and a new constitution did not reverse the concentration. The label on the office stayed presidential while the route for checking it narrowed.

Each entrance solves one question and creates another. Who can claim credit for the new order? Officers expect influence after a coup. Guerrilla commanders expect office after victory. Party organisers expect careers after an election. Business and landed elites expect protection after financing a conservative rescue. The future dictatorship begins as a debt ledger.

## **The first bargain**

New rulers are often weakest just after apparent victory. They possess the centre and not yet the whole state. Ministries have old staff, provinces have local patrons, officers command units and economic life depends on people who may not share the new project. The first task is to make enough of them expect that cooperation will be safer and more profitable than resistance.

Office, contracts, immunity and influence over appointments distribute the settlement. Ideology can make it more than an exchange of favours. Supporters who believe they have defeated an invader or widened opportunity may remain loyal through losses that money alone could not persuade them to bear.

The coalition is rarely stable. Insiders who helped at the beginning retain networks the leader may later fear. They know his early dependence and may possess an alternative claim to the revolution, army or nation. The ruler therefore starts changing the balance: one ally receives a promotion, another an investigation, a third a distant embassy. Informal access begins to outrank formal office.

This process is personalisation. It is not completed in a day and not completed everywhere. Some parties and monarchies preserve rules strong enough to contain leaders. Elsewhere, the founding coalition becomes a ladder the ruler climbs and then pulls up.

## **Closing the exits**

A new dictatorship must prevent organised opponents from using the institutions, weapons and information left by the previous order. The conversion can be violent, legal or both.

After the Reichstag fire in February 1933, Hitler's coalition obtained a presidential decree suspending major civil liberties and loosening restraints on arrest, search and political suppression. Communist deputies were imprisoned or prevented from sitting. The Enabling Act then allowed the cabinet to legislate without parliament. The votes and signatures were real. So were intimidation, exclusion and the destruction of the conditions that could make a vote free. Law did not stand outside the seizure. It became one of its tools.

Purges perform a related task inside the regime. They remove rivals, frighten survivors and redistribute offices to people whose advancement now depends on the ruler. A purge can be a public execution, a party expulsion, forced retirement, prosecution for ordinary corruption or an administrative transfer. The technique matters less than the message: independent standing is unsafe.

Coercive organisations are rearranged. Presidential guards appear beside the army. Intelligence agencies monitor one another. Commanders rotate. Weapons, transport and communications are divided so no unit can seize

the centre alone. The ruler may recruit from a family, region or community whose fate seems tied to his own.

Independent organisations outside the state are narrowed as well. Trade unions are absorbed, charities licensed, universities disciplined, religious bodies divided and media ownership changed. Opposition is often permitted at a level too scattered to threaten the centre. A local complaint may be tolerated; a national network joining complaints becomes subversion.

The result is an unequal power to dismiss. Citizens lose a reliable route to choosing a different government, while those at the centre retain power over careers below. Insiders may still replace a leader through party or military procedures. In personalist systems, even those routes can disappear, leaving conspiracy, defection or force. These differences decide whether the next crisis removes a president, destroys the regime or is settled behind a closed door.

## **Governing through organised participation**

Once rivals are contained, the regime still has to govern Monday morning. Pensions must arrive, teachers must be assigned, roads repaired, prices monitored and disputes settled. Dictatorships that survive build routines connecting the centre to millions of ordinary decisions.

Mexico's long period of rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party shows why this need not mean one man staying forever. Presidents served six-year terms and could not return to the presidency. For decades, the outgoing president could choose the party's next candidate in the expectation that the candidate would win. The individual left; the governing organisation endured. Ambitious insiders had a reason to wait for the next allocation of offices rather than bet everything on overthrowing the present occupant.

That arrangement was no substitute for fair competition. It did, however, settle an argument that personal rulers often refuse to settle: when must the man at the top go? Party careers, access to public resources and the expectation of continued victory helped sustain the bargain. Elections

connected it to citizens and local officials. They offered information about support and grievances while making opposition victory look unlikely. The party had to keep reproducing that expectation; its rule was organised, not automatic.

Material distribution gives the performance consequence. Housing, university places, import licences, public jobs, land and contracts become politically allocated. In poorer systems, a local broker may matter more than a national speech because he decides whose application moves. In wealthier ones, state banks, procurement and regulation can bind firms to the governing network. Patronage turns abstract loyalty into a chain of specific dependencies.

This is how the regime enters ordinary life without arriving each morning as armed force. Imagine a parent applying for a child's university place and wondering whether joining the party would help. No official needs to issue an explicit threat for the parent to weigh the child's prospects against a political objection. The example is hypothetical; the mechanism is conditional access. Where officials control valuable opportunities, people must think about the political meaning of decisions that ought to be private. Caution can travel farther than police.

Results matter too. Authoritarian governments have produced growth, literacy, infrastructure and public order; they have also produced famine, theft, war and spectacular waste. There is no single authoritarian economic record. Performance strengthens a regime when citizens credit the ruler, beneficiaries expect continuity and insiders receive resources to distribute. Failure becomes especially dangerous when admitting a policy was wrong threatens the ruler whose judgement it expressed.

Repression remains beside all of this. A tax office can deny a licence, an employer can dismiss, a court can convict and police can make people disappear. When the boundaries of punishment are uncertain, people may police themselves before the state needs to arrive.

## **When information turns against the ruler**

Control over speech gives the regime an immediate advantage. It can isolate organisers, repeat its own explanation and make public support look larger than it is. Over time, the same control alters the reports travelling towards the top.

The Soviet census of January 1937 supplied an unusually brutal demonstration. Its findings were politically intolerable, especially because they exposed the demographic losses associated with the famine of 1932 and 1933. The results were suppressed, and officials responsible for the census were arrested and executed. Counting the living had made the missing dead harder to conceal.

This was not a state unable to collect information. Nor does it prove that Stalin had been ignorant of the famine: reports and petitions had reached the leadership. The failure lay in what authority did with unwelcome evidence. A number could arrive at the centre and still be forbidden to correct its account of reality. The lesson for surviving officials scarcely needed a circular.

Some regimes permit criticism below a line. Complaints can expose local failure while leaving central authority untouched. Elections and petitions serve as sensors. The centre wants candour without organisation and truth without an independent truth-teller.

That balance becomes harder as power personalises. A bad policy can be corrected if it belongs to a ministry. Correction becomes disloyalty if the policy has been identified with the ruler's judgement. Subordinates then protect themselves by postponing the fact. By the time failure reaches the top, it often arrives as a crisis requiring the same concentration that prevented earlier adjustment.

## The fracture

An economic crisis can ruin a regime without removing it; an election can remove one without ruining the country. Neither outcome follows from the event alone. The decisive question in these internal fractures is which relationships stop holding.

Chile's 1988 plebiscite gave citizens a common decision on whether Pinochet should receive another term. The No side won about 56 per cent. The vote mattered because opposition groups coordinated, the count could be observed, and members of the governing junta and armed establishment did not unite behind cancelling the result. An authoritarian constitution had created a focal event that enough insiders chose to honour.

Indonesia's crisis in 1998 followed another route. The Asian financial crisis devastated prices, firms and confidence. Student protests expanded, riots struck Jakarta, and political allies began distancing themselves from President Suharto. He still occupied the office and commanded coercive bodies. What he could no longer assemble was a credible cabinet and coalition willing to carry the cost of keeping him there. He resigned on 21 May after thirty-two years in power. Much of the state and governing elite survived into the transition.

Romania showed the faster break. The Timișoara repression damaged the official story, the Bucharest rally exposed public refusal and military allegiance shifted. Ceaușescu's personalisation left few institutions able to negotiate an orderly retirement or preserve the regime around another leader. The collapse therefore moved through improvisation, violence and a summary execution.

These cases resist one heroic formula. A ballot can matter inside dictatorship. A financial crash can matter through elite abandonment. A crowd can matter by changing military expectations. Organisation before the crisis determines whether anger becomes a successor government, while decisions inside the coercive apparatus determine whether numbers protect demonstrators or supply targets.

The security forces rarely make one collective moral choice. Senior commanders consider institutional survival, junior officers consider immediate orders, police consider local retaliation and specialised guards consider whether their fate is tied to the ruler. Opposition movements try to split these calculations by promising amnesty, future status or personal safety. Regimes try to bind them through shared crimes and fear of revenge. Defection is a political bargain conducted under extreme uncertainty, even when later memory turns it into a clean awakening.

## **What comes after**

The removal scene creates a temptation to declare the system finished. Often it is not. Party officials change labels, officers return to barracks with reserved influence, security files remain, oligarchs move assets and emergency laws wait for another user.

A negotiated transition may preserve parts of the old order to reduce the fear of those capable of blocking change. That can make democracy possible and leave serious injustice unresolved. A revolutionary collapse may destroy coercive institutions and leave no authority capable of enforcing a settlement. Foreign removal may eliminate the ruler while turning ministries and armies into prizes for armed competitors.

The central distinction is practical. Has the person changed, has the coalition defining access to power changed, or has a competitive and enforceable method of changing governments appeared? Those answers can diverge for years. The statue coming down is evidence of a political event. It is not a constitution.

## **How we know**

Comparative claims in this book rely heavily on datasets that classify regimes, leaders, coups and transitions after 1945. Their value is scale. Their limitation is that coding requires judgements about when meaningful competition ended, which group ruled and whether a leader change altered the regime. Major datasets therefore disagree at some borders, and numerical claims here retain their stated definitions and periods.

Closed politics also distorts its own archive. Orders may be oral, official records self-protective and opposition testimony shaped by exile, trauma or later victory. Regimes that collapse open files that surviving regimes keep closed. Spectacular personalists leave more memorable evidence than quiet party machines.

Case studies repair part of this by tracing institutions, decisions and local experience, but no country can stand for dictatorship everywhere. Evidence on coup-proofing from the Middle East, ruling parties from Mexico or preference falsification from communist Europe establishes mechanisms and possibilities, not universal proportions. The strongest conclusions are therefore structural: rulers depend on coalitions, coercive organisations have interests, controlled institutions perform work, information is politically filtered, and leader fall differs from regime change. Exact mixtures remain historical questions.

## What People Get Wrong

### **“A dictator has unlimited power”**

The title encourages the mistake. One person is named, photographed and blamed, so his power appears complete. Regimes reinforce the impression because uncertainty at the top invites challenges.

No dictator can implement a decision without agents, and those agents have information and interests of their own. Generals can delay, officials can distort, local bosses can divert and security chiefs can manufacture threats. Even rulers who kill senior allies must decide whom to trust with the killing. The apparent freedom to remove anyone may conceal dependence on a narrow group whose cooperation cannot be dispensed with.

Unlimited power is also a poor description of choice. A personal ruler may face no court capable of vetoing him and still be constrained by revenue, military capacity, foreign patrons, elite expectations and public reaction. He can choose among bad options without being able to create good ones.

The correction matters because analysis built around personality alone cannot explain continuity. If a dead ruler is replaced by a similar one, the institutions and coalition were carrying more power than the portrait admitted. Ask who can refuse, who can conceal failure and who must act for an order to become real.

## **“At least dictators get things done”**

An order issued without a parliamentary argument looks efficient. A finished road is easier to photograph than a safeguard that prevented a bad project. People tired of delay may mistake the absence of visible disagreement for the absence of difficulty.

But speed of decision, capacity to execute and quality of outcome are different things. Imagine a ruler ordering a dam. He can silence objections. He cannot repeal the engineering problem, make displaced people unharmed or ensure that officials report costs honestly. This hypothetical project might still succeed. Its success would depend on competent design and administration, not on the silence itself.

Authoritarian governments can build capable bureaucracies and deliver public goods. They can also protect disastrous decisions from correction. The fair comparison is not the best dictatorship against the worst democracy. It is how different systems choose projects, discover failure and make those responsible answer for it. A spectacular achievement tells us something about one capacity, not the quality of the whole government.

The question to ask is what got done, for whom, at whose cost, and whether people could challenge the result. Removing an obstacle to the ruler is not necessarily removing an obstacle to governing well.

## **“Terror is all that keeps them in office”**

Terror makes silence intelligible. In regimes that use mass killing, forced labour and imprisonment, it must remain central to the account. But obedience is not the only behaviour that needs explaining.

Regimes also survive through parties, patronage, welfare, nationalism,

religion, economic performance and claims to revolutionary achievement. Citizens may support an authoritarian government because it restored order, widened opportunity, represented an identity or appears safer than the available alternative. Some believe its doctrine and help carry it into schools, workplaces and families. Others comply because income, education or security depends on a chain of officials. Conviction, advantage and fear can coexist.

Repression itself is organised socially. Informants provide names, judges formalise charges, employers dismiss, neighbours settle scores and officials decide which rule to enforce. The state rarely watches everyone directly. It creates incentives and moral categories through which people watch one another.

Reducing durability to terror makes two errors. It treats citizens as identical victims with no agency or beliefs, and it makes collapse mysterious whenever the prisons remain open. A regime weakens when its wider structure of legitimacy, rewards, expectations and cooperation fails, not merely when its capacity to hurt disappears. Fear can keep people apart. It cannot govern without participants.

## **“Elections under dictatorship are pointless”**

An election can fail the democratic test without having a predetermined winner. Unfair competition is still competition; even a controlled contest can perform useful work for the regime.

Authoritarian elections can mobilise supporters, distribute offices, identify weak districts, test local officials, expose opposition networks and give the regime a number to display. Campaigns tell the centre which grievances can be safely absorbed. Seats allow selected rivals to bargain without challenging control. Citizens may vote for the ruling party because access to benefits depends on doing so or because an opposition victory looks impossible.

The belief that everyone is merely fooled misses this machinery. Mexico's PRI used regular elections to bind careers and resources to its continued

rule. Other regimes permit enough competition to measure support while tilting media, law and finance decisively towards incumbents.

The correction also reveals danger for the ruler. Elections supply a common date, a count and an occasion for opposition coordination. Pinochet's 1988 plebiscite became effective because citizens voted against another term and important insiders accepted the result. Elsewhere, rulers have cancelled, falsified or ignored defeat.

The right question is not whether an authoritarian election is real or fake in one word. It is what remains uncertain, who can observe the count and what coalition can enforce the announced outcome.

### **“Propaganda works by making everyone believe”**

This model turns citizens into empty containers. The state broadcasts a claim, minds absorb it and loyalty follows. It also makes absurd propaganda look like evidence of failure.

Messages can persuade, especially when alternative information is scarce. They can also set the agenda, associate the ruler with national symbols, exhaust attention and make dissent appear isolated. Some propaganda works through visible repetition rather than belief. If teachers, newspapers and shopkeepers must display the same slogan, each observes that others are complying. The regime demonstrates its capacity to organise public speech.

Havel's imagined greengrocer hangs a political slogan among the vegetables to signal that he understands what safety requires. The customer need not believe the words to receive their social message. Public conformity can therefore coexist with private ridicule for years.

This is why jokes do not prove that a regime is near collapse, and mass displays do not prove deep support. Belief, preference and behaviour are separate. People may repeat what they reject, support what benefits them and conceal what they would do if others moved first.

Propaganda should be assessed by the behaviour it coordinates and the

alternatives it suppresses, not by asking whether every sentence has been swallowed whole.

## **“A stable dictatorship is a strong dictatorship”**

Long survival produces hindsight. A ruler who has lasted twenty years is described as secure in year nineteen, as though duration revealed the next outcome. Public quiet, unanimous votes and disciplined parades add to the illusion.

These signs are partly manufactured and often weak tests. Censorship hides the distribution of discontent. Purges make insiders cautious about sharing plans. Coup-proofing divides security bodies. Patronage holds allies while revenue lasts. A system can be effective at preventing visible challenges and poor at adapting to shocks.

This does not mean every dictatorship is secretly about to fall. Most days, most survive. It means that observed calm gives limited information about loyalty under conditions that have not been tested. The same army that salutes may split when ordered to fire. The same party elite that praises the leader may abandon him when succession becomes unavoidable.

Ceaușescu's Romania looked immovable until public ritual failed and coercive allegiance shifted. Many other apparently brittle regimes endured comparable crises. Collapse is not proof that weakness was obvious, and survival is not proof that institutions are healthy.

Strength should be separated into coercive capacity, elite cohesion, public support, fiscal resources, information quality and adaptability. A regime can possess several and lack the one its next crisis requires.

## **“When the dictator falls, democracy follows”**

The camera follows the person. A palace is entered, a statue pulled down or a helicopter departs, and political language reaches for liberation. Sometimes liberation follows. Often the event has been misidentified.

Leader change can occur inside an authoritarian regime. A party appoints a

new secretary, a monarch succeeds or officers replace one general. Regime change can also produce another autocracy. Comparative research finds that transitions from autocracy to autocracy account for about half of postwar autocratic regime changes.

Democracy requires a further construction: organised competition, enforceable rights, civilian control of force and a method by which today's winners can lose tomorrow. Many inherited institutions were designed to obstruct these outcomes; others may supply procedures that a transition can reuse. Courts may be dependent, media concentrated, opposition fragmented and officers fearful of prosecution. Destroying the state creates a different problem by leaving no authority able to secure new rules.

The correction is not an argument against resistance. It is an argument for naming the objective. Removing a cruel leader, ending a ruling coalition and establishing democracy are distinct achievements. A movement prepared only for the first may hand the second to whoever already controls the guns. The fall is a door, not the room beyond it.

## Use It

### **Map the coalition, not the podium**

Begin any analysis of an authoritarian system by listing the groups whose continued cooperation makes rule possible. Armed force, finance, appointments and local knowledge can matter more than airtime. The official with no television profile may control appointments or armed units.

Then ask what each group receives, what it fears and what it believes the regime protects or is entitled to build. Money is one answer, but office, immunity, identity, policy access, status and protection from rivals can matter more. A coalition joined by a common project may endure losses that would dissolve a bargain based on divisible spoils. Shared belief does not remove rivalry, and cynical participation does not prove belief is absent.

This lens turns personality news into political information. A minister's

dismissal matters when it changes who can coordinate or which version of the regime is winning. A corruption case may be law enforcement, factional discipline or both. Ask what relationship, resource or claim has been rewritten.

## **Ask who commands organised force**

Counting police and soldiers says little without the command map. Identify the regular army, presidential guards, intelligence services, militarised police, party militias and regional forces. Ask whether they share recruitment, communications and leadership, or have been designed to watch one another.

Next separate legal command from expected obedience. Which body protects the ruler personally? Which sees itself as guardian of the state? Which has committed abuses that make a change of government threatening? Which commanders have independent standing, and which owe their careers to one patron?

During crisis, look for coordination rather than rumours. Are units moving, standing aside or receiving contradictory orders? Are senior officers appearing together? Has the regime armed a loyal auxiliary because it doubts the regular forces? A crowd can expose these relationships, but it does not replace them.

Uncertainty can matter before open defection. Watch who can still give an order that others expect to survive the day.

## **Read institutions by function**

A constitution, parliament, court or election should never be classified by its name alone. Ask what uncertainty it permits and what decision it can enforce against the executive.

An authoritarian legislature may have no power to replace the government and still distribute patronage, bargain over policy and incorporate regional elites. A court may protect contracts while refusing political cases. An election may contain genuine local competition inside a national result that

has been secured in advance. These institutions are constrained without being empty.

The same test applies during democratic erosion. Formal continuity can conceal functional closure. An election remains on the calendar while candidates are excluded, media tilted and electoral authorities captured. A court remains open while judges learn that only one side's orders are enforceable.

Do not ask whether an institution exists. Ask what happens when it says no, who bears the cost and whether the government can be removed through the procedure without first consenting to its own defeat.

## **Separate belief from compliance**

Visible support is evidence of behaviour, not a direct measurement of conviction. A person may attend a rally through enthusiasm, employment pressure, fear, habit or the reasonable belief that absence will be recorded. The same action can carry several motives.

Do not make the inverse error. Private jokes do not prove that ideology is hollow, and material benefits do not cancel belief. A citizen may distrust the ruler, accept the regime's account of national danger and fear the opposition more. Another may repeat a slogan under pressure while helping enforce it against someone else. Mixed motives are politically normal.

Look for the cost attached to expression and the choices made when that cost changes. When criticism becomes safer, do preferences alter or only become visible? When benefits are withdrawn, does support remain? When a public event gives people information about one another, does participation expand? Surveys under surveillance may measure caution, while anonymous surveys can still be shaped by doubt over anonymity.

Keep four things apart: what people believe, what they prefer, what they say and what they do. Then examine how the regime links them. Dictatorship works partly by making citizens and observers collapse them into one.

## **Track what bad news can travel**

Information quality is a political institution. Map which people can report failure without losing office, income or safety. A ruler with many intelligence agencies may receive less usable truth than one with a professional statistics office and tolerated investigative press.

Examine how targets are set. If careers depend on meeting production, turnout or crime figures, the reported number may become an output of the incentive rather than a description of reality. Competing agencies can expose error, or create a market in alarming reports. Public complaints can reveal local failure, or become a list of people to punish.

Watch what happens after a mistake. Can policy be reversed while preserving the leader's authority? Can an official say that the centre was wrong, or must failure always belong to implementation, sabotage or foreigners? Systems that cannot separate policy correction from political betrayal accumulate avoidable crises.

A government that controls every microphone has solved the problem of public contradiction. It may also have destroyed its early-warning system.

## **Distinguish the leader from the regime**

When a ruler is ill, defeated, challenged or removed, ask three separate questions. Who occupies the office? Which group controls access to office? Can that group itself be replaced through open competition?

The first answer describes leadership. The second describes the regime. The third separates authoritarian rule from democracy. Confusing them creates false dawns and false reports of collapse. A new president chosen by the same military council may alter policy and leave the regime intact. A ruling party may surrender one election and retain enough coercive or economic power to make the transfer conditional. A dictator may die and leave a succession process that works as designed.

This distinction also improves forecasts. Personal rulers often make leadership and regime fate more tightly connected because they have

weakened alternative centres capable of arranging succession. Institutionalised parties and monarchies may replace leaders with less disruption.

Do not ask only whether the person can survive. Ask what can survive him, and whether that survival would amount to political change.

## **The limits**

This framework explains recurrent mechanisms, not a law of collapse. Authoritarian regimes differ in wealth, state capacity, ideology, colonial inheritance, social division, foreign support and historical memory. Evidence drawn from postwar national governments says less about ancient empires, occupied territories, city administrations or armed groups governing during civil war.

Coalition analysis can also become too bloodless. Patronage, information and elite bargaining are not substitutes for the experience of imprisonment, torture, dispossession and fear. A system may be strategically intelligible and morally atrocious. Explaining why people comply must not be turned into blaming them for surviving coercion.

Nor does identifying fragility produce a timetable. Hidden opposition may remain hidden for decades. Economic failure can strengthen control if citizens become more dependent. Sanctions can split elites or help a ruler organise siege politics. Protest can widen or expose a movement to destruction.

## **The one thing to keep**

Keep the plural.

A dictator's power is assembled from other people's actions. The guard opens a gate, the editor removes a paragraph, the judge accepts a file, the officer transmits an order, the official adjusts a number, the employer rewards attendance and the citizen decides whether anyone else will object. Some act from conviction, some from advantage, some from fear and many from mixtures that change with circumstance.

This does not make responsibility disappear into a system. Leaders choose, command and create incentives. It makes responsibility more accurately distributed. The machinery survives because enough people with unequal power keep performing their part, and it fails when those actions cease to align.

That dependence helps explain how a dictatorship can be durable and unexpectedly brittle. A personal ruler concentrates decisions while relying on a network he cannot fully observe. He prevents its members from organising against him and may not hear when they decide he has become expendable. A ruling party can answer the same danger differently: replace the man and preserve the system. A new portrait need not mean a new relationship between citizens and power.

The next time a ruler falls, look beyond the departure. The guard is still at the gate, the judge still has a file and someone still decides what the newspaper may print. What has changed about their instructions? More importantly, can an ordinary citizen now oppose the successor without asking his permission? The first question tells you who took power. The second begins to tell you whether power has changed.

The dictator is never the whole story. The permanent question is who is still holding him up, why, and what they think everyone else will do next.

## Terms

**Dictatorship.** Rule that denies citizens a free, fair and reliably enforceable way to replace the government. Competition may be suppressed or systematically distorted. Some dictatorships still allow meaningful contests and can lose them; guaranteed victory is not the definition.

**Autocracy.** A broad label for government without effective democratic accountability. Researchers use different thresholds, so country counts vary. Constraints imposed by other insiders should not be mistaken for accountability to citizens.

**Authoritarianism.** Rule that restricts political competition, participation and

independent organisation. Unlike totalitarianism, it need not seek to remake every belief or absorb every private association into one ideological project.

**Totalitarianism.** A disputed category for regimes seeking extensive control through ideology, mass organisation, terror and social transformation. Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union supplied the classic comparison.

**Personalist regime.** A dictatorship in which the ruler has weakened institutions that might bind him. Appointments and policy turn increasingly on personal loyalty, access and discretion.

**Military junta.** A ruling group of officers governing collectively after armed intervention. Some preserve internal rules and rotation; others become vehicles for one officer's personal rule.

**Single-party regime.** A system in which one party monopolises national power and organises recruitment, careers and policy. The party may constrain the leader, or be hollowed out by him.

**Monarchy.** Rule organised through a royal family and hereditary succession. Absolute monarchies are authoritarian; constitutional monarchies need not be. Dynastic rules can clarify succession while moving rivalry inside the family.

**Hybrid regime.** A system combining authoritarian control with some uncertain competition. The label marks borderline cases, but can obscure whether defeat can remove incumbents in practice.

**Electoral autocracy.** An autocracy holding multiparty elections without meeting democratic standards. Opposition may win some contests, while censorship, repression, fraud or institutional bias keeps competition fundamentally unequal.

**Competitive authoritarianism.** Authoritarian rule in which opposition forces use meaningful legal arenas and sometimes win, yet incumbents systematically violate democratic rules. Competition is real, but heavily tilted.

**Coup d'etat.** An illegal seizure of executive power by insiders using the state's organised force or authority. Coups can remove a dictator without ending dictatorship.

**Self-coup.** An incumbent's illegal suspension or disabling of institutions constraining the office already held. State authority is used to destroy the constitutional route by which it could be checked.

**Incumbent takeover.** Conversion of a government into authoritarian rule by those already holding office. It may proceed gradually or through a sudden self-coup, using state power to disable independent constraints and fair competition.

**Coup-proofing.** Measures intended to stop armed insiders seizing power, including parallel forces, divided commands, loyalist recruitment, surveillance and rotation. They can reduce military coordination and honest reporting.

**Praetorianism.** A condition in which armed forces treat political intervention as part of their role. The name recalls Rome's Praetorian Guard; modern forms range from veto power to direct rule.

**Ruling coalition.** The people and organisations whose cooperation keeps a regime operating. It may include officers, party officials, business figures, relatives, clerics, local brokers and rewarded constituencies.

**Legitimation.** The work by which a regime argues that its rule is rightful, necessary or historically authorised. It may draw on ideology, religion, nationalism, revolution, performance or procedure. A claim to legitimacy can inspire sincere support, coexist with coercion and remain different from democratic consent.

**Patronage.** Distribution of offices, contracts, licences or resources for political service and loyalty. It can stabilise coalitions, but make administration depend on connection rather than competence.

**Clientelism.** A repeated exchange in which brokers deliver targeted benefits for support. Unlike broad policy, the bargain is particular and

conditional, fastening groups to organisations through intermediaries.

**Co-optation.** Bringing potential rivals into the regime through office, access, money or limited influence. It reduces opposition by making insiders responsible for the system while revealing information about them.

**Repression.** The threat or use of surveillance, censorship, dismissal, detention, violence or killing to deter challenge. Effects depend on selectivity, credibility, organisational reach and targeted groups' responses.

**State of emergency.** A legal or claimed crisis framework permitting exceptional executive action. Emergencies may answer genuine threats, but repeated renewal can turn temporary suspension into normal authoritarian rule.

**Decree rule.** Government through executive orders bypassing ordinary legislative scrutiny. Decrees exist in democracies too; the danger lies in permanence, breadth and insulation from independent review.

**Purge.** The removal, imprisonment or killing of suspected rivals and unreliable officials. Purges can secure personal control while destroying expertise and teaching survivors to conceal unwelcome information.

**Cult of personality.** Organised public veneration of a ruler through images, ritual, biography and attributed achievement. It signals hierarchy and can make policy criticism appear disloyal to the state.

**Censorship.** Control over what may be published, broadcast, taught or shared. It suppresses criticism and coordination, but also deprives rulers of evidence and encourages flattering reports.

**Preference falsification.** Publicly expressing support one does not privately hold because dissent is costly. When many do this, a regime can look secure until a shared signal reveals hidden opposition.

**Propaganda.** Organised communication intended to shape belief, attention or conduct. It may glorify policy, define enemies or display the regime's ability to compel public repetition without sincere belief.

**Succession.** Transfer of supreme office after death, retirement or removal. Rules can reduce uncertainty. Personalist rulers often resist naming an heir because a possible successor can become a present rival.

## Go Deeper

**The accessible map.** Erica Frantz, *Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2018). This is the cleanest next step after this book. Frantz compares routes into dictatorship, institutional types, leadership survival and regime collapse without forcing every case into one theory. The prose is compact, the categories are explicit and the quantitative claims are stated with enough care to show where definitions matter. Its short chapters also let you compare a particular regime against the wider record rather than treating it as unique. Read it to replace famous rulers with a comparative map of how authoritarian systems differ.

**The governing model.** Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). Svolik builds the distinction this book has used throughout: dictators must manage conflict with the governed and conflict among those who share power. The analysis is formal in places, with models and data rather than continuous narrative. It repays the effort because it explains why insiders empower a ruler they fear, why institutions can restrain him and why apparently stable bargains break. The chapters on power-sharing and mass repression give a rigorous base for reading individual histories with fewer heroic or psychological shortcuts.

**The view from inside compliance.** Václav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless” (1978), translated by Paul Wilson, in John Keane, ed., *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (Hutchinson, 1985). Havel begins with an imagined greengrocer displaying a slogan he need not believe. From that ordinary act he reconstructs how public conformity reproduces a system and how refusing the ritual can expose its dependence. It is an argument by a dissident, not a neutral survey, and that position gives it its force. Read it slowly for the distinction between private disbelief and public participation, which statistics

rarely capture well.

**The modern information bargain.** Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century* (Princeton University Press, 2022). The authors explain rulers who rely less on visible mass terror and more on media management, reputation, selective repression and claims of competence. Their contrast with older “fear dictators” is deliberately sharp, so do not treat it as a claim that violence has disappeared. Read it for the way censorship, polling, expertise and global image alter authoritarian survival, and for its account of why educated, internationally connected societies can remain politically closed without returning to twentieth-century totalitarian forms.

## Notes and Sources

**Definitions and scope.** The book uses dictatorship and autocracy as broad comparative categories, while treating authoritarianism as the wider pattern of restricted political competition and independent organisation. There is no single uncontested threshold. Juan Linz remains foundational for the distinction between authoritarian and totalitarian rule. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way supply the narrower category of competitive authoritarianism, where legal competition remains meaningful but incumbents abuse state power so extensively that the system is not democratic. Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz provide the main regime typology used here: military, single-party, monarchical and personalist tendencies can overlap, and regimes can change character over time. The working test concerns free, fair and enforceable competition, not the literal impossibility of an incumbent defeat. Competitive authoritarianism is the important counterexample to an absolute definition: genuine contests can coexist with systematic state abuse and an unequal playing field.

**The current global aggregate.** The opening figures come from the V-Dem Institute's *Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling the Democratic Era?*, published in March 2026 and based on Dataset v16 with observations through 2025. Its Regimes of the World measure gives best estimates of

ninety-two autocracies and eighty-seven democracies at the end of 2025, with 74 per cent of the world's population, about six billion people, living in autocracies. The report places the possible country totals in wider grey-zone ranges because classifications carry uncertainty. The manuscript attributes the figures to V-Dem rather than presenting them as natural counts. Publication date, observation year and dataset vintage are kept separate.

**Two threats and coalition rule.** Milan Svolik's *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* supplies the book's central distinction between authoritarian control, involving conflict between rulers and the governed, and authoritarian power-sharing, involving conflict inside the ruling group. Geddes, Wright and Frantz develop the complementary argument that dictatorships are systems with leadership groups, coercive organisations and institutions, not the acts of solitary rulers. Jennifer Gandhi, Adam Przeworski, Ronald Wintrobe and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and colleagues provide different models of co-optation, loyalty, repression and coalition size. These theories do not make identical assumptions, so the manuscript uses their shared structural insight without treating any one model as complete.

**Legitimation, ideology and revolutionary durability.** Johannes Gerschewski's three-pillar framework restores legitimation to explanations that otherwise emphasise repression and co-optation. The manuscript uses the framework as a disciplined distinction, not a measured universal equation. Jean Lachapelle, Steven Levitsky, Lucan A. Way and Adam E. Casey analyse authoritarian regimes from 1900 to 2015 and find that regimes founded in violent social revolution were especially durable. Their explanation combines cohesive ruling parties, loyal security apparatuses, extraordinary military threats and the destruction of alternative power centres. Levitsky and Way's later *Revolution and Dictatorship* (2022) develops the argument and explicitly includes revolutionary regimes destroyed by foreign war. The book therefore gives sincere belief and transformative ambition independent weight without claiming that ideology alone causes survival or that every revolutionary regime endures.

**Routes into power.** The figures for 250 authoritarian regimes beginning

from 1946 to 2010, with 46 per cent replacing prior autocracies and 29 per cent replacing democracies, come from Erica Frantz's *Authoritarianism*, chapter 6. Her seven routes are dynastic family takeover, coup, insurgency, popular uprising, incumbent takeover, a rule change altering the ruling group and foreign imposition; independence accounts for the remaining origin cases in the period summary. The manuscript groups these into a readable lifecycle without implying that each route is equally common. Maxwell Cameron's work on self-coups supports the Fujimori example and the definition of an incumbent using existing office and armed support to disable constitutional restraints.

**Mussolini and Hitler.** Robert Paxton and R. J. B. Bosworth support the treatment of the March on Rome as coercive mobilisation combined with elite accommodation and royal appointment, not a battlefield conquest of Rome by Mussolini. Richard Evans and Ian Kershaw support the account of Hitler's appointment on 30 January 1933, conservative expectations that he could be contained, and the subsequent conversion of office into dictatorship. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's "The Nazi Rise to Power" identifies the first cabinet's three Nazis: Hitler, Wilhelm Frick as Interior Minister and Hermann Göring as a minister without portfolio. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Holocaust Encyclopedia entries on the Reichstag Fire Decree and Enabling Act were used to check the February and March 1933 legal sequence. The manuscript does not suggest that legality made the process democratic: intimidation, exclusion, detention and political violence destroyed the conditions of free decision.

**Coups and armed organisations.** James Quinlivan's 1999 article identifies the coup-proofing repertoire used in the manuscript: exploiting special loyalties, creating parallel forces, building internal security bodies and funding forces whose political loyalty matters to the ruler. Caitlin Talmadge examines how political control of militaries can impair battlefield effectiveness, while Sheena Chestnut Greitens shows how coercive institutions are designed around different threats. The manuscript states this as a trade-off, not a universal claim that every coup-proofed military performs badly. Military identity can produce intervention, obedience or

refusal depending on institutions and expectations; the same language of national guardianship can justify opposite choices.

**Parties, legislatures and co-optation.** Jennifer Gandhi's *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* and her article with Adam Przeworski support the claim that legislatures and parties can incorporate outsiders, distribute access and make bargains under dictatorship. Jason Brownlee shows how ruling-party organisation affects authoritarian durability. Magaloni and Ruth Kricheli's "Political Order and One-Party Rule" explains how party careers and collective institutions can make power-sharing credible. Divide-and-rule is therefore treated as a personalist strategy, not a requirement that every authoritarian party or military council must meet. These institutions are not treated as democratic merely because they perform real work. Their political significance lies in which conflicts they organise, what rewards they allocate and whether they can bind the ruler.

**Authoritarian elections and Mexico.** Beatriz Magaloni's *Voting for Autocracy* is the main source for the Institutional Revolutionary Party, the use of elections to attach careers and distribution to regime survival, and the strategic problem faced by voters considering a challenger who appears unable to win. The broader account also draws on Jennifer Gandhi and Ellen Lust-Okar's review of elections under authoritarianism and Levitsky and Way's study of uneven competition. K. Larry Storrs's Congressional Research Service history and the constitutional non-re-election rule support the six-year presidency and the outgoing president's historical influence over the PRI nomination. The discussion refers to the period of dominant-party rule, not present-day Mexican politics. Rotation of presidents is distinguished from democratic alternation between governing parties. Elections can stabilise, reveal information or create an opposition focal point.

**Chile's 1988 plebiscite.** Carlos Huneeus and Pamela Constable with Arturo Valenzuela support the account of the plebiscite created by the 1980 constitution. The No option received about 56 per cent of valid Yes and No votes. This denominator is not mixed with all ballots cast. Opposition

organisation, observation of the count and disagreement inside the junta and armed establishment limited Pinochet's attempt to escape the result. The vote did not by itself create democracy; it operated through prior constitutional commitments, mobilisation and elite choices during the transition.

**Patronage, corruption, performance and ordinary-life illustrations.**

Gandhi, Magaloni, Wintrobe and Bueno de Mesquita and colleagues support the treatment of material distribution as a political technology. Patronage can reward supporters, make local brokers valuable and expose insiders to selective prosecution. This does not imply that all corruption is centrally designed or stabilising. Predation can destroy investment, revenue and loyalty. Geddes, Wright and Frantz and Stephan Haggard with Robert Kaufman support the wider claim that authoritarian economic records vary and that economic shocks matter through coalitions and institutions rather than as automatic triggers. The parent considering a university application and the ruler ordering a dam are explicitly hypothetical, not reported events. The committed revolutionary is likewise an illustration of a possible mechanism, not a claim about the beliefs of every supporter. The dam example separates command, administrative capacity and public benefit; it supplies no estimate of comparative economic performance.

**Information, propaganda and preference falsification.** Václav Havel's imagined greengrocer comes from "The Power of the Powerless", written in 1978 and used here in Paul Wilson's English translation in John Keane's 1985 collection. The displayed slogan is Havel's own example. Timur Kuran supplies the concept of preference falsification and the mechanism by which hidden private views can make political cascades surprising. Haifeng Huang's work on propaganda as signalling supports the idea that implausible messages can demonstrate the state's capacity to compel visible compliance. Lisa Wedeen's study of official rhetoric in Syria and Guriev and Treisman's *Spin Dictators* support the separation of belief, ritual, reputation and conduct. The book does not claim that propaganda never persuades.

**The Soviet census of 1937.** Catherine Merridale's archival study establishes the suppression of the census and punishment of its organisers. Its references document famine reports and petitions reaching Moscow. The example concerns rejected knowledge, not a ruler without information, and supplies no famine death toll.

**Personalisation and succession.** Geddes, Wright and Frantz are the main source for the difference between leader removal and regime failure and for the way personalisation changes elite incentives, policy and collapse. Svoboda provides the power-sharing problem behind a ruler's reluctance to empower a successor. Hazel Smith supports the description of North Korea's family succession inside a party-state. Raymond Hinnebusch supports the institutional and elite setting of Syria's 2000 transfer from Hafez al-Assad to Bashar al-Assad. These are examples of dynastic coordination outside formal monarchy, not claims that blood alone secures command.

**Stalin, Franco and succession after death.** The Soviet case is used narrowly: Stalin's death in 1953 did not end the Soviet regime, while collective party leadership curtailed the extreme personal terror associated with his final years. The Spain example follows Paul Preston and Juan Linz with Alfred Stepan in treating the transition after Franco as the product of inherited institutions, royal choices, reformers, opposition organisation and negotiated change. Neither case is offered as a full history of the country or as proof that institutional succession always moderates rule.

**Routes out and the three different falls.** Frantz's *Authoritarianism*, chapter 8, supplies the count of 239 authoritarian regime failures from 1946 to 2014 and the seven routes: coup, election, popular uprising, insurgency, change in the ruling group, foreign imposition and state dissolution. Coups account for 33 per cent in that dataset. Geddes, Wright and Frantz's 2014 dataset article supports two distinctions repeated throughout: leadership turnover can leave the regime intact, and transitions from one autocracy to another make up about half of autocratic regime changes in their postwar data. These proportions belong to specified coding rules and periods, not to all eras. The US Holocaust Memorial Museum's account of the Nazi Party

supplies the deliberately different case of regime destruction through military defeat in 1945. Internal coalition shifts cannot explain away superior external force.

**Crowds, coordination and coercive defection.** Kuran explains why preference concealment can produce sudden cascades. Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan show how broad nonviolent participation can raise the political cost of repression and encourage loyalty shifts, while also documenting many failed campaigns. The manuscript deliberately avoids the claim that crowds inevitably win or that security forces make one unified moral choice. Demonstrations matter through organisation, participation, elite expectations and the decisions of distinct coercive bodies.

**Romania in December 1989.** Peter Siani-Davies is the main source for the Timișoara repression, the organised Bucharest rally of 21 December, the rupture in its scripted applause, the breakdown of command, the Ceaușescu's helicopter departure on 22 December, capture, summary trial and execution on 25 December. Dennis Deletant supplies additional context on the Communist regime and coercive state. The event remains contested in important details, especially the violence after Ceaușescu fled and the role of successor elites. The manuscript confines itself to the well-established public sequence and the coalition fracture it exposed.

**The Roman office.** Andrew Lintott supports the account of the Roman dictator as an extraordinary republican magistrate appointed for a task or emergency and constrained by convention, including the traditional six-month horizon. The limit was not a modern constitutional guarantee, and individual appointments varied with their mandate. Sulla's dictatorship after civil war and Caesar's appointment as dictator perpetuo broke or transformed republican precedent. Mary Beard provides a wider narrative check on the late republican setting. Caesar was assassinated within weeks of receiving the perpetual title in 44 BCE.

**The mass state and totalitarian ambition.** Linz provides the conceptual distinction between authoritarian systems permitting limited political pluralism and totalitarian projects seeking ideological and organisational

penetration. Paxton, Evans and Richard Overy support the account of twentieth-century mass parties and state capacities. The manuscript does not claim that earlier rulers were gentle or weak. It claims that modern administration, communication, schooling, conscription and party organisation expanded the reach and ambition of central rule.

**Fujimori and the self-coup.** Cameron's "Self-Coups: Peru, Guatemala, and Russia" supports the 1992 Peruvian example. Fujimori won the presidency in 1990, then used military backing to dissolve Congress and suspend major constitutional restraints in April 1992. The subsequent constitution and elections did not make the original closure democratic. The example is used to distinguish an incumbent takeover from an external military seizure.

**Indonesia in 1998.** Edward Aspinall is the main source for opposition organisation and the end of Suharto's rule. The Asian financial crisis, student mobilisation, riots, fractures among political supporters and the failure to assemble a credible new cabinet all contributed to his resignation on 21 May 1998 after thirty-two years in power. The manuscript stresses continuity as well as change: military, bureaucratic and economic networks from the New Order remained influential during democratisation.

**After dictatorship.** Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter remain the classic guide to negotiated transitions under uncertainty. Linz and Stepan analyse the institutional problems of democratic consolidation. Haggard and Kaufman connect mass action and elite bargaining across transitions, while Geddes, Wright and Frantz prevent leader removal from being mistaken for democratisation. These works support the manuscript's final diagnostic: person, ruling coalition and competitive method of removal are three different objects of change.

**Method and source limits.** Comparative datasets make cross-regime patterns visible by coding beginnings, failures, leaders and ruling groups. Coding choices differ, especially in borderline electoral systems and in deciding whether an insider replacement changed the regime. Historical archives add another selection problem: collapsed governments often open records that surviving governments keep closed, while official records may

hide oral orders and local improvisation. The “How we know” passage therefore marks quantitative periods, distinguishes mechanisms from universal laws and treats individual cases as tests rather than templates.

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