CHAPTER 1

FEAR AND SPIN

Dictators have been changing. The classic tyrants of the twentieth century—Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Mao Zedong—were larger-than-life figures responsible for the deaths of millions. They set out to build new civilizations within their tightly guarded—and sometimes expanding—borders. That meant controlling not just people's public behavior but also their private lives. To do that, each created a disciplined party and a brutal secret police. Not every old-school dictator was a genocidal killer or the prophet of some utopian creed. But even the less bloodthirsty ones were expert at projecting fear. Terror was their all-purpose tool.

However, toward the end of the century something changed. Strongmen around the world started turning up to meetings in conservative suits instead of military uniforms. Most stopped executing their opponents in front of packed football stadiums. Many flew to the annual business conference in the Swiss resort of Davos to schmooze with the global elite. These new dictators hired pollsters and political consultants, staged citizen call-in shows, and sent their children to study at universities in the West. They did not loosen their grip over the population—far from it, they worked to design more effective instruments of control. But they did so while acting the part of democrats.

Not all autocrats have made this leap. North Korea's Kim Jong-Un and Syria's Bashar al-Assad would fit well into a scrapbook of twentieth-century despots. In China and Saudi Arabia, rulers have digitized the old fear-based model instead of replacing it. But the global balance has

shifted. Among leaders of nondemocracies today, the representative figure is no longer a totalitarian tyrant like Josef Stalin, a sadistic butcher like Idi Amin, or even a reactionary general like Augusto Pinochet. He is a suave manipulator like Hungary's Viktor Orbán or Singapore's Lee Hsien Loong—a ruler who pretends to be a humble servant of the people.[1]

This new model is based on a brilliant insight. The central goal remains the same: to monopolize political power. But today's strongmen realize that in current conditions violence is not always necessary or even helpful. Instead of terrorizing citizens, a skillful ruler can control them by reshaping their beliefs about the world. He can fool people into compliance and even enthusiastic approval. In place of harsh repression, the new dictators manipulate information. Like spin doctors in a democracy, they spin the news to engineer support. They are *spin dictators*.[2]

THE PUTIN PUZZLE

We came to this subject through a particular case. In March 2000, Russians elected a former KGB lieutenant colonel with little political experience as their president. Vladimir Putin claimed to accept the principles of democracy, although his instincts clearly pulled in a different direction. For some time, it was not obvious—perhaps even to him—where he would take his country. As the economy boomed, his ratings soared.

Putin preserved democratic appearances while emphasizing the need to build a cohesive, modern state. At first, centralizing control seemed reasonable after the turbulent 1990s. But he did not stop, and after a while the measures he was taking to strengthen executive power—his power—were visibly undermining checks and balances. The scope for political contestation narrowed.

The battering ram that broke through democratic constraints was Putin's own popularity. He used it to get supporters elected to the parliament and to bully the country's unruly regional governors. With a mix of law enforcement and business leverage, he tamed the previously tycoon-dominated but competitive media. Even as he kept the form of national elections, he and his aides left less and less to chance. Putin and

his United Russia Party could almost always have won a free and fair vote. But they still used pressure and tricks to inflate their landslides.

Democracies are never perfect. For a time, the flaws in Russia's politics looked much like those in other middle-income, semi-free countries such as Argentina, Mexico, and Romania. Almost all such states suffer from corruption, tainted elections, and insecure press freedom. Political leaders often abuse their authority over police and judges. Still, these flaws typically coexist with some popular accountability.

But by the time Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, after four years as prime minister, he was clearly operating from a different playbook. In late 2011, a wave of demonstrations had swept Moscow and other cities over fraud in that year's parliamentary election. The sight of up to one hundred thousand people in the streets alarmed Putin and his advisors. They struck back, arresting peaceful protesters, squeezing disloyal politicians out of parliament, and harassing the remaining independent media.

We both watched closely as this process unfolded. Sergei headed a Moscow university specializing in economics and advised the Russian government. Daniel was a professor in the West studying Russia's post-communist politics. In the spring of 2013, Sergei received a visit from some of Putin's security agents, who confiscated his emails and copied his computer hard drive. He had helped write a critical analysis of the latest court verdict against Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a billionaire who had been jailed on a dubious charge. Apparently, the Kremlin did not like this analysis. Soon after, Sergei moved to France.[3]

The system Putin forged in Russia is distinctively authoritarian. But it is an authoritarianism of an unfamiliar type. Unlike Stalin, Putin has not murdered millions and imprisoned millions more. Even Leonid Brezhnev, who led the Soviet Union in its later, softer phase, from 1964 to 1982, locked thousands of dissidents in labor camps and psychiatric hospitals, banned all opposition parties, and held no elections that were even slightly competitive. Opposition rallies were out of the question. All media broadcast a mind-numbing ideological discourse. Foreign radio stations were jammed and most citizens were kept from international travel by a rusting iron curtain.

Putin's regime—now more than twenty years old—is different. It does not run on Soviet-style censorship. One can publish newspapers or books that call the man in the Kremlin a dictator.[4] The catch is that most people do not want to read them. Nor has the system run on fear, although that may now be changing. Occasional acts of political violence occurred, usually in murky circumstances. But the Kremlin always denied responsibility.[5] And, although Putin's political opponents are increasingly anxious, most Russians have not seemed scared.[6] Many have quite readily accepted a skewed vision of reality that Putin's media helped to shape. The authorities under communism, with their May Day parades and ritual elections, tried to create the illusion of consent. Under Putin, many Russians consented to illusions.[7]

As we examined the system that was emerging, we realized Putin's style of rule was not unique. From Hugo Chávez in Venezuela to Viktor Orbán in Hungary, nondemocratic leaders were using a common set of techniques.[8] Quite a few drew inspiration from the pioneer of this new brand, Lee Kuan Yew. Starting in the 1960s, the long-serving leader of Singapore had shaped his country into a formidable model of political control. That might sound surprising. Singapore claims to be a democracy and is often taken for one. It holds regular elections. But a key innovation of the new autocrats is precisely to claim to be democratic. "You are entitled to call me whatever you like," Lee once retorted to a critical journalist, "but . . . do I need to be a dictator when I can win, hands down?"[9] He failed to add that always winning, hands down, was the calling card of a modern dictator.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY TYRANTS

What exactly is a dictatorship? In the Roman Republic, where the term originated, it meant a temporary grant of absolute power to a leader to handle some emergency. These days, the word is used to refer to any nondemocratic government. It has become synonymous with authoritarianism and autocracy. We follow that usage in this book. A democracy, in turn, is a state whose political leaders are chosen in free and fair elec-

tions in which all—or almost all—adult citizens have the right to vote. A *liberal* democracy combines free elections with the rule of law, constitutionally protected civil liberties, and institutional checks and balances.

Before the twentieth century, no states were fully democratic. Even those that held free and fair elections denied most women the vote.[10] Only five countries had universal *male* suffrage in 1900—and not the United States, where African Americans were disenfranchised in the Jim Crow South.[11] Besides a handful of restricted suffrage republics like the United States, most political systems fell into three baskets: *monarchies*, in which a king or queen ruled, sometimes constrained by a constitution and a partly representative parliament; *oligarchies*, in which factions of the rich governed; and *colonies*, administered by a foreign power.

That changed in the twentieth century as democracy spread in three great waves.[12] The first peaked around 1920 as new states splintered from the European empires destroyed by World War I and Western governments liberalized their voting rules. The second occurred between the late 1940s and early 1960s as the winners of World War II imposed democracy on the losers and former colonies in Asia and Africa held elections. The third wave—a true tsunami—started with Portugal's "Carnation Revolution" in 1974, picked up speed as communism collapsed around 1990, and reached its apex in the mid-2000s. By 2015, more than half of all countries—containing 53 percent of the world's population—were electoral democracies, and about one in four was a liberal democracy.[13]

Yet, even as democracy expanded, dictatorship did not disappear; the first two democratic waves were followed by reversals. In two demoralizing periods, free government seemed to crumble. First came the 1930s—a "low, dishonest decade," in W. H. Auden's phrase—when authoritarians swept the European continent. Dictatorship did not just rebound: it mutated. A few monarchies hung on in countries such as Yugoslavia and Romania. Yet, alongside them, new forms of tyranny emerged that were better adapted to the mass politics that democracy itself had ushered in. During and after World War I, millions of

politically inexperienced workers and veterans cast ballots for the first time. They did so in the wake of a global bloodletting that had discredited the liberal belief in ever-continuing progress.

Two new types of regime—communist and fascist—set out to mobilize the lower classes. Each promised a complete transformation of society. Vladimir Lenin's Bolsheviks aimed to build communism in the remnants of the Russian Empire. The Nazis, under Adolf Hitler, planned an Aryan empire. On taking power, both forced the public to adopt an ideology distilled from the leader's scribblings. Raymond Aron called these "secular religions." Like traditional faiths, they stated truths not to be questioned, redirected attention from current hardship to a utopian future, and defined rituals that could sort true believers from heretics.[14] Both Lenin and Hitler inspired imitators in Europe and beyond.

A third new model—corporatism—aimed not to mobilize the masses into politics but to demobilize them into private life. Conservatives such as Portugal's António Salazar and Spain's Francisco Franco wanted to restore social deference and Catholic hierarchy.[15] In place of noisy parliaments, they created consultative chambers where selected spokesmen of social groups could advise the leader. Like the other two forms, corporatism was born out of disgust with the present. But while fascists and communists sought to escape into an imagined future, corporatists hoped to return to an imagined past.

Fascism died in the flames of World War II, while communism survived and spread. Corporatism hung on in Spain and Portugal, with distant echoes in regimes such as Juan Perón's in Argentina.[16] The second authoritarian surge began in the 1960s as postwar democratization ran out of steam. Fragile postcolonial republics fell to ruthless strongmen, while military juntas seized power in economically volatile Latin America. In this crop of dictators, some aimed, like the communists and fascists, to mobilize people into active support. Others sought, like the corporatists, to quiet them down. Socialist revolutionaries like Nasser in Egypt (mobilizational) shared the world stage with free-market reactionaries like Pinochet in Chile (demobilizational) and kleptocrats like Mobutu in Zaire (demobilizational). Aging communist regimes often

progressed from mobilization to demobilization, still clinging to the same revolutionary doctrines, which just grew ever more ritualized.

As this brief review suggests, twentieth-century dictatorships were diverse. Still, most shared certain features. To begin with, the vast majority used *violent repression*. They used it to reshape society, to extract resources from the population, and to defeat and deter opposition. The scale of slaughter varied. Stalin and Mao are blamed for tens of millions of deaths. Some others got by with "only" thousands (e.g., Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines) or hundreds (e.g., Algeria's Chadli Bendjedid).[17] During any leader's time in office, the intensity of violence might fluctuate. Some, like General Franco, came in with a bang; others, like Bashar al-Assad, ramped up the killing later. Either way, most left a bloody trail.[18]

And most were deliberately public about their violence. They turned killing into a form of gruesome theater. Some executed political opponents in front of mass audiences. Zaire's Mobutu, for instance, hanged four former cabinet ministers before a crowd of fifty thousand.[19] Or they displayed the bodies of rivals to terrorize their followers. The Haitian strongman François "Papa Doc" Duvalier propped a headless corpse at a street corner in Port-au-Prince for three days with a sign reading "renegade."[20] Almost all adopted a menacing rhetoric to spread anxiety and discourage challenges. Iraq's Saddam Hussein spoke of "cutting off necks" and "evildoers . . . who have thrust their poisoned dagger into our back."[21] Spain's Franco warned of "internal subversion" by an enemy who "lies in wait for opportunities to penetrate."[22]

At the same time, most twentieth-century dictators sought *comprehensive control over public communications*. Some banned or nationalized all private media. Others censored the press and intimidated journalists. For citizens, observing the rules governing public speech and writing became a test of loyalty, part of the mechanism by which leaders kept order. Criticizing the regime was generally taboo.

As with violence, dictators were open about their censorship. Some, like Hitler and Mao, burned books in huge bonfires. Others, like Pinochet,

sent soldiers to sanitize the bookstores. The Soviet Union created an explicit censorship agency, Glavlit, to purge all broadcasts and publications of forbidden topics. Penalties could be brutal. Critical writers often disappeared into the prison camps. State propaganda was also overt and often heavy-handed. It was produced in propaganda departments and—in its ubiquity and authoritative style—communicated the regime's strength and determination as much as any particular message.

Many dictators sought to *isolate their countries*. Quarantine was usually incomplete; most authoritarian states traded with their neighbors. Some, when they thought they could get away with it, invaded them. But virtually all viewed the outside world with suspicion. Unreliable visitors, inconvenient information, and other contaminants were blocked at the frontier. Those admitted were monitored. When technology permitted, dictators jammed foreign broadcasts, and they often censored or banned foreign newspapers. Many kept citizens *in*, hoping to limit knowledge of the world and conserve manpower.[23] In most communist countries, travel abroad required government approval; in some, such as Albania and Romania, attempting to emigrate without permission was a capital crime.

Finally, although totalitarians claimed a mystical identification with their people, the leading twentieth-century dictators *derided parliamentary democracy* as practiced in the West. Many claimed to be building new, superior political orders. The most brazen stole the word itself—as in "the German Democratic Republic" or "the Democratic People's Republic of Korea"—but subverted its meaning, eliminating any hint of pluralism or liberal constraint. Postcolonial leaders like Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah saw multiparty elections as a legacy of imperialists. Parliamentary institutions, he said, offered only "chaos, confusion, corruption, nepotism, and misery."[24] Zaire's Mobutu declared simply: "Democracy is not for Africa."[25] Elections, when held, were celebrations of the rulers rather than moments of choice.

In short, most dictators maintained power by repressing any opposition, controlling all communications, punishing critics, (often) imposing an ideology, attacking the ideal of pluralist democracy, and blocking most cross-border flows of people and information. The key principle

behind all these practices was simple: intimidation. The typical twentieth-century autocrat was a dictator of fear.

NEW AND IMPROVED

And yet, as we looked around in the 2000s, we saw something different. The men calling the shots in most nondemocracies seemed to come from another mold. There was Hugo Chávez, a charismatic former paratrooper, who commandeered Venezuela's airwaves to romance his country's poor. Chávez marginalized the opposition but jailed few of its members—and most of those only after a failed coup almost ousted him.[26] In Singapore, there was Lee Hsien Loong, a brilliant, Cambridge-educated technocrat, who posted photographs of sunrises on Facebook and served as patron of an NGO promoting kindness.[27] Lee's People's Action Party had won more than 89 percent of seats in all thirteen parliamentary elections since the country's independence, almost rivaling the Soviet Communist Party.[28] Yet, as of 2015 Singapore had only one "prisoner of conscience," according to Amnesty International—a sixteen-year-old blogger arrested for posting an obscene cartoon.[29] In Russia, Vladimir Putin denied there was anything undemocratic about his regime. His goons specialized in low-visibility harassment, pursuing their targets with fabricated court cases. All three of these leaders favored international openness, held frequent elections, and boasted high approval ratings. On the surface, they had little in common—a Latin American caudillo, a cerebral overachiever, a sphinx-like former spy. But that just made the parallels more intriguing.

Were these disciplinarians in well-pressed suits as different from their predecessors as they seemed? And, if so, what explained the change?

We spent several years puzzling over these questions. To begin, we plunged into literature about autocracies, past and present, immersing ourselves in histories, works of political science, journalists' accounts, and a range of other sources. Starting inductively, we looked for patterns in how rulers dominated their societies. This reading convinced us that Chávez, Lee, Putin, and various others did, indeed, share a distinctive modus operandi—one focused more on shaping public opinion than

on violent repression. Each was unique in some ways. Yet, the common elements defined a school of authoritarian rule unlike the main twentieth-century approach.

But how to be sure? We first checked the logic, formulating our understanding of the strategy as a mathematical model. Next, we sought to measure just how widespread the new approach had become. Scouring existing databases, we gathered information on authoritarian governments and collected new data of our own. These confirmed that there had, indeed, been a striking shift from the dictatorship of fear to that of spin. We refer to these statistics in later chapters (in sections titled "Checking the Evidence"). For those who are interested, our journal articles spell out the details, and additional graphs and tables can be found in an online supplement.[30] We will focus here on characteristic cases, illustrative examples, and stories. This book builds on research and data but it is not an academic monograph. Our goal is to sketch the history of authoritarian evolution and suggest an interpretation. We document the spread of spin dictators and describe the methods they use to stay in power.

Along the way, we have been influenced by a range of recent work in political science and economics.[31] Some of this is already well-known; other items deserve a broader audience.

Many scholars, for instance, have sought to explain the stability of classic, violent autocracies—the regimes that we call dictatorships of fear. How do such rulers avoid being overthrown in revolutions? One way, as our colleagues have shown, is to intimidate citizens with propaganda that conveys the dictator's power and resolve.[32] Another is to keep potential rebels from coordinating on a plan to storm the barricades.[33] Acting together, citizens can achieve safety in numbers. So dictators must keep them divided—and terrified.[34]

These arguments clarify how some twentieth-century fear dictators survived for so long—and why, in the end, their regimes often crumbled without warning. They have less to say about the new-style cases. Most assume that citizens hate the dictator: only fear keeps them from revolting. But what if citizens actually like their ruler and do not want to storm the barricades? In Putin's Russia, Lee's Singapore, and Orbán's Hungary,

revolutionaries have certainly existed. But they have always constituted a minority. In each case, the leader has been—as best one can tell—genuinely popular.[35] Spin dictators survive not by disrupting rebellion but by removing the desire to rebel.

Other recent works have described some features of spin dictatorship. Almost all autocracies these days hold elections, and not all are empty rituals. As Andreas Schedler has noted, we live in an age of electoral authoritarianism. In an influential book, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way pointed out that many elections held by dictators are—although unfair—not completely unfree. Opposition parties run and even have some chance of winning.[36] Political scientists have explored the ploys, con games, and bureaucratic abuses that autocrats around the world have used to secure victories.[37] Some study how dictators control the media. Others consider how new surveillance and information technologies are being used to turbocharge repression.[38]

We build on these ideas. Our aim is to synthesize and integrate them, suggesting an overarching logic. (In a few places, we will also disagree with our colleagues' interpretations.) The bottom line is that spin dictators are not just old-school violent tyrants who have learned a few new tricks. They have forged a distinct, internally consistent approach. The key elements—manipulating the media, engineering popularity, faking democracy, limiting public violence, and opening up to the world—complement each other to produce a model of unfree governance that is spreading. Understanding this is not just an intellectual challenge: it is crucial for the West to craft effective responses.

THE RULES OF SPIN

Although spin dictatorship has become salient recently, it is not entirely new. Indeed, some insights into it are hundreds of years old. Since the ancient Greeks, most writers on tyranny have focused on the dictatorship of fear. Rulers kill, torture, imprison, and threaten their subjects to secure obedience. They spy on citizens and spread distrust among them. Aristotle called these techniques "the Persian and barbaric arts."[39] Montesquieu alluded to the "prince's ever-raised arm," always poised to

strike.[40] Fear, he wrote, "must beat down everyone's courage and extinguish even the slightest feeling of ambition."[41] More recent theorists such as Franz Neumann and Hannah Arendt placed terror—along with ideology—at the heart of modern dictatorship.[42]

Yet, from the start, some thinkers also saw another possibility. Besides the "old traditional method," Aristotle described a second approach. This second type of ruler claimed to be not a violent usurper but "a steward and a king," governing for the benefit of all. He spent money to "adorn and improve his city" and cultivated an image of moderation and piety. Although still a tyrant, ruling in his own interest, he tried to seem "not harsh, but dignified."[43] He inspired reverence rather than fear. Although enslaved, his subjects did not realize it.

Later, in a similar vein, Machiavelli advised princes to use "simulation and dissimulation."[44] Since most people are influenced by appearances rather than reality, an ambitious ruler should create illusions. He "need not have all the good qualities . . . but he must seem to have them."[45] How to fool the public depends on context: "The prince can gain popular favor in many ways." But obtaining public support is crucial. "I will only say in conclusion that a prince must have the people on his side."[46]

Spin dictators heed Machiavelli's advice and copy Aristotle's second type of tyrant. Rather than intimidating citizens into submission, they use deception to win the people over. To govern in this way entails following a few rules.

The first is to *be popular*. Unlike classic despots, spin dictators must care about their approval ratings. As Machiavelli noted, they can win popular favor in various ways. Good economic performance helps. In any regime, prosperity tends to boost the incumbent's appeal.[47] This is hugely important and should not be forgotten even as we focus on other, complementary paths to popularity. Citizens infer from economic growth that the ruler must be a skilled manager. Leaders of all kinds—democrats and authoritarians—take credit for booming markets when they can.

But no economy booms all the time. So each brand of autocrat invests in a backup. Dictators of fear use repression to contain discontent as the economy tanks. They make sure citizens are too scared to protest.

Spin dictators may end up repressing as a last resort, reverting to the old-school approach in extremis. But that means giving up on broad popularity. Instead, their first line of defense, when the truth is against them, is to distort it. They manipulate information.

To do this effectively requires foresight. In good times, they prepare for bad. Claiming responsibility for successes—even those caused by luck—they build a reputation for professionalism. And, like Aristotle's second tyrant, they pretend to govern for the benefit of all. At the same time, they consolidate control over the media, often discreetly in order to preserve its credibility, quietly buying off owners and encouraging self-censorship. This enables them, at tougher moments, to divert attention from disappointing outcomes and retarget blame to others. Despite failures, spin dictators can remain popular for a while.

Of course, they are not the first to manipulate information. Some twentieth-century totalitarians were innovative propagandists. What is different is *how* spin dictators skew the news. The classic fear dictators imposed elaborate ideologies and loyalty rituals. Their control was comprehensive, their propaganda intimidating. Some were accused of brainwashing their citizens. Spin dictators use subtler methods—less Maoist agitprop, more Madison Avenue. And the content differs. Where twentieth-century strongmen relished violent imagery—recall Saddam's "poisoned dagger"—spin dictators adopt a cooler rhetoric of competence and expertise, sometimes with a light socialist or nationalist veneer.

When the facts are good, they take credit for them; when bad, they have the media obscure them when possible and provide excuses when not. Poor performance is the fault of external conditions or enemies. And disappointing outcomes are cast as still better than others could achieve. Dictators contrast their own leadership with a deeply unattractive pseudo-alternative, specially chosen to make them look better. Loyal journalists slander any genuine rival. Throughout, the dictator frames issues and shapes the public agenda to his advantage.

When this works, spin dictators are loved rather than feared. For twenty years, Putin's approval never dipped below 60 percent. Even Chávez's opponents acknowledged his popularity. But they are not

loved by all. In any modern society, authoritarian or democratic, people can be divided into two groups. To begin with, there are *the informed*—the stratum of college-educated, media-savvy, and internationally connected citizens. Its members are skilled at getting and communicating political information. They may be co-opted by those in power, but they are generally hard to fool. In dictatorships, the informed see through the leader's lies, recognizing him as out for himself and far less competent than state broadcasts pretend. They would like to replace him with a better alternative. But they are too few and therefore too weak to do so alone. They need the help of the rest of society—the *general public*.[48]

The spin dictator's key challenge is to prevent the informed from puncturing his popularity and mobilizing the public against him. But how? When state coffers are full, he can co-opt his critics. He can buy their silence or even hire them to produce his propaganda. In Putin's Russia and Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan, pro-regime TV networks recruited the country's talented college graduates. Other leaders—from Peru's Alberto Fujimori to Hungary's Viktor Orbán—have bribed private media barons with payoffs, scoops, and government advertising. When short of money, dictators censor the informed and their media. As growth rates and state revenue fell in Russia and Kazakhstan recently, press restrictions tightened. In fact, most dictators do a bit of both: some critics are cheaper to censor, others to bribe.

A key insight is that one need not censor everything. Indeed, in a spin dictatorship, press restrictions that are too blatant can backfire. Rulers want citizens to think the media are relatively free. So when they censor, they also censor the fact that they are censoring. Where fear dictators burn books and ban private newspapers, spin dictators mostly just push criticism to the fringes, keeping national TV for themselves.[49] They do not care what the chattering classes say about them in private—or even in public before a small audience. Dissident intellectuals are allowed their edgy journals, cable shows, and foreign newspapers, so long as demand is low. What matters is *mass* support. To divide the public from the informed, rulers insult the latter, question their motives, label them unpatriotic or elitist, and inflame cultural resentments.

Having won mass appeal, the leader *uses his popularity to consolidate power*. This is the second rule of spin dictatorship. Popularity is a fluid asset that can fall as well as rise. So it makes sense to invest some of it into other levers of control. To cash in his high ratings, a spin dictator calls elections and referenda and, winning huge victories, claims a mandate to adjust political and legal institutions. He enacts constitutional changes, packs courts and regulatory bodies with loyalists, and gerrymanders voting districts to build a cushion of institutional support.

The third rule is to *pretend to be democratic*. Today, large majorities in almost all countries—whatever their histories and political systems—favor democracy.[50] A worldwide network of liberal states and international organizations promotes popular government. Those autocrats who continue to rule by fear defy this global opinion. Spin dictators, by contrast, pretend to embrace the vogue for freedom. Of course, many abroad see through their hypocrisy. But at home—and even abroad—many others do not.

Twentieth-century fear dictators often locked their borders, limiting travel and information transmission. Spin dictators *open up to the world*—the fourth rule. Occasionally, they restrict foreign media. But mostly they welcome flows of people, capital, and data and find ways to profit from them. They join international institutions and disrupt any missions that might be turned against them. They target potentially friendly groups in the West with Internet propaganda and hack or harass vocal opponents. And they employ the subterranean infrastructure of offshore companies and banks to safeguard their cash and co-opt Western elites.

The final—and most important—rule is to *avoid violent repression*, or at least conceal or camouflage it when used. In modern societies, brutal acts tend to discredit the leader. For a spin dictator, visible violence against the public is a mark of failure. When the model works and the ruler is popular, terrorizing ordinary citizens is not just unnecessary but counterproductive. It undercuts the desired image of enlightened, responsive leadership.

That does not mean spin dictators are pacifists. Fighting civil wars or ethnic insurgencies, they can be brutal. (In fact, democracies too are

often ruthless when facing armed challenges—consider India in Kashmir.)[51] In Peru, Fujimori viciously suppressed the Sendero Luminoso Maoist guerrillas. Russia's second Chechen war, which Putin began in 1999, caused tens of thousands of deaths.[52] Where history has predisposed the public against small ethnic minorities—especially those that can be blamed for terrorism—spin dictators can profit by targeting them. They also sometimes repress journalists to censor their reporting. Still, when they do, they try to hide their involvement or disguise the purpose. Instead of arresting critics for their writing, they fabricate charges of tax evasion, fraud, or—even better—embarrassing offenses likely to alienate the writer's followers. Kazakhstan, for instance, prosecuted a well-known journalist for allegedly raping a minor, in a case Human Rights Watch suggested was "politically motivated."[53]

To recap, spin dictators manipulate information to boost their popularity with the general public and use that popularity to consolidate political control, all while pretending to be democratic, avoiding or at least camouflaging violent repression, and integrating their countries with the outside world.

Two caveats are important. We sometimes refer to spin dictatorship as a "new" model, contrasting it with the "old" practices of fear dictators. But, as noted, it is not completely new. In almost every era, at least a few autocrats have chosen deception over violence. As we saw, Aristotle first described the approach, probably with the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus in mind.[54] In nineteenth-century France, Napoleon III anticipated some techniques of later spin dictators.[55] What was new in the late twentieth century was a dramatic shift in the balance between types. Spin dictatorship grew from a marginal variety into the most common form.

The second caveat concerns our division of dictatorships into two neat groups. Again, this makes discussion simpler. But most real-world phenomena vary along a spectrum. That is certainly true of political regimes. Perfect democracy is an "ideal type" that exists only in textbooks, not life. Actual governments are more or less democratic. The same is true of nondemocratic leaders. They may be closer to the dictatorship of fear or the dictatorship of spin, but few will be entirely one or

the other. Most rulers depart from the blueprint in some respect. But they come close.

So who are some recent spin dictators? In Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew helped develop the model between about 1970 and 1990. His successors, Goh Chok Tong (1990–2004) and Lee Hsien Loong (2004–), embraced Lee's style of rule. Other cases include Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysia (1981–2003) and his successors, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003–9) and Najib Razak (2009–18); Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan (1992–2019); Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (1999–2013); Vladimir Putin in Russia (2000–present); Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey (2003 until at least 2016, when massive arrests following a failed coup suggest possible backsliding to fear dictatorship); Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007–17); and Viktor Orbán in Hungary (2010–present).[56] We also include Peru's Alberto Fujimori as an early borderline case, especially in the late 1990s, although state killings were relatively frequent in the early 1990s as the army fought Sendero Luminoso.[57] Some of these leaders inherited more or less democratic systems and converted them into spin dictatorships. Others did not need to. We will return to these cases repeatedly in the chapters that follow.

As this list suggests, the model comes in various flavors. Some practitioners, like Chávez, are on the left; others, like Orbán, are on the right. Some seek to mobilize their populations, others to calm them down. Some, like Chávez and Correa, are "populists," attacking "entrenched elites" or "the deep state" on behalf of "the people." Others, such as Lee Kuan Yew and Putin, are enthusiastic backers of the state, "deep" or otherwise. (Erdoğan attacks the "deep state" while packing the regular state with his allies.) Some, like Orbán, embrace cultural conservatism and ethnically charged anti-immigrant sentiment. Others, like Nazarbayev, emphasize ethnic and religious harmony.[58] Spin dictatorships also vary in their institutional form. Many are personalist, focused on a single individual, but they can also be dominant-party regimes (Malaysia, Singapore), military ones (Algeria under Bouteflika), or even monarchies (Kuwait under Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah). Still, spin dictators share certain common features that distinguish them from fear dictators. We summarize the differences in table 1.1.[59]

TABLE 1.1. Two Models of Dictatorship

Dictatorships of fear	Dictatorships of spin
Rule through fear	*Rule through deception*
Much violent repression—many political killings and political prisoners	Little violent repression—few political killings or political prisoners
Violence publicized to deter others	Violence concealed to preserve image of enlightened leadership
Comprehensive censorship	Some opposition media allowed
Censorship public—book burnings, official bans	Censorship covert—private media co-opted when possible
Official ideology sometimes imposed	No official ideology
Heavy-handed propaganda combined with loyalty rituals	More subtle propaganda to foster image of leader competence
Liberal democracy derided	Pretense of democracy
International flows of people and information often restricted	Generally open to international flows of people and information

How has the balance between fear and spin changed? The chapters to come will spell out the details, but for now here's a quick overview. To distinguish the types empirically, we use two simple rules of thumb. Like any such rules, these miss nuances and may get the odd case wrong, but they help identify the broad trends. As noted, spin dictators hold elections, avoid overt violence against political opponents, and permit at least some critical media. Our rule of thumb focuses on these aspects. We classify a leader as a spin dictator if under his rule all the following are true:

(a) the country is a nondemocracy, *and*
(b) national elections are held in which at least one opposition party is allowed to run, *and*
(c) at least a few media outlets criticize the government each year, *and*
(d) fewer than 10 state political killings occur each year on average, *and*
(e) fewer than 1,000 political prisoners are held in any year.[60]

Dictators of fear employ violent repression and aim for complete control over public communications. We classify a leader as a fear dictator if under his tenure:

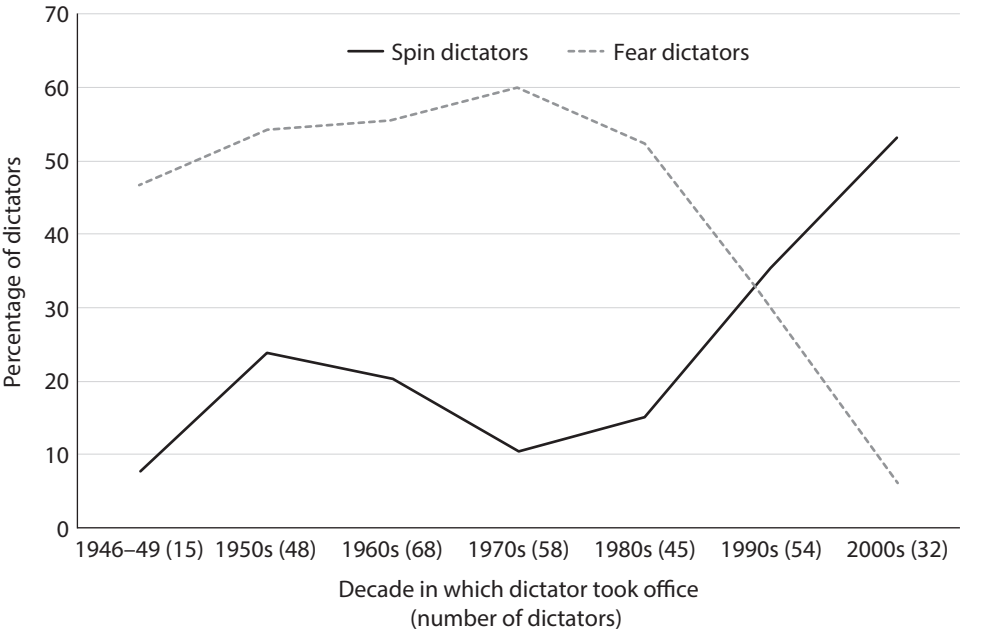

FIGURE 1.1. Shares of Fear Dictators and Spin Dictators in Successive Cohorts of Leaders

Source: Guriev and Treisman, Authoritarian Control Techniques Database; V-DEM, V.10; Polity IV.

Note: Number of dictators in the given period in parentheses. "Dictators": leaders who were in power for at least 5 years and whose state had a Polity2 rating of less than 6 in all 5 years. "Fear" and "spin" dictators defined as in the text.

(a) the country is a nondemocracy, *and*
(b) in at least one year few or no media outlets criticize the government, *and*
(c) 10 or more state political killings occur each year on average, *and/or*
(d) 1,000 or more political prisoners are held in at least one year.[61]

The remaining dictators—29 percent of the total in 1946–2015—are hybrids.

Figure 1.1 shows the change over time. We compare the proportions of spin and fear dictators in successive cohorts of leaders.[62] Violent repression often varies during a leader's tenure. Some shock the population into submission early on with a brutal purge or massacre and then

do not need to kill as much for a while.[63] Others start softly but later escalate. To take this into account, we average the number of state political killings over each dictator's total years in power and compare the number of political prisoners held under each dictator at its peak. Since estimates will be noisy if taken over too short a period, we focus on just those leaders who lasted in office for at least five years.[64] As can be seen, fear dictatorships plunge from 60 percent of the total in the 1970s cohort to less than one-tenth in the 2000s cohort. The proportion of spin dictatorships soars from 13 to 53 percent.[65]

OTHER EXPLANATIONS

We argue that dictators are substituting spin for fear. But another possibility is that they have just become more efficient at repression. Perhaps they have found ways to keep people terrified using less actual violence. New information technology makes it easier to monitor and target dissidents. To take advantage of this, dictators of all types have been deploying everything from street cameras and facial recognition technology to GPS trackers. Is that all that is going on?

We do not think so. It is true that better surveillance could, in principle, reduce the need for violence. Deterrence works by threatening offenders with punishment. The force of such threats depends on both the penalty and the odds of getting caught. If the odds of detection rise, a dictator can soften the punishment without weakening the deterrent. As monitoring capacity grows, rulers can replace "high-intensity" with "low-intensity coercion."[66] Even better, they can detain troublemakers in advance rather than penalize them after the fact.[67]

Still, that something *could* happen does not mean it will. Orwell did not think that high-tech surveillance would reduce terror. Far from it, comprehensive monitoring and brutal punishment merged in his "Big Brother." Recent research suggests that today's remaining fear dictators are using new digital tools together with—not instead of—more violent techniques.[68] And that makes sense. If repression has become more cost-effective, economic logic suggests we should see more of it, not less.

Besides, even if new surveillance technology explained the fall in violence, that would still leave the puzzle of other recent changes in dictators' tactics. If low-intensity repression is so effective, why conceal its use, weakening its deterrent force? Why pretend to embrace democracy and respect freedom of opinion instead of doubling down on fear-based methods? Why work so hard to be popular if one can control citizens through their smartphones? We agree that some fear dictators have merely digitized their coercive techniques—Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ("MBS") comes to mind. But those leaders have not given up on violence. Meanwhile, others have adopted a whole new model.

That model has, itself, benefited from new information tools. In fact, technological advances enhance the efficiency of both fear and spin.[69] The Internet allows for low-cost, selective censorship that filters information flows to different groups. Social networks can be hijacked to disseminate sophisticated propaganda, with pitches tailored to specific audiences and the source concealed to increase credibility. Spin dictators can mobilize trolls and hackers to manipulate elections. So even if new information technology facilitates fear dictatorship, it could facilitate spin dictatorship even more.

Other skeptics suggest it is not dictators that are growing less violent but societies that are becoming less rebellious. As people get richer, they become more risk averse. With more to lose, citizens lose their taste for revolution. A dictator may need less graphic brutality and fewer explicit threats to keep such a population in line.

That sounds plausible. But, while it may be true in some cases, it does not seem to hold in general. In fact, the well-off often appear *more* of a threat to dictators than the poor. The affluent may, indeed, have more to lose. But they also have greater capacity to resist—greater organizational skill, resources, and networks—and a stronger demand for political freedom. They are harder than the poor to buy off with material payoffs.

Some evidence supports this. In 2017–20, the World Values Survey (WVS) polled citizens of 19 authoritarian states. The pollsters divided respondents into three income categories—"high," "medium," and

"low"—based on their own assessments of their relative income. One question asked whether political violence was ever justifiable. Although most said no, in 9 of the 19 countries the "rich" respondents were readier to justify political violence than the "poor" ones.[70] In Hong Kong, for instance, 27 percent of high-income respondents answered 6 or higher on a 10-point scale that ranged from "never justifiable" (1) to "always justifiable" (10), compared to just 8 percent of low-income respondents. Even in mainland China, more rich than poor respondents chose high numbers. Tolerance for political violence was also greater among the rich than the poor in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Ethiopia, Jordan, Macau, Russia, and Ukraine.

Of course, the well-off might talk like revolutionaries but balk at actually revolting. But their survey answers, at least, suggest otherwise. The WVS did not ask about revolutions, but it did about less extreme opposition actions. In 20 nondemocracies, it asked whether respondents had attended peaceful demonstrations. In 14 of these, more rich than poor respondents said they had done so.[71] In Hong Kong, again, 31 percent of high-income respondents—but just 12 percent of low-income ones—said yes. And in 15 of the 20 countries more rich than poor respondents said they had participated in an unofficial strike.

Affluence may reduce the impulse to rebel in a few cases such as Singapore. But in other relatively rich autocracies—from the Gulf states to Russia, Malaysia, Turkey, and Kazakhstan—leaders seem anything but nonchalant about political unrest. And they often seem more worried about protest by the well-off than about unrest among the poor, who, in Russia and Turkey, for instance, constitute the dictator's support base. If these rulers use less violence than their predecessors, that is not because the enrichment of society has left them feeling more secure.

DIVIDING LINES

Most autocrats since 1945 are easy to peg as fear or spin dictators. But about a quarter are hybrid cases. In some countries—Qatar, the UAE, and Laos, for instance—leaders have barred opposition parties and public criticism of the government but without much violent repres-

sion. In others—for example, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Algeria—rulers have used considerable violence and yet tolerated—or perhaps failed to suppress—opposition media.

China seems, at first, difficult to classify. When we talk to experts on the country, many are struck by how many features of spin dictatorship fit the regime in Beijing. Compared to Mao's savagery, violence has definitely declined. In most places these days, dissidents are less likely to be hustled off to a labor camp than invited by a secret policeman to "tea," the euphemism for a warning chat. Although scathing about Western systems—democracy "would not fit us and it might even lead to catastrophic consequences," Xi said in 2014—Chinese leaders do often describe their government as a different kind of democracy.[72] Certain private media are tolerated, and online censors sometimes just slow traffic down rather than ban sites outright.[73]

Yet, non-China specialists see the country as a blatant case of rule by fear. In restive regions, repression has been merciless. More than a million Uighurs, Kazakhs, and others have been herded into reeducation camps in Xinjiang, and those still outside live in terror.[74] Their every move is tracked by intrusive surveillance equipment. Xi clearly hopes his toughness there will intimidate pro-democracy campaigners in Hong Kong. Separatists anywhere in China, he said in 2019, "will be smashed into pieces."[75] Attempts to divide China would "end in crushed bodies and shattered bones."[76] Between June 2019 and January 2021, more than 10,200 Hong Kong protesters were arrested.[77] And much of this repression is quite open. Although at first Beijing tried to block reports about Xinjiang, leaders quickly switched to defending the camps.[78] Even in non-minority regions, dissidents are forced to make chilling televised confessions, the goal of which can only be to spread fear.[79]

For a while, China seemed to be heading toward spin dictatorship. Party chiefs Jiang Zemin (1989–2002) and Hu Jintao (2002–12) each allowed some public discussion of liberal ideas.[80] Amid the partial commercialization of China's media, some investigative reporting appeared.[81] China's main nightly news show, *Xinwen Lianbo*, remained so stilted and propagandistic that anyone watching it for news, quipped one commentator, must "be lying or . . . mentally impaired."[82] Yet, other

channels introduced slick animated "explainer" videos, infographics, and patriotic documentaries.[83] However, Xi, who took over in 2012, reversed course. Besides stepping up repression in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, he cracked down on the press, firing investigative teams and jailing more journalists.[84] The pro-regime tone in the state-controlled *People's Daily* is today more effusive than at any time since the Cultural Revolution.[85] Even the commercialized newspapers—although devoting fewer inches to high-level politics—have become just as positive about the regime.[86]

Like Saudi Arabia under MBS, China under Xi is a strange mix of ruthless repression, outdated ideology, modern stagecraft, and cutting-edge information technology. Both states use hackers and trolls to dominate social networks, while tracking dissidents online.[87] Both leaders are more media savvy and comfortable with international openness than the classic twentieth-century tyrants. Yet, both remain wedded to rule by fear. Abroad, the Saudis deny responsibility for violent acts such as the 2018 assassination of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi.[88] But at home repression is publicized in order to intimidate. The authorities held some thirty thousand political prisoners in 2018, according to the Islamic Human Rights Commission, and public floggings, beheadings, and the display of corpses continue.[89] As journalist Ben Hubbard reports: "fear is so widespread that . . . many Saudis avoid talking on the phone or put their devices in the fridge when they meet."[90] Although updating the dictatorship of fear, Beijing and Riyadh remain committed to its central principle.

Some, hearing our argument, have suggested parallels between spin dictators and certain politicians in ostensibly democratic countries. In Italy, Silvio Berlusconi's dominance of the country's media shaped his governing style. Populist leaders like Néstor and Cristina Kirchner in Argentina and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico have used the tricks of spin dictators to co-opt mainstream media and marginalize critics.[91] In the United States, Donald Trump tried to use his Twitter account to mobilize support behind his undemocratic projects.

That spin dictators resemble politicians in low-quality democracies—and even some higher-quality ones—is not surprising. After all, spin

dictators are *trying* to look like democratic politicians. And spin dictatorships often emerge when weak democracies are hijacked by unscrupulous leaders. In their early days, Orbán's Hungary, Erdoğan's Turkey, and Putin's Russia seemed to many—us included—to be not autocracies but flawed democracies. Today, we definitely place them on the authoritarian side. Since regimes vary along a spectrum, we should expect the boundary between the most threadbare democracy and the mildest dictatorship to be a fuzzy one.

It is also easy to mistake spin dictatorships for illiberal democracies—that is, democracies in which freely elected governments fail to protect civil rights and discriminate against minorities.[92] Orbán, for one, boasts openly of his illiberalism. But, in fact, spin dictators are not democrats at all. They do not just attack the civil rights of minorities—they manipulate the elections by which majorities might otherwise remove them from power.

Why do more democracies not slide into spin dictatorship? It is not for lack of effort by unscrupulous politicians. Yet, in stable democracies, something holds them back. The tradition in political science is to say that this something is democratic *institutions*. Multiparty elections, constitutional checks and balances, legal procedures, and independent judiciaries stop budding dictators in their tracks. Such rules and procedures are obviously important. And yet, as we show throughout this book, formal institutions do not act by themselves. Often, they fail to constrain leaders.[93] The essence of spin dictatorship is to conceal autocracy within formally democratic institutions. Modern authoritarians manipulate elections, disable checks and balances, rewrite constitutions, and pack courts with loyalists.[94]

The real question is not whether a state has the right formal institutions but what prevents leaders from subverting them. We argue that protection lies in the active resistance of the informed.[95] Just as in dictatorships, this subset of the population—those with higher education, communication skills, and international connections—plays a crucial role. In modern democracies, the highly educated tend to work in information-rich jobs that develop organizational talent and detailed knowledge of how the system operates. When they are numerous and

well resourced, the informed can document abuses by incumbents, communicate them to the public, organize social and political movements, field effective electoral campaigns and protests, take abusers to court, and coordinate with international agencies and foreign governments. They can oppose attempts to usurp power—just as, in the United States in 2016–21, millions of lawyers, judges, officials, activists, journalists, and others pushed back against the initiatives of a nihilist in the White House. Without the actions of such people, a well-written constitution cannot help much.[96] The robust resistance of informed citizens is what secures the institutions of free government and makes them work.[97]

WHAT'S NEXT?

In the chapters to come, we will break down the elements of spin dictatorship. We will see how its practitioners avoid and disguise political violence (chapter 2), win over citizens with sophisticated propaganda (chapter 3), manage the media without crude censorship (chapter 4), fake democracy (chapter 5), and engage with the outside world (chapter 6). In each case, we will highlight striking cases, focusing on individual leaders whose early experiments helped to develop the model. We will contrast practices of recent spin dictators with those of their more overt twentieth-century predecessors. Wherever possible, we will back up our illustrations with references to more systematic data (in the "Checking the Evidence" sections and the book's online supplement).[98]

Having described the two models, we suggest an interpretation of the historical shift from fear to spin in chapter 7. What triggered this, we argue, was a cocktail of forces associated with modernization and globalization. In fact, these are the same forces that fueled the explosive "third wave" of democracy after 1974. Modernization and globalization create pressures for political openness. Spin dictatorship is the way rulers resist. They avoid real democracy by faking it. And yet, if modernization and globalization persist, the pressures intensify. In the absence of major oil wealth, these forces eventually nudge countries all the way into democracy.

Spin dictators put this off as long as possible. To do so, they must silence the informed by co-opting or censoring them. Yet, economic development swells the size of this group, rendering it more expensive to neutralize. So, in modern settings, spin offers only a temporary respite, albeit one that can last for years under a skilled operator. The effectiveness of this strategy is one reason why—although modernization generally creates conditions for democracy—the transition may come with a delay. We close, in chapter 8, with our best guess about what comes next for spin dictatorships, along with some thoughts about how the West should respond. But let's turn now to the experience of the model's pioneer as he first came to grips with the political costs of open repression.