

Authoritarianism

History offers a clear warning that authoritarianism often advances gradually through the subversion of democratic institutions, but it also provides a well-documented playbook for successful opposition, centered on unified pro-democracy coalitions, strategic nonviolent action, and the vigilant defense of institutional norms .

Below summarizes the common tactics identified by researchers as part of the modern "authoritarian playbook" .

Tactic Description Historical/Contemporary Example

Politicizing Independent Institutions Capturing courts, law enforcement, and electoral bodies to use them as weapons against opponents and shields against accountability . Stacking constitutional courts with loyalists (e.g., Hungary, Poland) .

Spreading Disinformation

Propagating falsehoods to create false grievances, sow doubt, and undermine the very concept of truth . Sustained narratives claiming electoral fraud without evidence to delegitimize democratic processes .

Aggrandizing Executive Power Weakening legislative and judicial checks and balances to concentrate power in the hands of the executive . Ruling by decree, ignoring court rulings, and rejecting legislative oversight .

Quashing Dissent Silencing opposition, independent media, and civil society through censorship, intimidation, and legal harassment . Labeling critical media as "fake news" and "enemies of the state," and limiting freedom of assembly .

Scapegoating Vulnerable Communities blaming minorities or immigrants for societal problems to sow division and consolidate power by turning the many against the few . Exploiting ethnic nationalism and promoting conspiracy theories about demographic replacement .

Corrupting Elections Tilting electoral rules, suppressing votes, and biasing results while maintaining the facade of democracy . Gerrymandering electoral districts and imposing voting barriers that disproportionately disenfranchise opponents .

Stoking or Condoning Violence Inflaming or ignoring political violence to stoke fear, division, and feelings of insecurity that justify authoritarian solutions . Using militant supporters to disrupt opposition rallies and harass rivals .

Lessons for Successful Opposition

Effective resistance to these tactics requires a strategic, sustained, and broad-based response.

- **Build a United, Pro-Democracy Front:** The most critical lesson is that successful opposition requires a large, diverse coalition that transcends partisan, ideological, and social divides . This means labor unions, business groups, religious institutions, civil society organizations, and political parties must align around a shared commitment to democratic rules, even if they disagree on policy . As seen in Malaysia's 2018 election, the key to victory was an opposition alliance that persuaded a critical segment of voters by focusing on a common goal . The mantra is to make diversity a strength and stay together for the common goal of defending democracy .
- **Employ Strategic Nonviolent Action:** History shows that successful movements often rely on nonviolent civil resistance . This includes a diversified range of tactics, such as methods of concentration (like mass protests and sit-ins) and methods of dispersion (such as walkouts, consumer boycotts, and labor strikes) . The objective is to create widespread social and economic disruption that the regime cannot easily control, while maintaining nonviolent discipline to undermine the regime's legitimacy and encourage defections from its supporters .
- **Defend Institutions and Norms Vigilantly:** Authoritarianism advances through the slow erosion of norms and the exploitation of institutional weaknesses . Therefore, opposition must be proactive, not reactive . This means immediately voicing objection to norm-breaking, fighting for the independence of the judiciary and media, and opposing any legal changes that concentrate power or corrupt elections . Complacency is not an option, as small battles lost can weaken the foundations of democracy, leading to rapid decline .
- **Educate and Foster a Pro-Democracy Culture:** Authoritarians thrive on fear, ignorance, and distorted facts . A resilient society actively educates its citizens, promotes critical thinking, and safeguards the true meaning of history and language from being rewritten for partisan ends . This involves fact-checking, civic education, and protecting academic freedom to ensure the public can recognize and reject authoritarian rhetoric .

What These Lessons Mean for You

The historical record demonstrates that defeating authoritarianism is possible but requires more than just hoping the system will correct itself.

- Individual Action Matters: The first rule is not to stay indifferent . You can contribute by supporting independent journalism, engaging in constructive dialogue with others (without patronizing them), and participating in civic organizations that uphold democratic values .
- The Challenge of Post-Victory: It is crucial to understand that overthrowing a dictator is fundamentally different from building a lasting democracy . Once an authoritarian regime is removed, the broad coalition that opposed it often fragments over what should come next. Sustainable democracy requires continued compromise and consensus-building among diverse groups after the immediate threat is gone .