

BOOK REVIEW

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***Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century* by Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman**

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022

Reviewed by **Annavajhula J. C. Bose**

Like 'hitmen' in cricket, there are 'strongmen' in politics. Unlike the former being adored by cricket fans, the latter are abhorred by all those who are drawn to the "wisdom of global value" that "no man or woman is perfect enough to rule unaccountably over their fellows, or the fragile lands and seas in which they dwell" (Keane, 2022, p. 201).

Based on this wisdom, the political problematic for humankind is arrestingly put forward as follows:

By encouraging people to see that their lives are open to alteration, democracy heightens awareness of what is arguably the paramount political problem: how to prevent rule by the few, the rich or the powerful, who act as if they are mighty immortals born to rule? Democracy solves this old problem of titanism—rule by pretended giants—by standing up for a political order which ensures that the question of who gets how much, when and how is kept permanently open. From its inception, democracy recognised that if humans were not angels, they were at least good enough to prevent others from behaving as if they were. And the flipside: since people are not saintly, nobody can be trusted to rule over others without checks on their power. Democracy supposes...that humans are more like potential crooks than honest gentlefolk,

and that since they cannot be expected always to be good, ways must be found of making it impossible for them to be bad. The democratic ideal is government of the humble, by the humble, for the humble. It means rule by people, whose sovereign power to decide things is not to be given over to imaginary gods, the stentorian voices of tradition, autocrats or experts, or simply forefeited to unthinking laziness, allowing others to decide matters of public importance. (Keane, 2022, pp. 8-9)

The book taken up for review here is a seminal contribution to the burgeoning scholarship about this political problematic: democratic recession or the rise and roar of authoritarianism in the world, and what can be done about it. The authors are empirical social scientists. They have collected, for example, lots of data in order to measure the level of violence. Guriev, as a Russian economist, and Treisman, as an American political scientist, have together contrasted the dominant incidence of ‘fear dictatorship’ in the 20th century with the dominant incidence of ‘spin dictatorship’ or ‘informational autocracy’ in the 21st century. They have decisively established the conclusion that while the change from fear dictatorships to spin dictatorships is bringing less violence for sure, they are actually undermining democracy.

In the powerful introduction to the book, titled “Fear and Spin”, the authors characterise dictatorships of fear by rule through fear or terror: violent repression in the form of political killings and political prisoners as well as violence publicized to deter others; comprehensive censorship in the form of public censorship by way of book burnings and official bans; imposition sometimes of official ideology; heavy-handed propaganda combined with loyalty rituals; derision of liberal democracy; and restriction often of international flows of people and information. By contrast, dictatorships of spin are characterized by rule through deception: little violent repression—few political killings or political prisoners; concealment of violence to preserve image of enlightened leadership; sanction for some opposition media; covert censorship—private media coopted when possible; no official ideology; more sensible propaganda to foster the image of competent leadership and other democratic posturing; and generally open to international flows of people and information.

Stalin, Hitler and Mao are quintessential examples of 20th century fear dictators or classic tyrants. Kim Jong-Un of North Korea, Maduro in Venezuela and Bashar al-Assad of Syria are perfect examples of fear dictators of the 21st century. Victor Orban in Hungary, Erdogan in Turkey, Lee Hsien Loong in Singapore, Kazakhstan’s Nazarbayev, Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez are examples of spin dictators. Many spin dictators are genuinely popular. A few of them, like the late Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, may not be personally corrupt. There are also political regimes in the world, such as in Saudi Arabia, Iran and China, which constitute examples of the ‘hybrid model’ tilting to the fear side of the spectrum.

The introduction to the book is followed by the heart and soul of the book in two parts. Part I is very long and has five chapters to explain the modus operandi of the spin dictatorship with case study materials. Part II is not at all black-and-white or straightforward. It has two heavily nuanced chapters, along with case study materials, addressing why the shift from fear to spin dictatorship has happened and what its future is going to be. The authors admit that it is not easy to decisively answer questions as follows: How long will the spin dictators

like Orban in Hungary or Erdogan in Turkey last? Will they revert to more bloody, overt forms of tyranny like Maduro in Venezuela? Or will spin dictatorship change to democracy like in Armenia? Will the many violent despots that still remain switch from terror to deception?

According to the authors, fear dictatorship has changed to spin dictatorship due to the 'modernization cocktail': interconnected forces related to economic and social modernisation combined with globalisation. This is a milieu of people demanding more individualistic lifestyles and freedom, of people with better organisational skills and capacities to resist; and of the growing appeal of the international liberal order putting pressure on authoritarians to respect human rights and freedom. In this milieu, the cost of violent repression under a fear dictatorship increases, whereas a spin dictatorship turns out to be a more efficient and less costly alternative.

Whether spin dictatorship changes to democracy depends on a constellation of forces and how they intermingle. The authors point out that people with tertiary education are much more critical of their leaders as compared to people without tertiary education. So, these people are not only required for economic growth but also for resisting spin dictatorship. Apart from the importance of these critically thinking educated people as civil society activists, lawyers, experts, scholars and journalists, importance of pursuing modernization, importance of integrating in global economy, importance of creative work, transparency due to global media, cross border human rights movement, rise of broadband internet and mobile broadband internet, rise of YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, and experiments like ranked choice voting and deliberative democracy by citizens' assemblies will determine whether democratisation will be triggered and preserved in a country. The authors also point out that populist leaders are different from spin dictators. They are usually democratic leaders, but some of them, like the late Berlusconi in Italy or Trump in America, are aspiring spin dictators. Whether they make the transition to spin dictatorship depends on how democratic institutions stand up against them. Orban and Erdogan are examples of successfully making the transition due to democratic erosion in their countries.

A central point of the book is that the relationship between modernisation and democracy is non-linear. Modernisation can change fear dictatorship into spin dictatorship but may not change spin dictatorship into democracy. Putin's early system was characterised as a democracy, albeit an immature one. It later became a spin dictatorship and now, in full war with Ukraine, it has become a fear dictatorship. The pioneering spin dictator, Lee Kuan Yew, pursued modernisation in Singapore, which is still not a democracy. Taiwan was a similar case, but it has transitioned to a democracy. There are many non-democratic leaders who pretend to be a Lee Kuan Yew without actually pursuing modernisation or the values of modernisation! As an aside, the Modi regime in India is surprisingly not discussed in the book. In light of the analysis in this book, and other books (Chowdhury and Keane, 2021; Prabhakar, 2023), we can take India as a case of democracy wedded to respecting Constitutional values, later changing into a spin dictatorship based on Hindu nationalism. While it was predicted to become a fear dictatorship or hybrid like Russia or China, the recent Indian elections have led to a coalition government, thereby leaving this final transition hanging in the air.

The authors are hopeful that spin dictators will not last long. They only prolong the lifespan of authoritarianism. They will eventually lose out as they fail to provide a vision or an ideology for emerging societies and world issues, and if the West could fix its own problems by preserving liberal democracy. Also, since economic growth in a knowledge economy requires a more open society, the transition to democracy is highly possible with more and more countries developing knowledge economies with sophisticated and highly educated societies.

The book is useful to understand not only the changing political regime but also how the connection between the political regime on the one hand, and economic and other realms of society, on the other, is changing. A supplementary reckoning to be noted, which strengthens the optimistic prognosis of the book, is that tyranny cannot cater long-term to the demands of developing nations (Wolf, 2024). In light of this, economics students who read this book can join the debates on the merits and demerits of the authoritarian and non-authoritarian approaches to economic development. They can also join the discourse on whether and how political governance and economic functioning can coalesce to establish a people's or human economy—an economy that gives priority to what people really do and think, while addressing their basic needs in the current context of contemporary economies, dominated as they are by global finance and political rent-seekers, often blocking the realisation of democracy (Hart, 2015).

References

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