

## THE 'INFINITY GAUNTLET' OF THE AUTHORITARIAN LEADERSHIP

Hasan Arslan, PhD

Associate Professor of Justice and Law Administration

Western Connecticut State University

### Introduction

"Representative government has been a luxury that relatively few people have enjoyed throughout human history" (Rosen and Holodny, 2016, February 20). Since democracies have a very fragile nature, how about the impact of coincidences that have paved the way for such authoritarian regimes? Or are there coincidences in life, or all things are the acts of God? The answer might serve as a test of faith for many. Indeed, suppose one pursues a particular religion. In that case, everything in life happens according to God's will that eventually defies the argument of "coincidences," which is defined as "*a sequence of events that although accidental seems to have been planned or arranged*" (American Heritage Dictionary, n.d.). The difference between them is the lack of causal connection between the sequence of those events. "Many believe that Fate or Mystery, or the Universe or God causes coincidences. Their faith in something Greater provides them with a cause. Since God causes them, the cause is known. Therefore, there are no coincidences" (Beitman, 2016, July 06).

According to '***the law of truly large numbers***,' given an enormous sample size along with enough opportunities, the probability of an occurrence of an unlikely event increases significantly (Diaconis and Mosteller, 1989). In fact, in *The Improbability Principle*, statistician David J. Hand writes (2014), "With a large enough number of opportunities, any outrageous thing is likely to happen." In other words, expect the unexpected when circumstances ripe. Therefore, this article's central

question is: What is the probability of an authoritarian leader's emergence in society? One of the most appropriate answers would be '*most likely*.' The underestimation or the simplification of the explanation would be very misleading for anyone. It is true that dictatorships, which is one degree further from authoritarianism, are often unexpected; however, they do not come from the skies and cannot be formed from the heavens (Maxon, 2017, October 22). "The causative factors that give rise to dictatorships in the first place have not changed much over the centuries" (Nuwer, 2015, June 1).

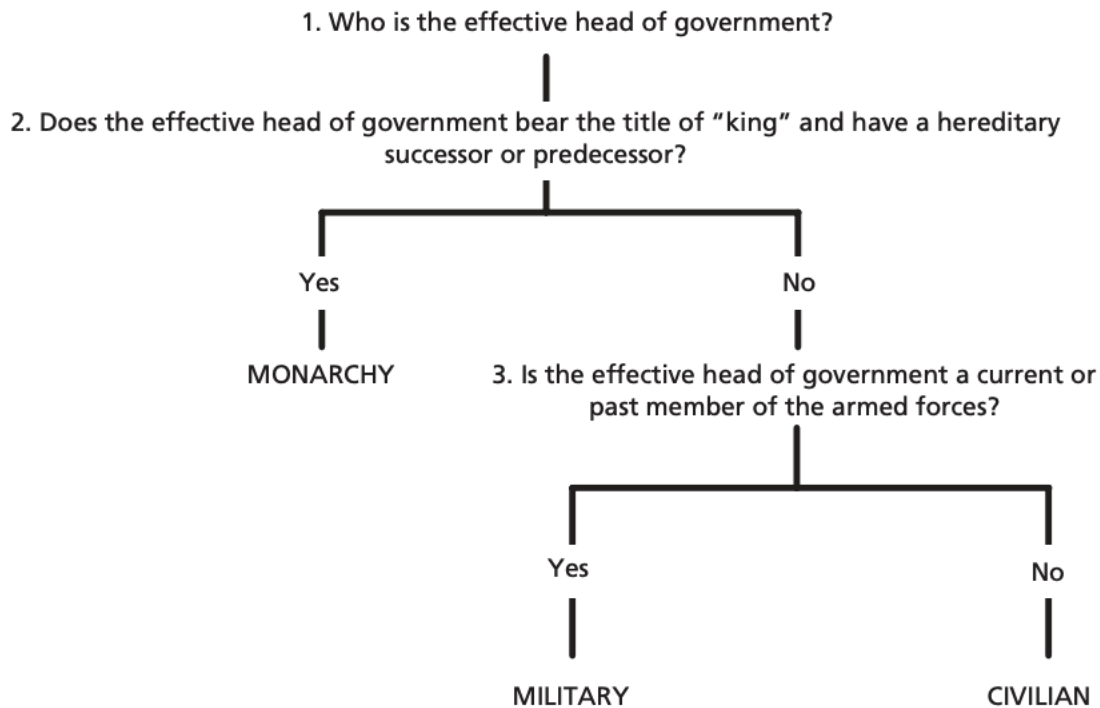
Gustave Gilbert was an American psychologist who studied the war criminals in prison during the Nuremberg trials in Germany. He made extensive conversations with the Nazi regime war criminals like Hermann Goering, Rudolf Hess, Franz Von Papen, and Joachim von Ribbentrop. According to Gilbert, a dictatorship results from a tendency to "revert to authoritarian rule after a too drastic attempt to impose democracy on an authoritarian culture" (Gilbert, 1979). Thus, *authoritarianism* is a reliable indicator of the early symptoms of the dictatorship. Unlike authoritarian leaders, dictators receive significantly fewer pressures from other interest groups because they only allow the ones that only support them for survival. Authoritarian leaders, however, might still face some degree of criticism and pressure from groups and political parties that share the same political atmosphere with minimal power and less maneuverability.

According to Matt Golder, professor of political science at Penn State, there are three categories of dictatorships (n.d.):

1. "*A monarchic dictatorship* is an autocracy in which the executive comes to and maintains power on the basis of family and kin networks.
2. "*A military dictatorship* is an autocracy in which the executive relies on the armed forces to come to and stay in power.

3. All other autocracies are *civilian dictatorships*."

**FIGURE 10.1** Classifying Dictatorships



Source: [http://mattgolder.com/files/teaching/chapter10\\_white.pdf](http://mattgolder.com/files/teaching/chapter10_white.pdf)

According to Planetrulers.com is one of the leading sources of information on the current political leadership changes; as of April 2021, "there are 50 dictatorships in the world: 19 in Sub-Saharan Africa, 12 in the Middle East and North Africa, 8 in Asia-Pacific, 7 in Eurasia, 3 in Americas and 1 in Europe. Their definition of a dictator is built upon the annual survey of freedom done by the Freedom House. Therefore, *what makes a dictator or an authoritarian leader?* According to Natasha Ezrow, a senior lecturer at the University of Essex, "*When there's no turnover in power of the executive, then it's a dictatorship*" (Nuwer, 2015, June 1). This means dictatorships could be built around an individual who has

established a personality cult, a single governmental party, or a military-run oligarchy (Nuwer, 2015, June 1). However, can one predict the emergence of such regimes by analyzing the past and current leadership styles? In other words, are there sure signs and indicators that are clear to every 'reasonable man' who only believes in the rule of law, equality, and fairness in society?

Let's use an analogy from the contemporary popular culture, the comics. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, a character named *Thanos*, also known as the Mad Titan, begins a vicious campaign of engagement and pursuit to seize all six infinity stones. "Thanos ultimately triumphed over his enemies and completed the Infinity Gauntlet, using it to finally complete his goal and erase half of all life within the universe at the snap of his fingers" (Marvel Cinematic Wiki, n.d.). In Marvel comics, the Infinity Stones are described as the most powerful gems with "unique capabilities that are necessary for the existence of the universe, giving its bearer phenomenal power over others" (Khanna, 2019, April 05). There are six Infinity Stones: The Space Stone (blue), the Reality Stone (red), the Power Stone (purple), the Mind Stone (yellow), the Time Stone (green), and the Soul Stone (orange). When they are united in a specifically designed Gauntlet, the power levels reach destructive capacity. In a way, dictators pursue their own 'Infinity Gauntlet' like Thanos to establish the precedent and pattern for taking over the control from the fragile nature of democratic systems. Indeed, tyrants, dictators, and authoritarian leaders are all hungry for power and seek opportunities to seize enormous powers on behalf of their people. Instead of conquering society's problems, power-hungry leaders use poor human qualities for their personal needs and absolute powers. Using the stones as a symbol of unique power, let's explain all six characters of authoritarian natured regimes' destructive nature.

## 1. Fear Stone

In the political movie, *The Ides of March* (2011), the campaign manager of a candidate for the US Presidential election advises him:

*"People are scared of you. 'Cause they don't understand how you do it, and they love you for it. And that is the most valuable thing in this business. The ability to win people's respect by making them mistake their fear for love."*

Many dictators have shown aggressive traits. Some even might argue that they offer "extreme potential of the human capacity for evil" (Norrholm and Hunley, 2017, January 12). Using their political power and status, inflicting fear into public starting by their political opponents, such leaders aim to suppress the potential crowds through imprisonment, public executions, mass exiles, tortures, and fearmongering. Ironically, while they use scare tactics and serve as the master of fear for their societies, many of the authoritarian leaders "also tended to suffer from excessive anxiety – mostly regarding paranoid fears of citizen uprising and/or assassination" (Norrholm and Hunley, 2017, January 12).

They attack their political opponent constantly and blame them for anything in the country. One might call this tactic the "demonization of the opposition" where they "initiate a vicious cycle of social hostility" towards the political opponents. If anyone states or performs a deviant policy from the leader's approach, they will be called the state's enemy. The Nazis called the Jews "rootless parasites" while Stalin called his enemies the rootless cosmopolitans (Maxon, 2017, October 22). "When groups within a society are already somewhat suspicious of each other, extremists can trigger a spiral of increasing hostility by attacking the perceived internal enemy in the hope of provoking a harsh reaction" (Walt, 2016, November 23).

Political opponents are harassed and humiliated, accused of fabricated crimes, and encouraged to emigrate" (Guriev and Treisman, 2015). Such leadership style seeks every opportunity to arrest, threaten, coerce, or eliminate opponents and critics. Furthermore, "dictatorships are not shy about harassing, capturing, or killing their critics in exile" (Nordlinger, 2019, January 14).

## **2. Security Stone**

"The Soul Stone ranks as possibly the most dangerous of all the Infinity Stones, with its holding a special standing among the others;" (Marvel Cinematic Wiki, n.d.), because it demands a sacrifice of a loved one. Thus, in this case, society sacrifices their many rights in exchange for security. In the words of Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of America:

*"Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety."*

Designing possible "false flag" operations assist them to enhance their power and "convince a frightened population to look to the Leader for protection" (Norrholm and Hunley, 2017, January 12). "Dictatorships, regardless of their constitutional or unorthodox nature, are a pattern of control which the logic of circumstances often tends to thrust upon people when certain crisis conditions prevail" (Hertzler, 1940, p. 158). Therefore, the authoritarian regimes feed upon emergencies; if there is none, then they manufacture one. "Psychologists and sociologists who study terrorism say dictators are able to spread fear among their people and place themselves as their only salvation" (Niiler, 2011, December 12). Their entire existence depends on this vicious cycle. According to Alice LoCicero, a Cambridge, Mass.-based clinical psychologist and researcher on leadership and terrorism:

"Our behavior is still affected by what went on thousands of years ago. It's easier to understand why it's adaptive and common for people to bond to powerful leaders. In Darwinian evolution, the people who bonded with the leader survived. That instinct got passed along" (DNews, 2011, December 12).

Consequently, one can predict that societies become more vulnerable in hard times, more particularly during the social, economic and political crises; "many people are often willing to go along with and support terrible things that would be unthinkable in good times" (Powell, 2013, February 05).

Consequently, they heavily rely on the government's power of surveillance to monitor, intimidate, embarrass, deter, or destroy political opponents. They also use the State's power to reward loyal business leaders (Walt, 2016, November 23).

"Dictatorships are simply a different approach for leading a country, one that values order over individual liberties" (Nuwer, 2015, June 1). Furthermore, as stated in the beginning, if there are no coincidences in life, one might also argue that tyranny happens due to the direct results of society's inevitable dilemma: liberty or security. Like Franklin warned, one's sacrifice of liberty will also result in the erosion of his/her own security in time.

### **3. Judicial Stone**

Dictators want to control the third branch of the government structure and enjoy using them as their legal office, especially when they need justification for their crazy policies and atrocities. They need courts to punish their political rivals/opponents and the signs of a pretense of legitimacy. In the 1920's Italy, under the Fascist leader Benito Mussolini, the Fascist justice was the rule of land by a supine judicial class; while in "judges in Nazi Germany were instructed that in the event of any conflict between Nazi Party and law, Nazi Party should always

succeed...The Moscow Trials from 1936 to 1938 gave power to Stalin eliminate his rivals" (Tewari, 2019, September 01). Therefore, the paramount objective of controlling the judiciary lies in the legitimacy of the authoritarian regimes.

It is very well known that "effective liberal democracies depend on the rule of law being implemented in a politically neutral fashion" (Walt, 2016, November 23). An independent judiciary is one of the greatest threats to the authority of authoritarian regimes. Independent judges refer to individual accountability at any level, which is a direct contradiction of the dictatorship since they know everything better. Shakespeare's exact line "*The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers,*" was stated in Henry VI (Vogel, 1990, June 17). "When democracy is subverted, it is the institutional reliability of the judicial system that is dismantled first" (Tewari, 2019, September 01). Therefore, disturbing law and order is another vital trait for authoritarian regimes.

#### **4. Media Stone**

The Free Press is the official "enemy of the state" and introduced as the people's enemy. The worst scenario is the silencing of the media by judicial decisions. During an interview with the French writer Roger Errera, Hannah Arendt, a political theorist, described how totalitarian regimes manipulate the facts (1978):

*"The moment we no longer have a free press, anything can happen. What makes it possible for a totalitarian or any other dictatorship to rule is that people are not informed; how can you have an opinion if you are not informed? If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer. This is because lies, by their very nature, have to be changed, and a lying government has constantly to rewrite its own history. On the receiving end you get not only one lie—a lie which you could go on*



*for the rest of your days—but you get a great number of lies, depending on how the political wind blows. And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please."*

Such regimes instead build their own media networks and called them the "voice of the nation." The public is mainly encouraged to watch and listen to the pro-political party, state, and 'real' news agencies. After every political scandal, natural disaster, or horrific crime news, the authoritarian regimes suppress, block, and ban the distribution of such information. Whoever does the circulation is generally punished with a heavy monetary fine followed by imprisonment. In sum, under every authoritarian government rule, the first "casualties of the war" have been the free press and the independent judiciary.

## **5. Hubris Stone**

The personalities of authoritarian leaders play a huge role in this universe. "Dictators are not evil by definition, but many do share a particular set of unfortunate personality traits. They might harbor fantasies of unlimited power, beauty, glory, honor and domination, paired with a lack of empathy" (Nuwer, 2015, June 1). Let's not forget the fact that certain good qualities like charm, charisma, and intelligence also help. However, "they are also extremely self-absorbed, masterful liars, compassionless, often sadistic, and possess a boundless appetite for power. Similar characters can also be seen in a genuine psychopath" (Fallon, 2011, November 11). Their narcissistic personalities make them believe that "they are unique and can only be associated with others of equally high status. They require excessive admiration to remain happy, possess an extreme sense of

entitlement, exploit others, and are often envious of others" (Norrholm and Hunley, 2017, January 12) since their narcissistic personalities enable them to have specific titles like *Duce*, *Fuhrer*, *El Supremo*, *Father of the Nation*, *Chef*, *Chief*, *El Jefe*, *The general*, etc. Criticizing them is deemed heretical by followers.

Historian Thomas Carlyle reported that Louis XIV once proclaimed: "L'État, c'est moi" - *The State? I am the State*. This delusionary belief of state ownership and divine right by dictators is often derived from the feeling that they "liberated" or "saved" their countries from an enemy either in colonial rule or foreign powers. Every monument or building of some significance is named after them: their face is everywhere, from the buttons, t-shirts, and caps of "a tomorrow for youth" to the dresses of quasi-national dancers. Highways, stadiums, and schools are named after them. National holidays are suggested to honor them" (Pethiyagoda, 2015, August 19). Another critical indicator is when they and followers begin to spread this notion that the country belongs to them, and they alone and their families and future progeny must rule forever.

## **6. Loyalty Stone**

Since mortality is a reality for living organisms, death will eventually catch up with the tyrants and dictators. Unlike the crimes of most criminals, the crimes of the authoritarian regimes take place before millions. However, what do they do to increase their finite political life?

Brian Klass, a research fellow London school of economics, believes that "losing power will open up an entirely unpredictable situation in which their rivals will be able to enact revenge;" (BBC Radio 4, n.d.) therefore, facing vengeance and death motivates them to be more brutal than ever. James Tilley, a professor of

politics at Oxford University in the UK, finds out what's in the dictators' survival guide (Tilley, n.d.):

- “Online Intimidation and smear campaigns
- Imprisonment
- Torture / beatings
- Going after the family members”

The constant fear of losing power one day forces them to build their own unnatural circle of trust that is full of “loyal lackey supporters, often drawn from their own villages” (Pethiyagoda, 2015, August 19). Moreover, they prioritize the loyalty of their circle of trust while bribing some of the elites, whereas enriching potential rivals through lucrative contracts preventing likely coups. In fact, rewarding your opponents might prevent their defection to the “dark side.” Bueno de Mesquita, a professor of politics at New York University, believes that corruption can be used to buy rivals, but it has another advantage for the dictator (Nuwer, 2015, June 1):

“Corruption is a beautiful structure in a system that depends on very few people. On the one hand, by allowing them to be corrupt you induce them to be loyal because they are getting rich. And if they should be suspected of not being loyal... then you accuse them of corruption.”

Professor de Mesquita also asserts that failing economy is not a good sign for the survival of an authoritarian regime because some of your alleged supporters “become nervous that you won't be able to help them, so they start to shop around” (Nuwer, 2015, June 1).

## Conclusion

**Black Mirror** is a British dystopian science fiction anthology television series created by Charlie Brooker, who explained its double meaning in *the Guardian* newspaper:

"Any TV, any LCD, any iPhone, any iPad—something like that—if you just stare at it, it looks like a black mirror, and there's something cold and horrifying about that, and it was such a fitting title for the show" (2011, December 01).

Suppose one wants to use the "Black Mirror" meaning. In that case, the following speech from a newly elected Turkish politician can be a good 'mirror image' of the poisonous tree concept's fruit. After being selected to modern Turkey's first Parliament in the early 1920s, he has made this brief speech to his constituents with his old Turkish elegantly:

*"O community, you should know this, you are the constituent [**muntehip**], and I am the elective [**muntehap**]. We will be going to the Parliament (**muntehabun ileyh**) where we serve. What you did (voting) is called the "election" [**intihap**], which originates from the Arabic word "**nuhbe**" which means Kaymak "cream/creme" [in English]. **Remember, the cream on top reflects the quality of the ingredient underneath.** Thus, on top of yogurt, there is yogurt cream; the milk has creme de la crème, and there is concrete under the screed. So, **whatever you are, that is who I am** (as your elective). Gentlemen understand me like this" (Uzunkaya, 2006, December 27).*

His words present an excellent lyrical depiction of the relationship between the politicians and their constituents in an ideal democracy. It also stresses the characteristics of a society in any nation. If society members are lazy, immoral,

greedy, apathetic, and ignorant, their Black Mirror image will be the true reflection of their leaders. In the end, it is up to the people to recognize the quality of their "leader's garment" while noticing his/her own image on that 'Black Mirror.' Thus, one constant pattern seems to be consistent accordingly that people's quality in society has shaped the leaders' variety. In other words, people will be ruled as in the reflection of their own qualities.

There is an inscription on the front top of The New York State Supreme Court Building in Manhattan: "*The true administration of justice is the firmest pillar of good government,*" a quotation believed to be taken from a letter written by George Washington to Attorney General Edmund Randolph on September 28, 1789 (Goldberger, 1979, p. 34). According to American political scientist Larry Diamond democracy is a system of government with four key elements (2004):

1. "A political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections.
2. The active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life.
3. Protection of the human rights of all citizens.
4. A rule of law, in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens."

Totalitarian and authoritarian leaders want to design their own "Infinity Gauntlet." Like any professional tailor, who makes a custom garment that fits the customer properly, they desire to wear one and hope to change their nations with the spur of the moment. They encourage and reward their followers under the false promises "to make the country better than ever." Absolute power is poisonous; whoever seizes it, wants more. Unlike Thanos, watching the sun rise in serenity will not be a given option. As the reader, you decide whether you are living in democracy or else.



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