



Authoritarianism:

How You Know It When You See It

Purpose: The purpose of this document is to help US organizers, bridge-builders, and ordinary people understand the key attributes of authoritarian systems, how authoritarians wield power, and ways to counter it.

What is authoritarianism?

Authoritarianism is a constellation of traits in a political, economic, and/or social system, which often include:

- **The concentration of power in the hands of a small group of people who act in ways that are not constitutionally accountable** to the people they are meant to represent and serve.
- **A concerted effort by a network of organizations and institutions (governmental, legal, educational, media, business, military, police, religious and cultural institutions, etc.) to legitimize an oppressive system** by providing it legal and political support, material resources (i.e. money, communication networks), and human resources (people, skills) to maintain control.
- **A system that is willing to engage in a spectrum of undemocratic practices** from corruption and sowing lies and conspiracy theories, to using fear and violence to manipulate, divide people, and maintain power.
- **The misuse of the power of the state to advance the personal and/or partisan desires** of the head of state or a ruling clique (e.g., persecuting political opponents, subverting honest elections).
- **Often emerges “legally”, by democratically elected leaders who subvert democratic norms and institutions** to stay in power.
- **A slow and quiet advance over a period of years where small battles weaken the foundations of democracy**, which can culminate in a period of rapid democratic losses and decline.

What is it *not*?

- A single individual or a few individuals, their character, or a presumed lack of morals.
- A partisan policy position that you may find disagreeable.
- A “red”, “blue”, “left”, or “right” phenomenon – any party or ideology is susceptible.

What are the core attributes of authoritarianism?

- ⇒ Rejecting democratic rules of game.
- ⇒ Denying the legitimacy of opponents.
- ⇒ Tolerating or encouraging political violence.
- ⇒ Curtailing the civil liberties of opponents.
- ⇒ Breaking down social cohesion to divide and rule a society.

What are the top 10 elements of the *authoritarian playbook*?

1. **Divide and rule:** Foment mistrust and fear in the population.
2. **Spread lies and conspiracies:** Undermine the public’s belief in truth.
3. **Destroy checks and balances:** Quietly use legal or pseudo-legal rationales to gut institutions, weaken opposition, and/or declare national emergencies to seize unconstitutional powers.
4. **Demonize opponents and independent media:** Undermine the public’s trust in those actors and institutions that hold the state accountable.
5. **Undermine civil and political rights for the unaligned:** Actively suppress free speech, the right to assembly and protest and the rights of women and minority groups.

6. **Blame minorities, immigrants, and “outsiders” for a country’s problems:** Exploit national humiliation while promising to restore national glory.
7. **Reward loyalists and punish defectors:** Make in-group members fearful to voice dissention.
8. **Encourage or condone violence to advance political goals:** Dehumanize opposition and/or out-groups to justify violence against them.
9. **Organize mass rallies to keep supporters mobilized against made-up threats:** Use fearmongering and hate speech to consolidate in-group identity and solidarity.
10. **Make people feel like they are powerless to change things:** Solutions will only come from the top.

What can we do to push back against authoritarianism?

- ⇒ **Form large, diverse, cross-partisan, and cross-ideological pro-democracy fronts or movements** with a shared vision; strategy; and clear, concrete demands.
- ⇒ **Build the capacity of pro-democracy coalitions and movements** to manage constructive tensions, center relationships, and prioritize larger collective goals.
- ⇒ **Train pro-democracy coalitions and movements in nonviolent discipline and violence de-escalation** in the face of authoritarian violence.
- ⇒ **Invest in opportunities for inter- and intra-group dialogue connected to collective action** to break down assumptions, develop empathy and understanding, and build trust at the grassroots by working together to combat authoritarian practices.
- ⇒ **Diversify the range of nonviolent tactics** to include methods of concentration (protests, rallies, sit-ins), and methods of dispersion (walkouts, stay-aways, consumer boycott, labor strikes); not doing what authoritarians expect and want.
- ⇒ **Engage members of key organizational “pillars”** like religious institutions, business groups, unions, professional associations, bureaucracies, media institutions, and security forces in pro-democracy mobilization.
- ⇒ **Provide pathways for individuals within key pillars that morally or materially support the authoritarian system to join the pro-democracy cause.**

Practical Tips and Tools for Everyone:

- [Hold the Line: A Guide to Defending Democracy](#)
- [Confronting Authoritarianism: A Community-Led Approach to Revitalizing Democracy](#)
- [Combatting Authoritarianism: The Skills and Infrastructure Needed to Organize Across Difference](#)
- [Democracy in a Box](#)

Practical Tips and Tools for Media:

- [The Authoritarian Playbook: A Media Guide](#)

Practical Tips and Tools for Business:

- [Recognizing and Countering Authoritarian Threats to Democracy: What Role for Business?](#)

Additional Key Resources:

- [This is How Democracies Die](#)
- [Authoritarianism is Making a Comeback: Here’s a Time-Tested Way to Defeat It](#)
- [Renewing American Democracy: Navigating a Changing Nation](#)
- [Where Does American Democracy Go from Here?](#)
- [The Future of Nonviolent Resistance](#)
- [Civil Resistance Tactics in the 21st Century](#)

Sources: Hannah Arendt, Ruth Ben-Ghiat, Erica Chenoweth, Larry Diamond, Rachel Kleinfield, Steven Levitsky, Ivan Marovic, Hardy Merriman, Kim Scheppelle, Timothy Snyder, Jason Stanley, Maria Stephan, and Daniel Ziblatt