

Introduction: Tyranny Two Years on

Since *Tyrants* was first published two years ago in 2016, the features of the strange career of tyranny have not fundamentally altered. Yet as I write these words in November 2018, there have been significant additions and alterations in the status of tyranny in the world today. North Korea and its confrontation with the United States under President Trump is one. Another is that, in the temporary abeyance of the direct threat of ISIS and its ambitions to create the first installment of a world-wide Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, the Twenty-First Century Anti-Democracy League (as I call it) filled the vacuum. This league is led by the powerful axis of China, Russia, and Iran, with North Korea as a junior partner, along with a motley crew of dictatorships in what is still referred to in increasingly Orwellian terms as “the developing world,” including Cuba, Venezuela, and much of Southeast Asia and Africa.

We have also witnessed the rise of populist movements in the heart of the Western liberal democracies themselves, reactions both to the perceived threat to traditional national communities posed by immigration – particularly from the Muslim world – and to “global elites” led by the aspiring supranational authorities of the European Union and the United Nations aiming, these movements believed, to usurp the sovereignty of the nation-state. This led some to speculate on a dangerous longing in Europe, reminiscent of the 1920s and 1930s, for an authoritarian “strong man,” evidenced by the disturbing enthusiasm among some figures on the far right, like Marie Le Pen, for Vladimir Putin’s autocratic style of rule in Russia and his rejection of Enlightenment liberal values. Most surprisingly of all, while we were all looking eastward, craning our necks to track the likes of Le Pen, the UK Independence Party, and Hungarian nationalist Viktor Orban as signs of this populist wave, it emerged on a major scale in the United States itself, with the astonishing victories of Donald Trump in winning the Republican nomination and then the presidency.

The precise character and aims of Trumpism are of course a matter of deep controversy. Hardly a day goes by when someone doesn't ask whether I think Trump is a tyrant, and if so, what kind. I'll try to answer those questions here.

THE THREE TYPES OF TYRANNY AND THE CASE OF NORTH KOREA

To recall briefly the argument of *Tyrants*, I suggested that tyranny can be classified according to three distinct types, although they can also overlap. The first are garden-variety kleptocracies in which a whole society is run for the profit of the ruler, who operates like a Mafia don on a national scale. This kind of tyranny has been around the longest – Plato would have had no difficulty recognizing the tyranny of Bashar al-Assad or Robert Mugabe – and is still going strong today.

The second kind is the tyrant as reformer. These rulers also lust for power and wealth like their garden-variety counterparts, but they can genuinely want to do good for their people, to make them powerful and prosperous, with eternal fame as their own reward. Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte are clear examples.

There is a special category of reforming tyranny, the modernizing autocrats who, beginning with the Tudors, centralized all instruments of authority in their own hands, crushing the independent power of religion and enriching the commercial classes at the expense of the aristocracy – “benevolent despots,” as they used to be called, including Louis XIV, Peter the Great, and Frederick the Great. People of course disagreed passionately about whether these rulers truly were benevolent, or simply despotic, but reforms were certainly implemented by them that in the long run improved the lot of the common people and encouraged them to rise in life through individual effort and ability. The tyrant as reformer is mainly a descriptive category, not necessarily a moral endorsement.

Finally, there is millenarian tyranny, in my view unique to the modern age, a revolution conducted in the name of “the people” that seeks to destroy all existing traditional privilege and hierarchy in order to create a collectivist utopia. Beginning with Robespierre and the Jacobins, this club of the scariest tyrants includes Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot, Khomeini and al-Baghdadi. Although frequently cruel and corrupt, millenarian tyrants genuinely believe in a collectivist ideal. Taken together, their revolutions have cost hundreds of millions of lives to date. In almost every case, their movements are imperialistic, aiming not only to defend the revolution from external attack but, more important, to extend its blessings by force to all mankind. In almost every case as well, they are genocidal: They believe that the extermination of a hostile class or race in the present (the aristos, the bourgeoisie, the kulaks, the Jews) – which is the embodiment of all greed, selfishness and vice – will usher in a future of bliss for everyone, in which the individual will be completely submerged in the collective. The terror has to be permanently maintained, because without it,

selfish bourgeois vices will creep back into the people's character. Like reforming tyrants, these millenarian regimes are also capable of improving the economy and standard of living, or at least profess to want to do so, although their hostility to any concept of individual liberty makes it difficult for them to encourage people's aptitudes for business and commerce. Certainly if it is ever a choice between widespread prosperity and the austere and all-controlling collectivism for which the revolution stands, prosperity will always come a distant second (think of the history of the Soviet Union, China's Cultural Revolution, or of today's Iran).

So, of the three types of tyranny, which category does North Korea, now striding so aggressively onto the world stage, most clearly fall into? I would say it displays elements of all three. It is a reforming tyranny because, being theoretically a "workers' state" like the Soviet Union and Communist China, the totalitarian regime is supposedly developing the economy from above. In reality, it lacks even the limited degree of interest in economic improvement for the masses that the Soviet Union and Communist China under Mao occasionally demonstrated. Due to malnourishment, the average North Korean soldier is up to three inches shorter than his South Korean counterpart, despite the fact that the military is kept relatively well fed compared to the populace at large. Terror is used to maintain an omnipresent collective fear. At the regime's absurd parades, the secret police film those who are cheering the least and they and their entire families end up starving in labor camps, where torture is on a scale with the worst of the Khmer Rouge or SS. Of the three kinds of tyranny, North Korea least corresponds to the reforming type.

The regime is certainly also a garden-variety kleptocracy, much of whose meagre prosperity is gobbled up by the Kim dynasty and its favorites. Pyongyang is a fake capital, a stage set for the regime's parades, and whose inhabitants are Party functionaries. A few stores crammed with luxury goods are used to convince gullible journalists of widespread prosperity. The regime's parades, a combination of half time at the Rose Bowl and Cirque du Soleil, are the last intact reminder of a totalitarian ritual going back to the "virtue festivals" staged during the French Revolution. Other former Communist regimes like Russia and China now get straight to the point by parading their military hardware. The choreographed waves of colorful scarves and flags meant to evoke joy have largely faded, suggesting there isn't after all much joy to go around.

Kim Jong-un has reportedly displayed a taste for cruelty on the order of past tyrannical monsters like Caligula, watching as a distrusted uncle and his aides were torn apart by dogs systematically starved for the occasion, or having his enemies blown apart with anti-aircraft missiles. Like Napoleon, Hitler, and Stalin, he loves to build, and lavishes the regime's limited resources on empty resort complexes and hotel towers. The comical qualities we sometimes detect in tyrants stem from their outsized and grotesque personalities, and our ability to laugh at them disarms their capacity to inspire fear and deflates their

megalomaniacal pretensions. Kim Jong-un's contribution to tyranny's cavalcade of comedy was to have his Foreign Ministry label a mediocre American movie about a plot to assassinate him an "act of war," and threaten "a merciless countermeasure" unless the Obama administration blocked its release, thereby confirming the caricature of him in the movie itself (as well as suggesting that he thought an American president possessed tyrannical powers like his own).

The Trump administration believes that US assistance in developing the North Korean economy will provide Kim Jong-un with a serious incentive to get rid of his nuclear weapons. If that is in fact the case, it is virtually certain that Kim does not envision anything like opening up North Korea into a genuine free market economy on the model of South Korea. What he most likely has in mind is the China model: in other words, the dictatorship partners in a neo-mercantilist way with foreign investors who are given access to cheap labor for their factories and permitted to develop an infrastructure for foreign tourism, while the regime skims off a huge share of the profits to distribute among the Kim family and its military and party elites. It is possible that such a state-run economy could exist right alongside the death camps and have little if any material impact on the economic situation of ordinary people, and, as in China, no development of an independent bourgeoisie of entrepreneurs and start-ups would be allowed.

It is clear that Kim should not be underestimated. Though young, he has managed to make himself a fulcrum of world attention, putting his backwater regime on the level of a negotiating partner with the world's greatest superpower by brandishing the threat of nuclear weapons. A formal end to the war between North and South Korea would be a tremendous propaganda victory for him, the US would end up willy-nilly guaranteeing the security of one of the world's worst human rights abusers, while the rationale for a continuing American military presence in the South would grow difficult to defend. At the time of writing, we have no clear idea of what Kim meant by "denuclearization," whether it is to be verifiable and complete, and whether it is meant to apply to the presence of the American nuclear umbrella in the region. At the conclusion of the 2018 Singapore summit, one could have said with equal plausibility that Kim had outfoxed Trump or the other way around.

Finally, I think North Korea is also a millenarian tyranny, but in a unique way. Unlike its millenarian predecessors from the Jacobins to the Bolsheviks to the Islamic Republic of Iran, North Korea doesn't try to export its revolution. Its ideology has no significance beyond reuniting the Hermit Kingdom. Whereas there was a Maoist doctrine asserting China's leadership of "the backyard of the world," there is no ideology of Kim-ism meant to apply outside of North Korea (at least until the two Koreas are reunified). In this respect, it somewhat resembles the Khmer Rouge, whose main aim was to purify the Cambodian people of Western materialism and corruption. But even the Khmer Rouge, unlike North Korea, was ostensibly part of a multinational

movement – third world socialism – to throw off the shackles of Western imperialism. There is one way, however, in which North Korea has demonstrated global ambitions, and that is in its possession of nuclear weapons. Whereas past revolutionary regimes like the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany needed armies, fleets and air forces to extend their reach, for North Korea nuclear weapons are a means to project itself as a world power and threaten to incinerate the leader of the West, the U.S. This is its version of a millenarian project, making it to some extent a beacon of hope for other aspiring nuclear dictatorships like Iran. That is why we must seriously wonder whether the Kim regime could exist without nuclear weapons, if it could ever give them up without fatally undermining its own mission. And could it ever really rest content with a two Korea peace treaty, when for three generations the Kim dynasty's proclaimed paramount aim has been reunification of the peninsula under its rule?

CHINA AND THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ANTI-DEMOCRACY LEAGUE

As I observed at the outset, North Korea is a junior partner in the Twenty-First Century Anti-Democracy League, whose chief leader is unquestionably China. Unique among what political scientists call post-Communist successor states (although it still officially styles itself a Communist state with a Marxist-Leninist ideology), China continues to combine a one-party dictatorship with the selective release of market forces begun by Deng Xiaoping, its corporations seamlessly intertwined with the state and the military, a recipe for capitalism without democracy so successful that China now boasts the second largest gross domestic product (GDP) in the world. While continuing to spend vast amounts on infrastructure to improve living conditions for the masses, as I observed above, it carefully avoids the emergence of a home-grown class of individual entrepreneurs and start-ups, preferring to partner with multinational corporations and provide them with cheap labor, while having access to their technology. It knows full well from British and American history (and also from Marxist theory!) that the emergence of an independent bourgeoisie is the stepping stone to electoral multi-party democracy, an independent judiciary, freedom of speech, and individual rights.

The regime's continued profession of Marxism, stripped down to a doctrine of sheer obedience to the party oligarchy, has been blended with a so-called Confucian revival, in reality simply another code for obedience to the state and bereft of genuine Confucianism's speculative dimension. In contrast with China under Maoism, which was an unquestionably millenarian revolutionary regime bent on achieving a collectivist utopia through genocide – just like the Jacobins, Bolsheviks, and Nazis – today's China is very definitely a reformist tyranny, although like its Maoist predecessor, it is also a kleptocracy bent on enriching the dictatorship and its servitors. Human rights abuses are no longer on the scale of the Maoist era, when millions were killed during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution in order to purge the people of recrudescing bourgeois

longings and preserve the purity of the revolution. But there is still an extensive network of forced labor camps (including for the manufacture of consumer goods to be sold in the West), brutal repression of dissidents, widespread use of torture, organ harvesting from prisoners condemned to death, the persecution of sects such as Falun Gong perceived to threaten the Communist Party's monopoly on sanctioned beliefs, and the repression of the Buddhist faith in Tibet.

One also detects a growing sense of despair as the have-nots, even if better off than in the past, grasp the insuperable distance between their own lot and that of the "party princes" driving foreign sports cars, clubbing and traveling abroad on luxury shopping sprees. A spate of suicides in a workers' compound in Shenzhen arguably emerged from this despair. The workers, brought in from the countryside in the usual Chinese state-capitalist fashion to produce consumer goods for Apple at low wages, were housed in dormitories that by Chinese standards were comparatively good, as was their pay. But, as they drank in the incredible wealth and privileges of their rulers, it must have dawned on these poor country boys that this was the best they would ever be able to do, a form of social doom.

Through the policy of "one belt, one road," China is building a zone of economic influence from east to west, spending lavishly on infrastructure in third world countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, so as to invest its huge financial resources, gain international influence to offset that of the US, and to let the kleptocratic rulers of those countries know that, as an ally, China will never undermine their dictatorships. In fact, the chief ideological principle of the Anti-Democracy League is: Never, ever undermine the status quo of a fellow tyranny's internal order. China is also the world's most rigorous meritocracy, where school exams reaching into the most distant hamlets cull the top 2 per cent of the top 2 per cent all the way up to Beijing University, from which there emerges a powerfully intelligent civil service whose members are lavishly rewarded and who speak around the world on the regime's behalf with an impressive uniformity of message. As I argued in *Tyrants*, the state's promotion of a ruling elite based on merit has been a hallmark of modernizing despotisms since the Tudors.

One wonders, though, whether this reliance on measurable IQ will provide the regime's ruling class with sufficient flexibility to improvise when faced with unforeseen economic setbacks or social unrest, or whether American bootstrapping will in the long run prove more successful than this rigid collective discipline. These different approaches are embodied in the current leaders of the two nations. There could hardly be a greater contrast than that between President Xi, conservatively tailored and always self-composed, carefully permitting himself a single glass of Cabernet sipped slowly over dinner at Mara Lago, and President Trump, rambunctious, floppy-haired and loose-lipped, said to wolf down cheeseburgers in bed while binge-watching cable news. I wouldn't care to bet on which approach will prevail. The fact that American pop culture is so wildly popular with young people around the world, including those living under dictatorships that officially excoriate it, is proof of the appeal

of American cockiness, independence and ambition, and may be a chink in the armor of closed societies that in the long run cannot keep its influence out.

China has increased its military power exponentially. Two years ago, they had no aircraft carriers. Today they have two, and a third under construction. Their motivation is no longer the fomenting and export of millenarian revolution, as was the case under Mao, but enhancing the power, wealth and greatness of the ancient Chinese nation. China aimed to challenge the US naval presence in the South China Sea, built military bases on artificial islands outside of its own territorial waters, and began sending submarines into the Indian Ocean. Some observers believe that China's ambitions as a great power are confined to a zone of influence in Southeast Asia. Others believe they are bent on world domination, in keeping with their ancient belief that China is the Middle (or Central) Kingdom.

Under President Xi, who impressively combines a mandarin calm and intelligence with a Machiavellian capacity for ruthlessness that enabled him to reach the top of the party by systematically eliminating his competitors, China in my view has been the puppet master behind North Korea's conflict with the US. China loathes nothing more strongly than America's military presence in South Korea and in what China regards as its private sea lanes, and fears nothing more strongly than the possibility that America might support Japan to develop nuclear weapons or might station them there itself. I believe that the whole drama of Kim Jong-un's alternating threats of nuclear annihilation and offers to give up his weapons was orchestrated by China to trade off the latter promise (which, as noted above, may not really be for complete, rapid and verifiable denuclearization, and may not be confined to the North) for the US withdrawing, downsizing, or at least not expanding its military umbrella in the region.

All in all, China remains one of the world's most formidable foes of democracy. There are a few civilizational centers that have survived more or less intact for centuries, including Egypt, Iran and Turkey, despite major political, social, and religious transformations. Among them, China may be the most staggering example of a nation's longevity. From the seventeenth century BC until today, it has endured and, after suffering the prolonged and pointless bloodletting caused by Mao's megalomania, is today more powerful than ever. It would be as if the Roman Empire still existed, now equipped with intercontinental ballistic missiles. In pursuing global predominance, China is playing a very long game. In the history of reforming tyrannies reaching back to the aspiring world states of the Pharaohs, Cyrus the Great, and the Ottoman Sultanate, China stands out as an impressive example of the comparative success that rational despotism can achieve while giving no quarter to the concept of the rights of the individual.

PUTIN'S RUSSIA

To continue the world Tyranny Tour from where I left off two years ago, my original discussion of Russia under the elected despotism of Vladimir Putin isn't

one I would alter significantly. I would still describe Putin as a combination of reformer and kleptocrat, with a dash of the millenarian. Putin's foreign policy can be described as combining a baseline of nineteenth-century great-power militarism with a millenarian filigree. The base-line is that Putin still aims to turn what once were the Soviet Union's Warsaw Pact satellites into a zone of influence where Russia, while not attempting to actually rule them, will have a veto over their actions. An exception is Ukraine, which he likely wants to re-absorb because he regards it as a part of Russia proper; the same may apply to Moldova. The millenarian filigree is provided by Slavophilic nationalism, its chief exponent being the academic and pundit Aleksandr Dugin, whose geopolitical writings envision a coming struggle with the US on behalf of Russia's "anti-bourgeois, anti-American... revolution of archaic values," aimed at achieving "strategic control of the U.S." In Dugin's adaptation of the political existentialism of Martin Heidegger, which provided the Third Reich with its chief philosophical underpinnings, Russia assumes the role of the "people of destiny" that Heidegger assigned to Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

I still doubt that Putin actually contemplates world conquest or a world war with the US. Yet by patronizing Dugin's views, his foreign policy takes on the aura of a Russian-led crusade to save the world from Western materialism and imperialism, connecting it seamlessly to Putin's vision for Russian society and culture, which leans heavily on Slavophilic romantic nationalism like that of Berdyaev. Hence, Dugin was given free rein by Putin to remove from the school and university curriculum all discussion of Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms, and to rehabilitate the Soviet era as an organic part of Russia's past, massaging Marxist-Leninist Communism into an agrarian populist movement summed up in Dugin's own "Eurasianist National Bolshevik Party." I continue to see Putin as a rational actor in foreign policy in the sense that, unlike former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who cheerfully contemplated Iran's absorption of an Israeli nuclear counter-strike as an acceptable price for Iran's first-strike annihilation of the whole of Israel, since at least some of Iran and its population would survive, Putin does not intend himself or Russia to go down in flames over any foreign policy conflict or ideological ideal. He won't go the way of Hitler in the bunker in 1945. So far, his aggressive military moves in Ossetia and Crimea have been akin to Hitler's lightning blows in the Rhineland, Austria and the Sudetenland before provoking a full-scale war with the Western allies by invading Poland in 1939. Putin strikes, then declares he has no further territorial ambitions, and retrenches for the next move. His pragmatism displayed itself when he prudently stood aside when President Trump ordered two strikes on Syrian airbases and when Israel struck Iran's main base in Syria.

But he is *not* a rational actor in the Western sense that I discussed in *Tyrants*, whereby everything comes down to the Hobbesian pursuit of material self-interest, so that international actors can be expected to avoid the perils of military conflict in exchange for getting the biggest available piece of the economic pie. Putin believes his foreign policy ambitions are at the service of Russian honor and avenging the

humiliation of losing the Cold War, and he will allow the Russian people to absorb a very high degree of economic pain without abandoning that mission. If there is anything especially worrisome about Putin when it comes to foreign policy, it may in fact be Russia's desperate economic straits: as the Soviet Union was once called "upper Volta with rockets," Russia today is a gas station in search of a country. Its GDP is smaller than that of Canada, with over three times the population, but Putin is spending on building up the military in a way that is vastly out of proportion to the country's resources. One wonders if he might reach a point where he believes that he must roll the dice on decisive Russian military action, say against eastern Europe, because of these shrinking resources and the exponentially expanding American military build-up. One of Hitler's calculations in launching World War II was that if Germany did not act soon, the much greater capacity of the Allies for arms production and military man-power would soon neutralize Germany's advantage. Let's hope Putin doesn't make a similar calculation.

MILLENARIAN TYRANNY LIVES ON

Meanwhile, millenarian tyranny lives on in the form of the International Jihad. As I wrote in *Tyrants*, the twin aim of Jihadist revolution going back to Islamism's intellectual founder Sayyid Qutb and al-Qaeda's Declaration of War on the US is the creation of an Islamic Republic governed by the harshest version of Sharia law as the way -station toward creating the world-wide Caliphate, subverting and overthrowing pro-Western and insufficiently pure Muslim regimes along the way, culminating in the destruction of Big Satan America and Little Satan Israel. The Iranian Islamic Republic remains the most successful example of the attempt to achieve those aims, not excluding provoking a world-wide nuclear conflagration to usher in the Last Days (an aim of Ahmadinejad's never explicitly repudiated by Iran's rulers). That is especially true now that the territorial enclave of ISIS has crumbled under an American-led assault. Iran terrorizes its own population at home, and attempts to extend its revolution through terrorism and warfare in Syria and Yemen, through backing Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Taliban, and colluding with North Korea over their joint development of nuclear weapons. In a classic totalitarian pattern recalling the Soviet Union, Iran's aggression abroad is both a matter of revolutionary principle and meant to offset the regime's crashing economic failures and repression of human rights at home.

Millenarian revolutions often have an inner core of elite cadres, guardians of the purity of the revolution, and in the vanguard of its military aggression abroad – examples include the NKVD–KGB in the Soviet Union and the SS in the Third Reich – each becoming virtually a state within the state. The Revolutionary Guard has assumed this kind of role in Iran, as guardians of the Khomeinist theocracy – quick to crush any sign of civil disobedience or independent action by legislators – and the spearhead of Iranian aggression abroad, particularly in Syria. But if Iran's ayatollahs are students of history, they should reflect

on how imperialistic aggression to increase a regime's prestige can backfire. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan was intended by Leonid Brezhnev to provide a new infusion of ideological and revolutionary vigor, recalling Stalin's seizure of eastern Europe, to counteract the regime's increasing ossification into a creaky nomenklatura oligarchy bent on its own venal self-interest, resembling the late Ottoman Empire. Instead, the invasion was a catastrophe that began a cascade of civil unrest as the body bags came home, emboldened Warsaw Pact nations seeking independence when Soviet forces were withdrawn, and led to Gorbachev's reforms and the Soviet Union's eventual dissolution. In this, the invasion was a replay of Russia's hubristic gamble that it could easily defeat the Japanese fleet, which it believed to be manned by an inferior race, leading to the complete destruction of its own fleet, a humiliation for the tsarist autocracy that lit the fuse for the revolution of 1905. The ayatollahs should also reflect that the elite cadres of millenarian revolutions do not always remain loyal if things begin to turn out badly for the regime. Sometimes they can leave you in the lurch, as did Himmler when he abandoned Hitler in 1945 and tried to negotiate Germany's separate surrender to the West. Himmler even envisioned (fantastically) a role for himself and the SS in restoring post-war order on behalf of the victorious Allies. Sometimes the elite cadres become advocates of political liberalization and reform, such as Beria wanted the KGB to spearhead after Stalin's death. It is not inconceivable that the Revolutionary Guards might join an uprising against the ayatollahs in order to save their own skins.

Having earlier discussed the Khmer Rouge at some length as an important example of millenarian tyranny, I now add a personal coda arising from my visit to the Killing Fields in the fall of 2017. Like many, I remember when the first shocking photos of massive heaps of skulls surfaced in the West after the overthrow of Pol Pot. It was equally shocking to see them now encased in a graceful Buddhist shrine, neatly stacked in a tower behind glass like an enormous reliquary, and the prison huts decorated with icons, as if to recast the Khmer Rouge's deliberate genocide as something akin to a natural disaster, rolled into Cambodian history, the victims and their survivors now to be enfolded in the ageless comforting embrace of religion. I don't doubt this was a sincere response on the part of some. But it also struck me unavoidably as an attempt to airbrush the truth of what happened and why, perhaps not unconnected to the fact that Cambodia's "president" – continuously in office for the past thirty-three years – was a former Khmer Rouge. It recalled the Catholic Church in Poland's insensitive location of a church inside the former SS headquarters at Birkenau, as if the Holocaust had been a generically Polish, Catholic or human tragedy, when the camp existed specifically to exterminate Jews.

THE TRUMPIAD: RISE OF A DEMAGOGUE?

Let me now turn to the question I have been asked almost on a daily basis since the book first came out: Is Donald J. Trump a tyrant, and if so, what kind? In