

All dictators are not alike. Former US Ambassador to the UN, Jean Kirkpatrick, noted that because of the Cold War, the US supported some authoritarians, but not totalitarians. Authoritarians control their countries with armed force; they are often thugs. But totalitarians mess with their subjects' minds, imprisoning and executing people for wrong thoughts (or religions). A thug really does less long-term damage than an ideologue.

Dictatorships that are at least competent in keeping public order and encouraging a modernized economic system generally get public support. The military dictatorships in South Korea and Taiwan were not opposed until their societies had become educated and middle class and were ready to rule themselves. Singaporeans have not yet-and may never-oppose their authoritarian government; they are quite satisfied with their social contract.

But when we look at the majority of dictatorships around the world, they are not only thuggish, but are also economically incompetent. Their subjects suffer from lack of jobs, oppressive (and useless) bureaucracy, and no hope for a reasonable future. Cambodia's dictator, a fierce man in his 40s, plans to rule into his 90s. His long-suffering population has not yet dared to complain.

The worst dictators create a huge gulf between the haves and have-nots; population explosion (thanks to cultural and religious suppression of women); and incomprehension of how a modern government should work. In such countries, the thugs refuse to share power with any educated sector. Their only organized opposition is militant Islam---an institution pretty hard to shut down. This situation is almost universal in the Muslim world, with few exceptions.

The United States and Europe must tread carefully in the unfolding turmoil. Critics of American policy complain about inconsistency, and what they see as hypocrisy. What they do not understand is that foreign policy is not, and has never been, one size fits all. There are times that we need something from another country---such as a reliable energy supply---that is more important at the moment than certain human rights concerns---no matter how distressing to us. We have to choose our battles.

One of the thorniest problems for American policy is Pakistan. How do we deal with a country that is essentially feudal and Medieval Muslim, but also has strong secular nationalists in urban areas? We needed their support during the Cold War because India was obviously a Soviet client at the time. We also need them in our present war with Militant Islam---one that they are ambivalent about pursuing.

Our other problem with Pakistan is that not only does their democracy not work, but their bouts of dictatorship don't work either. One military dictator, Zia, was responsible for inserting drastic Sharia law into the formerly secular constitution---law that persecutes women and institutes death for apostasy or blasphemy against Islam. We needed Zia at the time for Cold War purposes and looked away. Then we dropped his successor, Musharraf, a secular and modernizing dictator, when the ill-considered "democracy project" intervened. We seem never to get it right. Musharraf's replacements have not been impressive, to say the least.

Not all dictators are the same. We deal with the communist dictatorship of China because it obviously benefits us both to do so. They have become a modern economic state and are thriving as they have not for the past 300 years.

Next door to China are North Korea and Burma, two of the ugliest dictatorships in the world. We need nothing they have, so we shun them. The same with Zimbabwe's Mugabe, an old dictator who has managed in just a few years to impoverish and terrorize his formerly prosperous land.

But what do we do about the authoritarian Jordanians, the king in Morocco, and the military dictatorships in Algeria and Syria? And what about the Persian Gulf states? We need them all. If and when they fall, their successors will well be worse. Remember the Shah of Iran and the Islamic Dictatorship that replaced him? Now there is a cautionary tale! Some tyrants are worse than others.

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