

The Perfect Storm of Totalitarianism

How could a totalitarian state rise in the face of modern democracy?

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Introduction

Totalitarian states have historical similarities that include a cycle of turmoil followed by revolution. Typically, a military defeat leads to an economic depression, break-up of an empire, and the foundation of a new state. This lays the groundwork for ruthless dictators such as Hitler or Joseph Stalin to win over an entire citizen population. This ability to convince a population to follow a radical new idea can only happen in a “perfect storm” of disparity and manipulation (Powell np). Because many countries are experiencing populist movements today that resemble the fascist dictatorships in post-World War I Europe, this paper investigates the factors that cause this phenomenon to occur in various settings across the globe. This essay explores the “perfect storm” for the creation of a totalitarian state through the Global Politics theme of Imbalances of Power and asks the question, “How could a totalitarian state rise in the face of modern democracy?” This paper will investigate North Korea, an established totalitarian state, and Hungary which remains on the brink of totalitarianism. Lastly, this paper will analyze how the United States could possibly fall into a totalitarian state. These case studies, evaluated through Arendt’s theory and the lenses of Global Politics, conclude that the central factors of totalitarianism are ones that favor a strong leader who can establish control and cement power while operating in an environment of chaos and crisis.

Methodology

Sources/Literature:

To address the research question, a combination of sources was used to cover the totalitarian ideology, case studies on the North Korean Kim Dynasty, news articles emphasizing the current crisis in Hungary, and research papers regarding the United States and the effect of its current political division on the preservation of liberty.

Possible Limitations / Weaknesses

There is a limitation to research of North Korea. Because it is so isolated, it is hard to find primary sources of individual experiences and daily life in North Korea. Often American interpretations of the North Korean society were used which may be biased to American Democratic ideals.

There is also a limitation to research of Hungary. It has become increasingly totalitarian, and it is difficult to find accurate information expressing the current state of Hungary.

Global Politics Analytical Lenses

Examples: By studying different nations with varying levels of totalitarian ideology, this paper will test the situations in which a new political regime may rise. It will compare North Korea, which has been totalitarian for decades, Hungary which is on the brink of a collapsing democracy, and the United States which is currently a democracy.

Perspectives: By choosing multiple countries, this paper will incorporate a global perspective of the risk of the rise of dictators. Further, the paper emphasizes that liberty must be fought for to be maintained and that any country runs the risk of dangerous disrepair in a period of crisis.

Course Concepts: This essay is in the category of Global Politics: Imbalance of Power. This essay further acknowledges global issues including Human Rights, Individual Liberties, and Justice by exploring the implications and effects of totalitarianism. It will articulate the lives of citizens in a society dominated by government control.

Critical Theories: This essay will use the critical theory of totalitarianism by Hannah Arendt from her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. She extrapolates upon the core ideas of totalitarianism using the periods of Nazi Germany and Stalin Russia to highlight similarities and common developments under a totalitarian leader.

Global Political Challenges: The lives of North Korean and Hungarian citizens are manipulated and oppressed under a strict regime. This highlights the debate of governmental involvement in citizen's lives. Further, it demonstrates the importance of popular participation in government and preventing the oppression of individual liberties.

Hannah Arendt: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

Hannah Arendt's Theory on *the Origins of Totalitarianism* explains factors leading to the rise of totalitarian regimes including Nazism and Stalinism as the major totalitarian political movements of the 20th century. She focuses on emergence and increased prevalence of racism as an ideology and how it affects the rise of totalitarianism, stating that, "totalitarianism has discovered a means of dominating and terrorizing human beings from within" (Arendt 344). The work discusses the transformation of classes into masses, the role of propaganda in the dictator's rise to power, and their use of terror and anxiety (Arendt 25).

Firstly, all totalitarian leaders have come to power during an economic, political, or social crisis that creates an overall sense of weakness and disparity where citizens are more willing to

support radical ideologies (Arendt 479). For example, if individuals are desperate and trying to feed their families, they may turn to the last resort of stealing. Further, totalitarianism is only possible in a society in which classes have dissolved into masses, large groups of people are politically disenfranchised or economically emasculated (Arendt 275). Because they are not organized, the totalitarian movement can harness their number and gain power.

Secondly, the revolution relies on a leader who can resolve the crisis, a member of the citizenry searching for a solution, a strong charismatic speaker who can appeal to the despair of the people. Totalitarian leaders usually have a strong desire to suppress opposition and demand arbitrary power in the guise of emergency action to restore order (Arendt 480).

Thirdly, as the leader rises to power, they increase their control by using propaganda and censorship to manipulate and influence their citizens even after the crisis is resolved (Arendt 456). Therefore, if the population is manipulated into seeing their leader as essential to prevent them from despair, then the fight for liberty is lost and the government has full control resulting in a totalitarian state. Liberty can only be protected if people are willing to fight to preserve it. This is the framework of totalitarian ideology. This essay examines these shifts in political power towards totalitarianism.

Case Studies – Current Forms of Totalitarianism Throughout the World

North Korea

Context. Before the 20th century, Korea was completely isolated. However, in 1894, Japan started a war in North Korea known as the Sino-Japanese war. In less than a year, Japan won the war and enslaved many of the Korean men and forced the women into prostitution. During this time of oppression, Russia gained influence in China and Korea. Threatened by this

increased influence, Japan began a war with Russia known as the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 (How the Kim Dynasty Took Over np). This war ended with the Treaty of Portsmouth which gave Japan continued control over Korea. A group of approximately 200,000 Korean resistance fighters formed and started practicing guerrilla warfare. Many of these fighters had communist ideologies due to a strong influence by Russia. One of the members of this group was Kim Song Ju (How the Kim Dynasty Took Over np).

At the end of World War II, Korea was divided with the north under Soviet rule and the South under United States rule. Russia instituted Kim Song Ju as the leader of North Korea. They changed Kim Song Ju's name to Kim Il Sun which roughly translates to "Kim become the Sun." He was portrayed as a national war hero for fighting against the Japanese but was, in practice, a Soviet puppet (How the Kim Dynasty Took Over np).

As Kim Il Sun grew in popularity, he began to use his reputation to his advantage. He established the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and proclaimed himself the leader. He promised his citizens that he would reunite North and South Korea. This initiated the Korean War between North Korea, backed by the Soviet Union and China, and South Korea backed by the United States until 1953 (Brezáni 8).

Since the wars, Kim Il Sung has controlled North Korea using propaganda and manipulation. He established the North Korean Federation of Literature and Art which allowed him to control the country's cultural output (How the Kim Dynasty Took Over np). He mandated that all art and media portray him as a god-like figure. He then changed the constitution to eliminate term limits, allowing him to serve as dictator for life. Creating this god-like persona allowed for implementation of the ideology known as *Juche* (Baek 108). *Juche* emphasizes

self-sufficiency and praises the rulers of the Kim dynasty as *quasideities*. A *quasideities* is someone whose wisdom and judgement are so great that they cannot be questioned (Baek 108). He further enforced this image of himself by issuing a list known as the *Ten Principles for the Establishment of the One-Ideology System*. These principles acknowledge the authority of Kim Il Sung as the supreme leader and stress the importance of obedience to the state (Ten Principles np). Starting in first grade, students memorize and adhere to these principles in their daily lives. This is enforced by making all citizens participate in weekly “self-criticism” sessions in which they discuss their obedience to the principles and how they can improve (Baek 108). Enforcing these ideas at a young age prevents citizens from being exposed to contradictory information. This creates generations of citizens who will blindly follow their supreme leader.

Since Kim Il Sun there have been two successors; Kim Jun Un is now the current leader. The propaganda and control over the citizens continue. Every home has state-sanctioned radios that broadcast propaganda. The radio cannot be turned off (Baek 109). All news reports and broadcasts go through several rounds of censorship. They depict the rest of the world as a wasteland of deprivation and criminality. If inspectors find anything illegal, citizens can be arrested, sent to labor camps, or killed (Hathcock np).

North Korea is very isolated and most of the population lives in government housing which lacks basic necessities such as water and heat. About 200,000 North Koreans have fled to Northeastern China in recent years to avoid starvation (Ulferts and Howard 86). The education system is meant to promote the nations ideology and provide workers, but the country has a shortage of doctors and medicine. The government does not offer any assistive programs such as disability insurance, pensions, and care for the elderly. Massive military spending has also left

the country in need of foreign aid (Hathcock np). Kim Jong-Un now controls all of the government, economy, and industry.

Analysis. Following Arendt's theory, when North Korea began its political crisis, it moved from a division of classes to a mass of people when Japan took over their nation and terrorized them. The citizens were united with the common goal of defeating their abusers. Kim Il Sun rose from this chaos and was selected as leader. Continuing from this, the citizens of North Korea struggled through multiple wars. They allowed the government to slowly strip away their civil liberties. For the citizens, Kim Il Sun represented peace from the crisis that they were going through, so they trusted him. Thirdly, utilizing propaganda, the Kim dynasty convinced citizens that the rest of the world was a wasteland and that they are treated fairly. Arendt's theory proves accurate in the depiction and creation of the totalitarian state in North Korea.

Hungary

Context. The Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orban, has worked to create a totalitarian regime. During his first period in power, from 1998 to 2002, he began to dismantle the country's democratic institutions. He worked to decrease the freedoms of the press, undermine the educational system, and limit the power of the judiciary branch (Serhan np).

He became prime minister again in 2010. As he led the country, he filled the judiciary with people who were loyal to the Fidesz party. He gutted the civil service, and appointed loyalist as watchdog agencies. Further, he disabled the media and changed the constitution (Livingston np). In this practice, the executive and legislative branches could no longer be defined as separate as they were both heavily controlled by the Fidesz party (Kornai 280).

Despite these changes, in 2015 Fidesz lost its majority due to corruption scandals, unemployment, and taxes that caused many protests. This slowed Orban's reforms. However, during this time, many refugees were crossing Hungary as they were fleeing conflicts in the Middle East and Syria. Orban utilized the appearance of a refugee crisis to instill fear in his citizens. He classified the refugees as the "unknown," dividing his nation into two groups. He created the "us" or the Christian Hungarians and the "others" or the Muslims and refugees (Livingston np). He was able to influence the Hungarian view of the Muslims and refugees while creating policies that destroyed the protection of these groups. He built the reputation of himself and the Fidesz party as the protectors of the Hungarian citizens. He created a strong image that he would protect his citizens from these "outsiders." He made actions that targeted immigrants and refugees seem not only necessary, but worthy of praise. It is reported that 76% of Hungarians believe that refugees increase terrorism (Livingston np). This demonstrates that the efficacy of the fear and anxiety that Orban has been instilling in these citizens.

When the coronavirus hit in 2020, Orban was quick to capitalize on the pandemic as an opportunity to increase his power. He created an image of the virus as an enemy to his citizens, saying that it was, "spreading among foreigners" and that the Hungarians are "fighting a two-front war, one front is called migration and the other belongs to the coronavirus" (Dettmer np). In grouping these problems together, Orban creates a massive enemy that instills fear in the heart of the nation. Further, the pandemic has allowed Orban to institute more laws and programs that increase his power. He has now instituted rule-by-decree with no democratic oversight, he can impose jail terms for hindering coronavirus measures or spreading false information about the government. Newspapers and broadcasters have been threatened by jailtime and other

criminal charges. He ultimately has made himself prime minister indefinitely while removing any oversight and silencing criticism (Dettmer np).

Since the coronavirus began, Orban's popularity has increased. This demonstrates that the citizens fear the crisis and they believe Orban will keep them safe.

Analysis. Orban's rise to power is synonymous with Arendt's ideas on the rise of totalitarianism. Firstly, Orban began by creating the dual crisis involving immigration and the pandemic. Although the immigration was not a true crisis, Orban branded it in such a way that it worked to cause disparity in this group. Further, he eliminated the classes and created a common mass by making an "us" and a "them." Instead of a separation of classes it was a separation between the Christian Hungarians and the Muslims and Immigrants. Secondly, using propaganda he depicted himself and his party as a group that the citizens could rely on. He assured them that he would solve the crisis of the refugees and the global pandemic. Thirdly, as he continues to grow in popularity, he has taken more of the citizens freedom. He has eliminated proper legislation and stripped the country of term limits and free press. According to these ideas, if Hungary continues to progress it will end up similar to North Korea as a totalitarian state.

United States of America

Context. The United States was founded in 1776 as a representative democracy. Since its conception, it was focused on ensuring a balance of power. This led to the creation of a system of checks and balances. There are three equal government branches: the legislative, executive, and judicial. The United States is further founded on term limits and focused on the majority rule principle (Madrid and Weyland 158).

While the American democracy has been successful for centuries, it has been tested. Most recently with the election of Donald Trump, the United States has faced severe polarization. Trump ran on the campaign rhetoric of dividing the country between an “us,” the Americans who wanted to return to the past of industrial jobs and upward mobility where white males dominated the workplace, and “them,” the immigrants and minorities (Mccoy 30). Utilizing the fear caused by the coronavirus, the president created misdirection and chaos by claiming the news was false and undermining healthcare professionals. However, due to the balance of powers, he was unable to significantly impact the democratic estate. In addition, at the end of 2020, Trump was voted out of office. But, instead of following the traditional transfer of power, he refused to admit his loss (Madrid and Weyland 161). He rallied his supporters to fight for him to maintain power. By his unwillingness to accept defeat, Donald Trump threatened the American democracy. However, the balance-of-powers in coordination with the multiparty system prevented Trump from successfully maintaining power (Madrid and Weyland 158). The American democracy survived this threat of totalitarianism.

Analysis. The attempt at totalitarianism in the US did not fit the “perfect storm” described by Arendt. Due to the U.S. system of checks and balances it is nearly impossible for one individual to take control over the country. Even as the former President tried to undermine democracy by establishing distrust in the news and creating mass confusion, the democracy continued to succeed. Despite being heavily polarized, the multiparty system prevented one group of people from gaining control (Madrid and Weyland 155). After Trump’s defeat, many Trump supporters who considered themselves “freedom fighters” stormed the capital in hopes of overturning the democratic election. However, this group was not able to gain enough power to

take control of the entire country and perform a coup. While Trump's populism has damaged the democratic norms in the United States, he has not succeeded in undermining the democracy (Madrid and Weyland 158).

Although the situation in the United States does not fit the conventional depiction of totalitarianism created by Arendt, there are totalitarian characteristics. In his book, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, the political philosopher Sheldon Wolin created the term "inverted totalitarianism". Inverted totalitarianism is a form of government that is morphing towards an illiberal democracy (Wolin 13). It is a system in which corporations have corrupted the democracy to the point where cost-effective-economics overcome our ideology. He employed the words inverted totalitarianism to emphasize the totalitarian aspects in the control that corporations have in our society. An example of this is in the American healthcare system. The price of insulin in America is higher than anywhere else in the world. This price leads to the death of many American diabetics unable to afford treatment (Hart 40). Wolin emphasizes that Americans believe they live in a democracy but are actually controlled by corporations (Wolin 14-15). The inverted totalitarianism differs from Arendt's totalitarianism in the way that they come to power. Totalitarianism overthrows an established system, while inverted totalitarianism exploits the legal and political constraints of the established democratic system and uses it to defeat the original purpose of the democracy (Wolin 16).

Ultimately, while the United States does not fit the conventional formation of totalitarianism created by Arendt, totalitarian ideals still appear throughout the democratic system of government.

Analysis of the Factors in the Rise of Totalitarianism

Examples:

Using examples from different governments demonstrates the susceptibility of nations to totalitarianism. North Korea demonstrates a prevalent totalitarian estate. The citizens have been extremely restricted, and all of their personal liberties have been taken away (Baek 109). North Korea has managed to exist through changes in dictators and maintains complete control over its citizens. Hungary presents a country on the brink of collapsing democracy. It currently faces a crisis where the leader Orban is slowly increasing his power and manipulation (Livingston np). The United States represents a well-established democracy. While it is unlikely to become a totalitarian estate like Hungary, it still shows some aspects of totalitarianism in its reliance on capitalism (Wolin 14-15).

These different examples demonstrate the common patterns in totalitarianism and how they differ. While North Korea and Hungary seem to follow the “perfect storm of totalitarianism,” the United States represents how totalitarianism can be revealed in other ways.

Perspectives:

The example countries bring different global perspectives but enforce the idea that liberty must be actively protected. While North Korea and Hungary both faced entirely different crises, they both ended with similar results. The totalitarian state of North Korea was constructed out of a devastating war while in Hungary, Orban converted a democracy into totalitarianism by escalating crises. The same form of totalitarianism rising out of seemingly different circumstances demonstrates how liberty can be transformed into control. Even in the United States, with systems in place to protect liberty, totalitarian characteristics shine through the

economic structure. These multiple perspectives emphasize that liberty must be fought for to be maintained.

From a realist perspective, a country might tend to become more totalitarian if they feel threatened by countries around them and as a result desire a strong leader who is capable of handling the threats (Honig 313). This is the case in Hungary and North Korea where both leaders took advantage of a crisis to secure leadership. Thus, the rise of totalitarianism would not be expected to occur in a well-established modern democracy like that of the United States.

Course Concepts:

The exploration of this topic lies in the Global Politics Imbalances of Power. The rise of totalitarianism creates an imbalance of power where the citizens are stripped of their ability to make decisions. Questions such as “To what extent does the restriction of personal liberties become a normality in totalitarianism?” and “In what ways does totalitarianism eliminate the opinions of the citizens and minority groups?” help frame the research question. Further, this analysis involves Human Rights, Individual Liberties, and Justice. As seen in the environments of North Korea, Hungary, and the totalitarian aspects of the United States, the citizens face serious threats to their rights. In North Korea citizens live without the basic necessities of water, heat, and healthcare (Ulferts and Howard 86). In Hungary, citizens live in constant fear of immigrants and the coronavirus (Livingston np). In the United States, millions of Americans die out of their inability to afford healthcare (Hart 40). Totalitarianism restricts the rights and liberties of these citizens and create injustice.

Critical Theories:

Hannah Arendt's theory on the Origins of Totalitarianism describes the "perfect storm" for the rise of a totalitarian estate. She modeled her theory on Nazism and Stalinism in the 20th century. As seen in the case of North Korea and Hungary, both leaders came to power in time of crisis. Each respective leader claimed to resolve the problem for their citizens. Once in power they began to manipulate the citizens into believing stability can only exist with them as leader. They then began to cement power by controlling news and media outlets and finally by eliminating term limits (Arendt 25).

However, in the case of the United States where a strong long-lasting democracy exists, it is difficult for a dictator to come to power through a crisis. With many levels and divisions of power, the United States has resisted these threats (Madrid and Weyland 158). However, the totalitarian ideals still exist in the democratic state. As Wolin demonstrated in his theory of inverted totalitarianism, the United States is still under the control of a dictator, although not the conventional dictator that Arendt highlights. The source of totalitarianism lies in who controls the most amount of power, even if it lies outside of the government (Wolin 14-15).

Global Political Challenges:

The implications of the rise of totalitarianism in times of crises can be broad. As crises such as the global pandemic occur, countries will struggle to ensure their stability and democracy. For many developing nations this means finding the means to restrict one person from gaining dictator-like powers. For developed democracies, such as the United States, this means recognizing the characteristics of non-traditional totalitarianism. Stopping the rise of totalitarianism ultimately means maintaining the correct balance between leaders and citizens.

Answering the Hypothesis:

To answer the question of “how could a totalitarian state rise in the face of modern democracy?” This essay concludes that totalitarianism can rise by the traditional method seen in Arendt’s theory, or can deploy its characteristics more subtly in a functioning modern democracy as explained by Wolin. The idea of totalitarianism can thus be constructed to include the way of life of the citizens. This allows for increased awareness of totalitarianism and the increased necessity for the defense of liberty.

Conclusion

Totalitarianism can rise in the modern world when a leader takes control during a crisis and cements power through systems in place. It is important, in the defense of personal liberty, to understand who is vulnerable to a rise in totalitarianism. This ultimately prevents the silencing and restriction of personal liberties in people across the world. While totalitarianism today can differ from how totalitarianism has been formed in the past, it is important to recognize all forms of totalitarianism.

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