

The Authoritarian Playbook

Authoritarian leaders across history often use similar tactics to gain and keep power. Below is a simple checklist you can use to see where countries fall on the dictatorship spectrum.

<p>1. Scapegoating Enemies</p> <p>Blaming minority groups, political opponents, or "traitors" for national problems. Used to unify people through fear and anger.</p> 	<p>2. Targeting Political Opponents</p> <p>Labeling rival parties, activists, critics, or reformers as traitors, criminals, or enemies of the nation to justify silencing them. Pass laws to make other political parties illegal.</p> 
<p>3. Controlling the Media</p> <p>Censorship of newspapers, radio, books, or speeches; spreading propaganda; shutting down independent reporting.</p> 	<p>4. Encouraging Paramilitary Groups</p> <p>Using militias, party thugs, youth groups, or the military to intimidate voters, silence critics, or enforce loyalty.</p> 
<p>6. Attacking the Courts</p> <p>Removing independent judges, ignoring court rulings, or replacing legal institutions with loyalists.</p> 	<p>5. Attacking the Courts</p> <p>Removing independent judges, ignoring court rulings, or replacing legal institutions with loyalists.</p> 
<p>7. Attacking the Legislature</p> <p>Using militias, party thugs, party thugs, or spies to shut down independent reporting.</p> 	<p>8. Weakening the Legislature</p> <p>Using militias, party thugs, banning rival parties, or removing voters, or enforce loyalty.</p> 
<p>9. Assaulting the Courts</p> <p>Removing independent judges, ignoring court rulings, or replacing legal institutions with loyalists.</p> 	<p>7. Rigging or Undermining Elections</p> <p>Manipulating with courts, banning rival parties, bribing with cash, or using elections, propaganda.</p> 
<p>10. Restricting Civil Liberties</p> <p>Limiting freedom of speech, press, and</p>	<p>10. Controlling Education and Youth Indoctrination</p> <p>Restricting freedom of speech, press, and</p>

Sources:

This checklist is adapted from widely used academic frameworks on authoritarianism, most notably:

- **Levitsky, Steven & Ziblatt, Daniel. *How Democracies Die*. Crown, 2018.**
(Provides the foundational "warning signs" of authoritarian behavior used in most civics versions of this list.)
- **Freedom House. *Freedom in the World Reports*.**
(Offers criteria on civil liberties and political rights that inform the commonly taught "tactics of authoritarianism.")

ITALY (1920s–1930s)

Italy entered the 1920s angry and unstable. Even though it fought on the winning side of World War I, many Italians felt cheated by the peace negotiations and believed the government had failed to secure the territory they were promised. At home, the economy was struggling, prices were rising, and factories were shutting down. In 1919–1920, a period remembered as the Biennio Rosso (“Two Red Years”), workers occupied factories in northern cities, peasants took over farmland in the countryside, and protests erupted across the country. Many Italians feared a full-scale socialist revolution.

Amid this disorder, Benito Mussolini — once a socialist, now a fierce nationalist — founded the Fasci di Combattimento in 1919. His movement didn’t grow through peaceful campaigning. Instead, Mussolini’s followers, known as the Blackshirts (Squadristi), used violence to attack Socialist Party offices, break up meetings, burn down union buildings, and intimidate political opponents. Local police forces often ignored the violence or secretly supported it.

Mussolini’s newspaper, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, praised the Blackshirts as patriots restoring order. Socialist newspapers such as *Avanti!* were frequently raided or shut down in many towns. By 1921, Mussolini turned his movement into a formal political party — the National Fascist Party (PNF) — and won a seat in Parliament.

Italy’s democratic system, already weak, struggled to handle the ongoing upheaval. Governments rose and fell quickly, while the Fascist movement gained more supporters who believed it could bring stability. In October 1922, Mussolini organized the March on Rome, a show of force in which thousands of



Blackshirts traveled toward the capital. The march itself was chaotic, but it convinced King Victor Emmanuel III to avoid a potential civil war by inviting Mussolini to form a government.

Once he became prime minister, Mussolini moved quickly to secure his power. In 1923, Parliament passed the Acerbo Law, which guaranteed that any party receiving at least 25% of the vote would automatically get two-thirds of the seats. The law was advertised as a way to strengthen the government, but in reality, it was designed to benefit the Fascists.

During the 1924 election, Fascist violence and intimidation were widespread, and the PNF won a landslide. Soon after, Socialist deputy Giacomo Matteotti gave a bold speech accusing Mussolini’s party of corruption and voter intimidation. Ten days later, Matteotti was kidnapped and murdered by Fascist loyalists. His death shocked the country. Opposition parties responded by walking out of Parliament in protest, hoping the king would remove Mussolini. He didn’t.

Instead, Mussolini tightened his grip. On January 3, 1925, he delivered a speech claiming full responsibility for the country’s direction and signaling the beginning of one-party rule. Over the next two years, a series of laws known as

5 country profiles: Spain, Italy, Germany, Japan, Soviet Union
(reading included here is a sample. Each profile is 2 pages)

Name _____

Date _____

Directions:

Read your assigned country and compare its events and laws to the 10 signs in the **Authoritarian Playbook**. For each sign, list specific evidence, laws, or behaviors.

Authoritarian Sign	Your Country Evidence & Examples
1. Scapegoating Enemies	
2. Demonizing or Targeting Political Opponents	
3. Controlling the Media	
4. Encouraging Paramilitary Groups	
5. Attacking the Courts	

Example show here is of the 1 country model.
A second model includes two countries for comparison.

(Each model comes with All 10 authoritarian
warning signs & discussion questions)

Big Picture Questions:

1. Which actions or laws do you think did the most to weaken democratic institutions, and why?
2. What early warning signs appeared before full authoritarian control took hold?
3. How did authoritarian leaders use crises (economic, political, or social) to justify gaining more power?