
Why the World Is Attracted to Neo-Authoritarian Leaders



By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD

Leaders like Donald Trump do not rise in a vacuum. But what draws people to authoritarian rulers?

Centuries ago, Jewish mythology warned of a primordial sea serpent – the Leviathan – so monstrous an embodiment of evil that it challenged the very presence of God. According to the scriptures, a force no less powerful than God would be required to destroy this horrible creature and restore the natural balance of the world.

With the passage of time, the symbolic meaning of the Leviathan morphed in oddly conflicting ways. It came to stand for God’s own power of creation, a dark force, an avatar for chaos and anarchy, a beast of Satan, willful ignorance, the unabashed abuse of power, and even flat-out authoritarianism.

In the 17th century, philosopher Thomas Hobbes put forward the idea that the world *needs* a Leviathan to preserve the peace. For Hobbes, the Leviathan served as a metaphor for the ideal state, a commonwealth in which the masses – chaotic, selfish, and sinful by nature – could be united

under a single sovereign power, wielding nearly unlimited authority.

Fast forward to today, and it is clear that **Leviathan-like leaders** remain and are on the rise. While the United States has been released from the grip of Donald Trump (for now) many countries are still ruled by Leviathans. The non-exhaustive list includes Russia's Vladimir Putin, China's Xi Jinping, Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Belarus' Aleksandr Lukashenko, Hungary's Viktor Orban, India's Narendra Modi, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, Myanmar's Min Aung Hlaing and Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro.

Of course, these leaders do not rise in a vacuum. It is the people who enable them, support their growth, and even cheer them on. But why are humans attracted to these rulers who carry the Leviathan's dark force?

The pathological lure of the neo-authoritarian

When people are fearful about the future – socially, economically, and environmentally – they regress into a dependency position looking for someone to guide them. Thus, not surprisingly, they are drawn to "miracle workers" who offer quick fixes. These leaders' approaches to governance are dangerously Leviathan in nature.

Unlike dictators such as Hitler, Stalin or Mao, contemporary Leviathans use methods that aren't explicitly draconian. Rather than resort to overt, excessive violence, they rely on deception and seduction to ensure the obedience of their subjects. In this respect, they can be described as neo-authoritarians.

While some neo-authoritarians tout themselves as defenders of democracy, in reality they exploit the system to police every area of their subjects' lives and maintain their powerbase. In doing so they create a phantom democracy. What makes their behaviour so sinister is their ability to frame their agenda as a product of "freedom of choice". For example, elections appear to be a legitimate expression of the people's will, yet results are manipulated or even pre-determined by convoluted political frameworks.

Another salient feature of their modus operandi is their twisted use of the law. Neo-authoritarians selectively apply the law when they need to fight opponents, and bend or breach it when they need protection from any threat

to their power. One of their most deceptive and dangerous talents is this capacity to centralise power with pseudo-democratic processes.

The psychological ploys of the neo-authoritarian

There is no doubt that neo-authoritarian leaders are charismatic, yet beneath their veneer lurks a calculating personality with a mix of narcissistic and psychopathic traits. Void of empathy and morals, consumed by a thirst for personal power, Machiavellian in nature and inclined towards vindictiveness, these leaders have the capacity to inflict profound human suffering without feeling a thing.

In their efforts to rise to power, such leaders deploy certain psychological tactics:

1. They present themselves as defenders of the common people, who are often depicted as victims.
2. They skilfully use the media to manipulate their followers and make a point of staging large-scale public events where they position themselves as the unifying celebrity.
3. They are masters at inventing ideologies, religious or otherwise, to cement their powerbase and justify their policies.
4. They create an illusion of choice during elections as a way of maintaining their powerbase. They don't tolerate dissent and have no qualms about disqualifying or even imprisoning opponents.
5. To assure their hold on power they become dependent on cronies, family members, the military and the police.
6. They are very talented in seducing the members of the emerging middle class by using financial incentives and status-based symbols.
7. When faced with a restless population, neo-authoritarians point out external threats to justify their existence. Of course, waging war will be the ultimate distraction.

The question before us

Human beings will always struggle with the need to be led and the desire to be free. And while most people claim opposition to any kind of demagogue-type leader, they can easily fall victim to the pathological desire to be led and controlled.

In the United States, there are early rumblings about the 2024 presidential election and the possible return of a Trump candidacy. If such a scenario were to materialise, the US electorate would once again face the lure of the Leviathan – an embodiment of evil capable of destroying the very balance of a world where people have the freedom to speak their mind. If such a candidate were to emerge in the US or elsewhere, would we proceed informed of the dangers, or would we be deluded by the pathological lure of the Leviathan? That is the question before us.

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