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Authoritarianism's New Wave

Today's undemocratic governments are smarter and more sophisticated than ever before.

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Call

it Authoritarianism 2.0. Today's authoritarian regimes are undermining democracy in updated, sophisticated, and lavishly funded ways. This new class of autocrats poses the most serious challenge to the emergence of an international system based on the rule of law, human rights, and open expression.

With the benefit of hindsight, it's clear that the 1990s were heady days. The Soviet Union had collapsed and democracy appeared to be on the march. Then, earlier this decade, popular color revolutions stunned rulers in a number of countries and continue to inspire democrats from Central Asia to the Middle East. But, partially in response to these developments, authoritarians have regrouped and are adapting and modernizing their repressive practices.

Our organizations convened experts to analyze the ways in which five influential countries --China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and Venezuela -- impede democratic development both within and beyond their borders. Our research resulted in the new report, *Undermining Democracy: 21st Century Authoritarians*, which explores the common traits of these regimes and how they are largely responsible for the recent overall decline in political freedom throughout the world.

These countries resemble traditional authoritarian regimes in their subversion of democracy using a combination of tools, including manipulation of the legal system, media control, and outright fear. The ruling group in each country protects its power by rewarding loyalists and punishing opponents without regard to due process. Nothing new for dictators.

What makes these cases unique and a genuinely new phenomenon, though, is the innovation

and sophistication they are using to subvert online discourse. When not controlling Internet access, these regimes have deployed armies of commentators and provocateurs to distract and disrupt legitimate Internet discussions.

These regimes have also adapted to modern global capitalism by using the market to solidify their control. China, for instance, has commercialized censorship for old and new media alike. For traditional media, the authorities encourage journalists and editors to produce reports that have popular -- and commercial -- appeal, but are politically anodyne. China has been at the forefront of the growing trend of outsourcing censorship and monitoring to private companies. These activities cast doubt on the widely held assumption that the Internet is a force for democracy.

The new authoritarians also shape international values and views through sophisticated and well-funded global media enterprises. The Kremlin has launched Russia Today, a multimillion-dollar television venture that broadcasts to North America, Europe, and Asia. In 2007, Iran created Press TV, an English-language satellite station with an international staff several hundred strong. And China is poised to spend enormous sums on expanding overseas media operations in a bid to improve the country's image. Beijing has reportedly set aside at least \$6 billion for these media expansion efforts.

Meanwhile, these governments have not limited their checkbooks to media investments. By doling out billions of dollars in no-strings-attached foreign aid, they are hobbling international efforts to improve governance and reduce corruption through conditional aid. Chinese leaders put forward a doctrine of win-win foreign relationships, encouraging Latin American, African, Asian, and Arab states to form mutually beneficial arrangements with Beijing based on the principle of noninterference. The Chinese aid program appears to attract willing recipients; the World Bank estimates that China is now the largest lender to Africa. Russia, Iran, and Venezuela have similarly used their oil wealth to build foreign alliances and bankroll clients abroad, particularly in their home regions.

As part of the broader effort to export authoritarian influence, these regimes are also working hard to disrupt

key international rules-based bodies that support democracy and human

rights, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Organization of American States, and the Council of Europe. At the United Nations, they have formed ad hoc coalitions to blunt criticism, obstruct proposed sanctions, and advance antidemocratic measures.

But also new is what these regimes are not doing.

Today's authoritarians recognize that absolute control over information and economic activity is neither possible nor necessary. Instead, they have adapted their traditional coercive mechanisms with more subtle methods. Political discourse is managed, rather than blatantly dictated, through the selective suppression or reshaping of news and information. And while the most important business entities are either co-opted or swallowed up by the state, the days of the command economy are over. Citizens are allowed to enjoy personal freedoms -- including foreign travel and access to consumer goods -- that would have been unthinkable in the era of Mao and Brezhnev.

During the Cold War, the nature and goals of the dominant authoritarian states were clearer. In contrast, modern autocrats, integrated into the global economy and participating in many of the world's established financial and political institutions, present a murkier challenge.

So far, policymakers in democracies have struggled to identify an effective approach to these threats. This is all the more worrying because the lack of a clear response is happening alongside a deeper debate in the United States over the inclusion of the fourth D -- democracy, as an integral part of U.S. foreign policy, along with defense, diplomacy, and development. And nothing would please the new authoritarians more than to see D No. 4 drop from the lexicon.