



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

# Young and illiberal? Look forward to being old and oppressed



Listen up, kids. Yes, I'm talking to you, majority of English Gen-Z men who apparently favour Britain being run by a dictator, and especially those who fancy a man in uniform on top. Or for that matter, all who are losing confidence or interest in democracy and are turning to illiberalism around the globe. I've had the good fortune to have worked in some of the less savoury places on earth and can guarantee you this: being ruled by a dictator is the pits.

It sucks in so many ways that by the time the self-interested bastard's portrait has appeared on every office wall and on your (blockchain) currency, you won't even remember what first made you feel a bit meh about the imperfect functioning of democracy.

I recognise the desire for a strongman to lead a traumatised, threatened and disillusioned group. In the Middle East, which used to be my patch as a reporter, there's no shortage of those. But it never ends well.

I can list the ills of the countries that I covered, but some will say that the oppression, killing, torture, ethnic tensions, gender violence, poverty, under-development, illiteracy rates, terrible health outcomes, etc., etc., are a result of regional factors, not dictatorship.

This would ignore that many of those same outcomes, certainly killing, oppression, torture, often gender violence and bad health results, can be found in other, supposedly better-functioning dictatorships, such as Russia and China.

## Elections alone are not enough

Democracy is meant to prevent the worst excesses, that's why elections alone are not enough, as we can see in places such as Russia and Belarus. It is supposed to protect those without power from those with it, minorities from being crushed by the majority, and level the playing field at least to a certain degree. It's not supposed to stifle discussion, but just set some red lines that prevent us from bashing in each other's heads.

It would be foolish to pretend democracy is perfect, or even always very attractive to the people living in it. The system often will not cure deep-seated problems in a society, but it can be the starting point of trying to figure out solutions that have a certain measure of legitimacy.

Rapidly increasing globalisation after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, the shock of the 2008 financial crisis, and the anti-vax wars of the pandemic era are now being trotted out as the main inflection points, undermining people's faith in governments, establishments and democracy itself.

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Add to that social media and its 'outrage machine' effect and algorithms that prioritise fear and other strong emotions. Also, the online erosion of some minimal guardrails for discourse - that used to smooth discussions and the exchange of viewpoints - has found its way into real life.

These are not very new phenomena, despite the recent Gen-Z Channel 4 [survey](#) in the UK that set me off on this rant. We're now shocked periodically by reports of how certain groups, often young people, are trending towards the far-right, or beyond, into anti-democratic territory.

## Collapse of trust in democracies

Take, for example, the 2022 Edelman Trust [Barometer](#). Among its findings three years ago was a "collapse of trust in democracies". It noted that in many of the democracies surveyed, institutions were trusted by less than half of their people, such as "only 46 pts in Germany, 45 pts in Spain, 44 pts in the UK, and 43 pts in the U.S."

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, at least,

many of the turns towards illiberalism are inspired by far-right, populist, and/or ultra-nationalist ideologies. That has led to a lot of handwringing on the left about its inability to formulate an adequate alternative, or a response.

But the question should not be limited to the left. The open preference for dictatorship among some groups should worry everybody across the political spectrum who sets store by a democratic system of government.

Sadly, the new illiberalism is often either ignored, defended or even co-opted by many right-of-centre mainstream parties and politicians. The latest example being Germany's CDU candidate for chancellor, Friedrich Merz, uniting with the far-right AfD in an attempt to push through tougher migration policies.

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The 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer also noted that, "Without faith that our institutions will provide solutions or societal leadership, societal fears are becoming more acute. Most notably, 85% are worried about job loss and 75% worry about climate change."

Two years later, in 2024, the **figures** were slightly worse, and on the economic front, inflation had joined joblessness.

Given the high numbers, there must be some overlap between those worrying about jobs and those worried about the environment, which should offer hope for a common way forward. But it's the fringes that set the pace, and these seem to become ever more polarised.

Countering distrust and polarisation should be done in lockstep, but not in response to any one particular fear or concern. Trust itself is the problem, rather than the economy, the environment, or indeed, issues such as

migration.

## Democracies are actually doing very well

We, in the media, are often urged to take these problems seriously, and we get told that we don't understand the common man's troubles. But flooding the Trump heartlands with reporters wondering what they missed has not yielded answers either.

Problems are real, there will always be challenges, whatever perfect form of government future generations might invent. But we know from experience that there's no better way to deal with them than through one version or another of democracy. Because many democracies are actually doing very well.



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Western democracies are extraordinarily wealthy and technologically advanced. Despite rising concern over inequality, the overwhelming majorities are relatively safe, well-fed, and well taken care of. Yes, our problems are also real and often heartrending, but we're still better off than in most dictatorships.

The people lucky enough to live in these democracies should be confident enough to come up with solutions to their and the world's problems together. Instead, many are becoming unproductively disenchanted.

Granted, too many people fall between the cracks of the system. The concentration of wealth, and power, in the hands of a new class of billionaire oligarchs is obscene.

But the pro-dictatorship crowd is not mainly concerned with either of these issues. In fact, they often align with the oligarchs in a joint desire to sweep away the old order, in the hope, one supposes, of benefitting from the new one.

Populists and charlatans habitually oversimplify and present people with quick, easy solutions and misleading analogies, such as talking about 'balancing the nation's check-book' when talking about the economy. Households and national economies are very different things.

I'm afraid that sections of voters in democracies are falling into the same trap with regard to fixing systemic problems. They use the tech-bro jargon of moving fast and breaking things, disrupting the old, supposedly bad, ways.

But societies and governmental systems cannot be simply 'hacked'. In the end, what you'll get will not be new at all, let alone better. It will just be old-fashioned tyranny.