



By: Shlomo Ben-Ami

Populist-authoritarians and their patron



Tyrants have gone by many names – princeps, monarch, czar, Führer, caudillo, duce – but they all have a few things in common.

Historians of antiquity describe how the first Roman Emperor's ability to "organize opinion" enabled him to maintain the pretense of safeguarding democracy while subverting its institutions to create a "new state." Political scientists observe a similar **phenomenon**.

This is not just a matter of distorting reality or cultivating an image: it demands the active subversion and gradual destruction of the rule of law.

It is no coincidence that Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu faces serious corruption charges, and that US President Donald Trump is the first convicted felon to hold the office.

The same goes for Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro and Colombia's Álvaro Uribe, two former autocrats seeking a political comeback. At their core, tyrants are outlaws.

This may be key to understanding populist-authoritarians' appeal: though they are wealthy and privileged, they manage to present themselves as authentic representatives of the "people" and bulwarks against the excesses of the "elites."

Outlaws are fundamentally outsiders, so their legal battles can be portrayed as evidence that state institutions actively target those who challenge the establishment.

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This strategy depends on popular distrust of established institutions, which is in ample supply nowadays.

A 2024 **study** found that only 23% of Americans trust the federal government, and only 29% believe that democracy is working. Across OECD countries, just 39% of people, on average, **trust** public institutions.

Against this backdrop, all the autocrat needs is one electoral victory. Tyrants rule for themselves, their cronies, and occasionally their constituents – never their opponents.

Anyone who tries to hold them accountable – the media, the judiciary, government technocrats, academics – is biased, lying, or an agent of the deep state. From there, it is but a short step to dismantling democratic institutions.

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After all, he convinced a large share of Americans that Joe Biden "stole" the 2020 election and on January 6, 2021, **urged** his supporters to disrupt the transition of power, which led to an enraged mob storming the United States Capitol.

On the first day of his second presidency, Trump pardoned nearly 1,600 people convicted of crimes in the insurrection, which left five people **dead**, including a Capitol police officer.

Ahead of Brazil's 2022 election, Bolsonaro followed Trump's lead, warning that, if he lost, it would be due to electoral manipulation.

So, after Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva defeated him, a mob of his supporters attacked Brazil's federal government buildings.

Since then, Bolsonaro – who is facing trial over the alleged coup attempt – has **called** for amnesty for those convicted of crimes committed during the attack, while **lamenting** the "relentless persecution" he supposedly "suffers."

Uribe, for his part, insists that his recent conviction for witness tampering and the

ongoing probe into a 1997 massacre of subsistence farmers by paramilitaries, which took place while he was governor of western Antioquia, are acts of “political **vengeance**.”

Right-wing media echo the claim, which has proved convincing enough to spur mass **rallies** by Uribe’s supporters.

As for Netanyahu, he has waged a brutal war in Gaza partly to distract from his years-long trial on corruption and bribery charges.

Meanwhile, he has used his position to **pressure**, and even remove, relevant officials. More generally, he has sought to weaken judicial authority and independence.

Tyrants stand together, defending one another

Tyranny has seldom been an exclusively domestic phenomenon. While dictatorship can happen in isolation, tyrants have long understood that there is strength in numbers.

Beyond emulating successful tactics, they often stand together, **defending** one another publicly and even propping up fellow tyrants’ regimes.

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Trump is a case in point. In “defense” of Bolsonaro, he has raised Brazil’s tariff rate to 50%, even though the US runs a large bilateral trade surplus with the country, and imposed sanctions on Alexandre de Moraes, the Brazilian Supreme Court judge in charge of the investigation.

Likewise, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio has accused “radical judges” of “weaponizing” Colombia’s judicial branch against Uribe.

The US House Committee on Appropriations cited Uribe’s trial in **proposing** a 50%

reduction in non-military aid for Colombia in 2026.

Patron of populist-authoritarians

But Trump defends no tyrant more vociferously than Netanyahu.

What “out-of-control prosecutors” are doing to the Israeli leader is “INSANITY,” Trump recently **wrote** on social media.

In a different post, he called for the trial to be canceled immediately, or for Netanyahu to be pardoned, and has even implicitly threatened to suspend military aid to Israel if the “witch hunt” continues.



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It was the US that “saved Israel,” he concluded, and it will be the US that “saves Bibi Netanyahu.”

By casting himself as a sort of patron of populist-authoritarians, whom he sees as comrades in the fight against the liberal state, Trump elevates himself and normalizes his behavior at home.

In this context, his administration’s support for El Salvador’s recent decision to abolish presidential term limits – paving the way for another autocratic president, Nayib Bukele, to

remain in power indefinitely – should worry us all.

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None of these leaders is genuinely religious, but all cultivate alliances with powerful religious constituencies.

Netanyahu and Trump take this further, claiming – with no apparent sense of irony – that they have been **chosen** by God to save their respective countries.

If patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel, the mantle of a divine calling elevates the scoundrel above ordinary mortals and their rules. As Trump ominously **put it**, “He who saves his Country does not violate any Law.”

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