

Tools of Dictators

Dictators rarely come to power by accident; they use a set of tried-and-true methods to manipulate people and consolidate control. Some of the most common strategies include:

1. Creating fear and finding scapegoats.

Dictators often exploit fear—whether of outsiders, economic collapse, or social instability—and then point to a scapegoat (ethnic groups, political opponents, religious minorities) as the source of all problems. This unites people around anger rather than reason.

2. Controlling information and rewriting truth.

They censor the press, flood society with propaganda, and repeat slogans until they become accepted as reality. Education systems, radio, newspapers, and now social media can be bent to their narrative.

3. Cult of personality.

A dictator builds an image of themselves as the nation's savior—larger than life, indispensable, and heroic. Portraits, statues, staged events, and constant glorification make questioning them feel like a betrayal of the nation itself.

4. Undermining institutions.

Independent courts, legislatures, unions, and the press are weakened, resulting in fewer checks on power. Slowly, people lose the ability to resist legally or politically.

5. Militarization and violence.

They rely on paramilitary groups or secret police to intimidate, arrest, and silence opposition. Fear of punishment keeps many people passive.

6. Offering simple solutions.

In complex times, dictators promise easy, sweeping fixes—"I alone can solve this" or "If we just remove this one group, everything will be better." These messages appeal to frustration and despair.

7. Exploiting nationalism and myths.

They stir pride in a glorious past or promise a rebirth of national greatness, convincing people that sacrifice—even cruelty—is justified in service to the homeland.

8. Rewarding loyalty and punishing dissent.

Jobs, promotions, and privileges are awarded to those who demonstrate loyalty. Those who resist are excluded, punished, or worse. Over time, these conditions cause people to conform.

What's striking is that these methods are as psychological as they are political. They work because they tap into basic human needs: the desire for safety, belonging, pride, and certainty.