

Why the world should be worried about the rise of strongman politics

Written by Tony Walker, Adjunct Professor, School of Communications, La Trobe University

Back in 2016, The Financial Times' Gideon Rachman advanced the view in a commentary for [The Economist](#) that the “strongman” style of leadership was gravitating from east to west, and growing stronger. “Across the world – from Russia to China and from India to Egypt – macho leadership is back in fashion,” Rachman wrote.

In light of subsequent developments around the world, he understated the “macho” phenomenon, driven by rising populism and growing mistrust of democratic systems.

That commentary was published before Donald Trump prevailed in the US presidential election and [turned upside-down](#) assumptions about how an American president might behave.

Whether we like it or not, the most powerful country in the world – until now, an exemplar of Western liberal democracies and global stabiliser in times of stress - is ruled by an autocrat who pays little attention to democratic norms.

Spread of authoritarianism

In his [lecture](#) delivered just a day after Trump [appeared to take](#) Russian President Vladimir Putin's side over America's intelligence agencies on the issue of Russian meddling in the 2016 US elections, Barack Obama drew attention to the new authoritarianism.

Without referring directly to Trump, Obama issued his most pointed criticism yet of the nativist and populist policies adopted by his successor on issues like immigration, protectionism and climate change.

The politics of fear and resentment ... is now on the move. It's on the move at a pace that would have seemed unimaginable just a few years ago. I am not being alarmist, I'm simply stating the facts. Look around – strongman politics are on the ascendant.

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Trump, therefore, is not an aberration. He is part of a strengthening authoritarian trend more or less across the globe.

Read more: [*A growing mistrust in democracy is causing extremism and strongman politics to flourish*](#)

In the Middle East, the Arab Spring has given way to the entrenchment of dictatorships in places like Syria, where Bashar al-Assad [has reasserted](#) his grip on power with Russian and Iranian help; and in Egypt, where strongman Abdel Fattah al-Sisi continues to [curtail press freedom](#) and [incarcerate political rivals](#).

In Europe, the [rise of an authoritarian right](#) in places like Hungary, Austria and now Italy are also part of this trend. In Italy, the bombastic [Silvio Berlusconi](#) proved to be a forerunner of what is happening now.

In China, Xi Jinping's ['new era'](#) is another example of a strongman overriding democratic constraints, with term limits on his leadership having recently been removed.

In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte is using his war on drugs for [broader authoritarian purposes](#) in the manner of a mob boss.

In Thailand, the army [shows little inclination](#) to yield power it seized in a military coup in 2014, even if there was public clamour for a return to civilian rule (which there is not).

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In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan is continuing to strengthen his hold on the country, [expanding the powers of the presidency](#) and locking up political rivals and journalistic critics. As a result, Turkey's secular and political foundations are being undermined.

In Brazil, 40% of those [polled by Vanderbilt University](#) a few years back said they would support a military coup to bring order to their country, riven by crime and corruption.

And in Saudi Arabia, a young crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, [has detained](#) the country's leading businessmen and extorted billions from them in return for their freedom. This took place without censure from the West.

The death of truth

Meanwhile, genuine liberal democrats are in retreat as a populist tide laps at their doors.

In Britain, Theresa May [is hanging onto power](#) by a thread against a revanchist threat from the right.

In France, Emmanuel Macron [is battling](#) to transform his welfare-burdened country against fierce resistance from left and right.

Read more: [***Post-truth politics and why the antidote isn't simply 'fact-checking' and truth***](#)

In Germany, Angela Merkel, the most admirable of Western liberal democratic leaders, [is just holding on](#) against anti-immigration forces on the right.

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In Australia, Malcolm Turnbull and Bill Shorten, the leaders of the established centre-right and centre-left parties, are similarly under pressure from [nativist forces on the far right](#) .

What Australia and these other countries lack is a Trump, but anything is possible in an emerging strongman era, including the improbable – such as the emergence of a reality TV star as leader of the free world.

In a recent [Lowy Institute opinion survey](#) only 52% of younger Australians aged 18-29 years believed that democracy was preferable to other alternative forms of government.

In all of this, among the casualties is the truth, and particularly the truth. All politicians bend the truth to a certain extent, but there is no recent example in a Western democracy of a political leader who lies as persistently as Trump.

Like the character Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Trump lives in his own make-believe reality TV world where facts, it seems, are immaterial.

Read more: [Trump, Putin and the new international order](#)

Inconvenient information can be dismissed as ["fake news"](#) , and those who persist in reporting such inconvenient truths portrayed as ["enemies of the people"](#) ;

This is the sort of rhetoric that resides in totalitarian states, where the media is expected to function as an arm of a dictatorship, or failing that, journalists are simply disappeared.

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In Putin's Russia, journalist critics of the regime [do so at their peril](#) .

In his lecture in South Africa, Obama dwelled at length on the corruption of political discourse in the modern era, including a basic disrespect for the facts.

People just make stuff up. They just make stuff up. We see it in the growth of state-sponsored propaganda. We see it in internet fabrications. We see it in the blurring of lines between news and entertainment. We see the utter loss of shame among political leaders where they're caught in a lie and they just double down and they lie some more. It used to be that if you caught them lying they'd be like, 'Oh man.' Now they just keep on lying.

In the digital era, it had been assumed technology would make it easier to hold political leaders to account, but in some respects the reverse is proving to be the case, as Ian Bremmer, author of [Us vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism](#) , wrote in a [recent contribution](#) to Time.

A decade ago, it appeared that a revolution in information and communications technologies would empower the individual at the expense of the state. Western leaders believed social networks would create 'people power,' enabling political upheavals like the Arab Spring. But the world's autocrats drew a different lesson. They saw an opportunity for government to try to become the dominant player in how information is shared and how the state can use data to tighten political control.

In his conclusion, Bremmer has this sobering observation:

Perhaps the most worrying element of the strongman's rise is the message it sends. The systems that powered the Cold War's winners now look much less appealing than they did a generation ago. Why emulate the US or European political systems, with all the checks and balances that prevent even the most determined leaders from taking on chronic problems, when one determined leader can offer a credible shortcut to greater security and national pride? As long as that rings true, the greatest threat may be the strongmen yet to come.

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