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**Dictators are using the coronavirus to strengthen their grip on power**

Authoritarians hate to squander an emergency. In the pandemic, they’ve found the perfect one.

By

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Azerbaijan’s dictator, Ilham Aliyev, is a wily survivor. He woos European democracies with [gas exports](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/opinion/the-two-faces-of-azerbaijans-mr-aliyev.html), hosts [the Eurovision song contest](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/opinion/the-two-faces-of-azerbaijans-mr-aliyev.html) and wins [$100 million](https://eurasianet.org/amid-iran-crisis-us-offers-big-military-aid-boost-to-azerbaijan) offers of military aid from the United States. Those laurels are all the more remarkable considering he regularly [tosses](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/opinion/the-two-faces-of-azerbaijans-mr-aliyev.html) politicians and reporters in prison. Now, he sees a new opportunity to consolidate his rule. In recent weeks, Aliyev has used the threat of the novel coronavirus to [crack down](https://atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/azerbaijans-strongman-senses-opportunity-in-coronavirus-pandemic/) on opposition groups and independent media: Last month, for instance, he closed a dissident group’s office, saying people could not “gather en masse.” There were four people present.

Aliyev is hardly alone. As the coronavirus sweeps across the world, most countries are taking dramatic steps to slow the rate of infection and keep hospitals and medical workers from being inundated. Many, including liberal democracies, have enacted lockdowns. Some of the countries with the most success in combating the coronavirus, such as [South Korea and Singapore](https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/can-us-emulate-asias-coronavirus-response), are closely tracking the personal interactions of infected people, using a range of data about citizens. In many such places, citizens accept that they must temporarily surrender certain freedoms to their democratic governments, confident that their leaders will act in good faith to grapple with this extreme threat.

But authoritarians often [take advantage](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/12/opinion/sunday/trump-national-emergency-wall.html) of emergencies — wars, terrorist attacks, high-profile arsons, natural disasters — to consolidate power. These catastrophes spark fear, bolster the public desire for a strong governing hand and [lead people](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/12/opinion/sunday/trump-national-emergency-wall.html) to rally around their leaders. Russia experts say Vladimir Putin used the war in Chechnya [to grab](https://www.hudson.org/research/12750-vladimir-putin-1999-russian-apartment-house-bombings-was-putin-responsible) greater power, while the Indonesian despot Suharto capitalized on massive killings and civil unrest in 1965-66, encouraged by the armed forces, to take control of the country and oust his predecessor. In the most infamous example, Adolf Hitler seized supreme dictatorial power after the 1933 Reichstag fire, an arson that [probably involved the Nazis](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/true-story-reichstag-fire-and-nazis-rise-power-180962240/).

A contagion on the scale of the [coronavirus](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/02/28/what-you-need-know-about-coronavirus/?tid=lk_inline_manual_7&itid=lk_inline_manual_7), however, may offer authoritarians a greater opportunity than any event short of war. It has no borders, and the sense of panic it creates is broader than that after a terrorist attack, which is designed to scare but usually targets one locale — and which has nowhere near the same economic impact. In a war or a natural disaster, average people can have some agency: They can volunteer to fight in a war or assist on the home front, or provide aid to an area slammed by a hurricane. But the virus leaves citizens powerless; to help others, all they can do is stay home, leaving them dependent on experts and officials to guide them — and unable to congregate publicly to protest a power grab. And while a war, a terrorist attack or a natural disaster may cause some areas to shutter, it does not usually close down an entire country, a shift that gives a leader the widest latitude. Finally, as autocrats like Cambodia’s Hun Sen have shown, a contagion provides an authoritarian a chance to stigmatize certain marginalized populations, scapegoating them for the disease.

Indeed, from the Philippines to Hungary, autocratic leaders in many nations are using the coronavirus to enhance their powers — to put in place new rules that will be hard to overturn even if the coronavirus is defeated. Many of the new powers have [no clear end date](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/world/europe/coronavirus-governments-power.html). The pandemic will have entrenched these strongmen indefinitely.

Rodrigo Duterte, the brash, illiberal president of the Philippines, has waged a brutal drug war propelled by perhaps [tens of thousands](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-drugs/un-launches-investigation-into-philippines-drug-war-deaths-idUSKCN1U61FV) of extrajudicial killings. He also has battled the media and opposition politicians. Last month, he got the legislature, controlled by his loyalists, to grant him broad emergency powers to confront the coronavirus. Some are reasonable, like the ability to order public transport to serve health-care workers. But rights activists believe that Duterte will use his emergency powers to punish opponents and [get more control](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-philippines/philippine-president-seeks-powers-over-firms-supplies-funds-to-avert-crisis-idUSKBN21A0GG) of state funds. The legislature also made it a crime to spread “false information,” the definition of which is disturbingly vague, as Human Rights Watch [notes](https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/26/philippines-curfew-violators-abused). And given Duterte’s record of silencing the press, he could use the broad provisions to punish reporters who criticize him or his government’s coronavirus response.

In nearby Thailand, the military-dominated but technically civilian government also has invoked emergency powers, supposedly to fight the virus. These allow the government — which put journalists in de facto reeducation camps after a 2014 coup — to “[censor or shut down media if deemed necessary](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-thailand-emergency/thai-leader-to-invoke-emergency-powers-as-virus-infections-climb-idUSKBN21B0RV),” according to the decree. Late last year, opponents of the government regularly gathered in Bangkok to protest its oppressive style; with the country now on lockdown, they basically can’t demonstrate, making it easier for officials to cast these changes as uncontroversial.

Fellow traveler Viktor Orban, who in the past decade has shifted Hungary from a democracy to an authoritarian regime with a democratic facade, is taking advantage of the coronavirus as well. This past week, Orban’s rubber-stamp parliament approved a law that gives the Hungarian leader [emergency powers](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-30/orban-takes-sole-command-of-hungary-with-pandemic-emergency-law) — indefinitely. He can rule by decree for as long as he wants, making him a dictator inside the European Union. Orban no longer maintains even the illusion of democracy: He can [unilaterally change](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/from-orban-to-kaczynski-wannabe-autocrats-love-the-pandemic/2020/03/30/4dd7a89a-72a7-11ea-ad9b-254ec99993bc_story.html?tid=lk_inline_manual_14&itid=lk_inline_manual_14) any existing Hungarian law and has effectively dissolved the legislature. Now people can be put in jail for [spreading false information](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/hungary-jail-for-coronavirus-misinformation-viktor-orban), which, as in the Philippines, is not well-defined.It’s [unclear what](https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-03-31/as-coronavirus-tide-rises-authoritarians-around-the-world-seize-the-moment), if anything, these changes have to do with battling the coronavirus.

In Poland, leaders of the ruling Law and Justice party — which also has hollowed out democracy — have refused to cancel the early May presidential election. The party put the country on lockdown, meaning the opposition candidate cannot campaign. But Law and Justice’s candidate, Andrzej Duda, [is campaigning widely](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/from-orban-to-kaczynski-wannabe-autocrats-love-the-pandemic/2020/03/30/4dd7a89a-72a7-11ea-ad9b-254ec99993bc_story.html?tid=lk_inline_manual_15&itid=lk_inline_manual_15) on state-dominated television. (Surveys [show](https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/29/polands-coronavirus-crisis-election-unleashes-political-warfare-154852) that if the election were delayed and more people could vote, Duda would face a real fight, but in a May election with low turnout, he would dominate.) The party also stuffed new electoral laws into emergency legislation to deal with the coronavirus, passed during a [chaos-filled parliamentary session](https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/29/polands-coronavirus-crisis-election-unleashes-political-warfare-154852). These [shift the election procedures](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/from-orban-to-kaczynski-wannabe-autocrats-love-the-pandemic/2020/03/30/4dd7a89a-72a7-11ea-ad9b-254ec99993bc_story.html?tid=lk_inline_manual_15&itid=lk_inline_manual_15) in ways that further favor Law and Justice by [making it easier](https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/29/polands-coronavirus-crisis-election-unleashes-political-warfare-154852) for the party’s older core of supporters to cast ballots, but not for opposition supporters to vote.

Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu has tried to utilize the virus for political reasons as well. Facing criminal charges that had already been filed against him, he cited the pandemic as a reason to close the courts, paralyze the Knesset and operate, for a time, [without parliamentary oversight](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/22/world/middleeast/israel-netanyahu-supreme-court.html). His moves helped end a political stalemate in which his opposition fragmented; then a portion of it [joined his governing coalition](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/27/in-israel-benny-gantz-decides-to-join-with-rival-netanyahu/)— leaving Netanyahu in power just as he looked to be at the end of his rope. Netanyahu’s moves angered many Israelis, but, as in Thailand, the coronavirus ban on sizable public gatherings meant they could not go into the streets to protest. Some held an online, [live-streamed](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/06/pandemics-and-the-shape-of-human-history) protest, but a virtual rally does not pack the same visceral effect as a massive street demonstration.

In Russia, meanwhile, Putin’s government has used the virus to [bolster](https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/29/europe/russia-coronavirus-authoritarian-tech-intl/index.html) its surveillance systems in Moscow, installing more [facial-recognition tools](https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/31/beware-implications-of-coronavirus-surveillance-pub-81411) to maintain quarantines — tools that could also be deployed to anticipate public rallies. And Putin got his compliant legislature to [end term limits](https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronavirus-and-autocrats-never-let-pandemic-go-to-waste-11585400400), possibly allowing him to serve into the 2030s, as most of Russia was distracted by the spreading virus.

In Turkey, strongman Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s government has [detained people](https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-created-new-dictator-emboldens-authoritarians-worldwide-2020-4) who dared criticize its response to the crisis. And the authoritarian government of Turkmenistan, which claims, implausibly, that the country [has no coronavirus cases](https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/03/31/824611607/turkmenistan-has-banned-use-of-the-word-coronavirus), [banned](https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/03/31/824611607/turkmenistan-has-banned-use-of-the-word-coronavirus) the use of the word “coronavirus” this past week.

In other parts of Asia, too, strongmen see an opportunity in the virus. Cambodian autocrat Hun Sen has cited the outbreak [to arrest](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-cambodia-arrests/cambodia-uses-coronavirus-crisis-to-arrest-17-critics-rights-group-says-idUSKBN21B0JJ) at least 17 critics of his regime since late January, according to [Human Rights Watch](https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/24/cambodia-covid-19-clampdown-free-speech) — mostly people who shared information about the spread of the coronavirus in the country and the government’s response. Several of those arrested were members of the leading (and banned) opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party. And Hun Sen has used the virus to smear minority groups like Khmer Muslims. The Health Ministry [is insinuating on its official Facebook page](https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/30/cambodia-fight-discrimination-amid-pandemic) that Muslims were somehow responsible for introducing the contagion to Cambodia.

This kind of attack [has a history](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/06/pandemics-and-the-shape-of-human-history). Over the centuries, rulers often have blamed outsiders for pandemics. During the Black Death of the early 14th century, for instance, officials in Strasbourg claimed that Jews caused the outbreak, as Elizabeth Kolbert [noted](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/06/pandemics-and-the-shape-of-human-history) in the New Yorker this past week. Jews were given a choice: Convert or die. Half converted, and the rest were put to death. People [blamed Jews](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/06/pandemics-and-the-shape-of-human-history) in other European cities for the Black Death, too, and slaughtered them.

Autocrats’ seizure of emergency powers is often difficult to undo. History suggests that in many cases, after a crisis is over, authoritarian leaders keep those powers and make them a normal part of governing. Putin has only become stronger since he used the Chechnya war to amass more authority, and now he is gunning to rule Russia into his 70s. After seizing control in Indonesia, Suharto ruled dictatorially for 30 more years. What happened in the years after the Reichstag fire is well known.

But perhaps the coronavirus will play out differently. Unlike wars, in which presidents and prime ministers do not actually fight, the bosses are not immune to a pandemic. Already, [world leaders](https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-government-officials-around-the-world-test-positive-2020-3) like British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Australian Home Minister Peter Dutton and Britain’s Prince Charles (none of whom are autocrats, to be sure) have contracted the coronavirus. Two senior Iranian ministers, leaders of an autocratic and opaque regime, have it. In [previous pandemics](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/06/pandemics-and-the-shape-of-human-history) — as when a plague hit the Eastern Roman Empire — infected autocrats saw their power wane. And if scientists devise a coronavirus vaccine or treatment, it would provide a clear, obvious endpoint to the panic and fear, a signal that a leader’s powers should be curtailed. In the meantime, the maneuvers by men like Hun Sen, Orban and Duterte will keep their countries backsliding further from democracy.