Transcription

Democracy in Question? – Season 1, Episode 5

‘Soft authoritarianism’, a new face of electoral democracy?

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SR: Welcome to "Democracy in Question," the podcast that explores some of the major dilemmas that democracies face around the world today. I'm Shalini Randeria, the Director of the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy, at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, and the Rector of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna.

[00:00:30] My guest today is John Keane. John is Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney, Australia, and at the Social Science Research Council in Berlin. Today, we'll mainly discuss his most recent book, "The New Despotism." It chronicles the rise of a new form of authoritarian rule in Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Iran. But it also analyzes the implications of this slide into despotism for the fate of democracies all over the world. John, thank you very much for joining us from Fortress Australia.

[00:01:00]
JK: It's a great pleasure to be with you, Shalini.

SR: I'm looking forward to this conversation because I think we're really at a challenging and an alarming crossroads for democracy at the moment. What you point to is a new kind of elected leader who has emerged in many democracies in the past few years. So, I'm thinking of Viktor Orbán, in Hungary, Donald Trump, in the U.S., Andrzej Duda, in Poland, who are taking a page out of the authoritarian playbook. So that the new despotism is not

restricted to China, or to Iran, or to Saudi Arabia. Orbán, Trump, Duda, they have all won elections. They rule with large majorities and can claim, therefore, democratic legitimacy. Yet, they are all gradually hollowing out the substance of democracy from the inside. They've muzzled the freedom of the press, they've stacked the judiciary, they are trying to repress all forms of opposition, and they have subverted the rule of law. When is the red line to the new despotism crossed in formal democracies, when do we know that a formal democracy has ceased to be a democracy? And is soft authoritarianism the new face of elected democracies?

[00:02:30] And I think this is where your book makes a really disconcerting argument because it's bringing hope to us, the fact that it's not just that we need to be worried about Russia, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia, but that all of these countries have a lot more in common with democracies than we would usually realize. And what I would like to start with is the label you give to these regimes, "new despotism."

JK: We are living through a major period of disruption that is obviously bound up with the collapse of the Soviet Union, with European stagnation, with disorder in the Arab world, a belligerent Russia, a self-confident China, and an American empire that looks to be in decline. And it's in this context that a new type of power, a new type of regime, which is despotic, is now playing a central role globally led by China. There is a free struggle about how to name

the Russias and the Kazakhstans and Saudi Arabia and China. Some speak of autocracy—I think it's a mistake. These are not regimes where there is a single ruler. These are not fascist or totalitarian regimes, they do not rule through generalized fear, they do not require mass mobilization. Actually, they prefer complacent subjects who don't go to the streets. And they are not regimes that rule through coherent big grand ideologies. There's something other. These despotisms are much more complicated in the way that power operates. And this yearning of those who rule for loyalty of their subjects, to use a whole variety of mechanisms, elections, public-opinion polling, agencies, and so on, all of that is part of the quest to build voluntary servitude. And I think that problem of how it is that top-down power can win the loyalty of people, that problematic I think goes missing in the literature on authoritarianism.

[00:04:30] I would also say that there is a normative problem which has been rendered invisible by those who use the word authoritarianism. If you look at its genealogy, in the early 1970s, you see that Sam Huntington and Juan Linz, when they use the term "authoritarianism," they contrast it with liberal democracy. American liberal democracy, in other words, is supposed to be the universal norm. I think that's questionable. When you use the concept of despotism, it is putting its finger on the problem of power exercised arbitrarily without public accountability and restraint. That's what a despotism is.

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SR: These regimes do rely on consensus on some kind of voluntary compliance. And I think that might be part of the story, but John, don't you think that fear plays a huge role? So, these are not violent regimes like totalitarian ones, and yet, the fear of imprisonment, repression, reprisals, of having the police, the tax office basically go after you, play as much of a role as does consensus in the seduction of these regimes.

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JK: Yes. These are not happy paradises. You find that there is calibrated coercion. They don't fill the bulk of the population with fear but, against their designated enemies, they certainly target. And that targeting of the Oleg Novoselskys or the Alexei Navalnys or the Jamal Khashoggis is a signal of who is in charge. But I don't think that these are regimes that primarily are defined by fear because fear alone, the rulers understand, cannot do that. There are many other ways of controlling populations and winning their loyalty.

An example is Kim Jong-Un. When journalists cover Kim Jong-Un, they comment on his haircut. Some of them chuckle at the fact that when he travels abroad, his feces and urine are bagged up because he's paranoid. But that's not the most striking thing about Kim Jong-Un. Kim Jong-Un actually has initiated a process, in North Korea, of transforming what was a totalitarian regime into a despotic regime. So, for example, shortly after the death of his

father, he went out of his way publicly to provide, in Pyongyang, in freezing weather, mourners with fresh fish and hot tea, with a statement saying that his duty was to serve the people. In his new year's address, January 2017, I should quote these lines because this is despotic talk, "I spent the past year feeling anxious and remorseful for the lack of my ability. I am hardening my resolve to seek more tasks for the sake of the people, this year, and make redoubled devoted efforts to this end."

[00:08:00] So, the puzzle is that here we have a 21st-century-type of regime where there is concentrated wealth and power at the top, they're top-down systems of rule, that engage in targeted coercion, and yet managed to win, despite the oligarchic qualities of the whole system, managed to win substantial loyalty of the population. Among the middle classes, among the poor, and among working classes as well.

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SR: So, that brings me to another puzzle. And that is the puzzle about elections. One would've thought the despots, the last thing they need are elections. And yet, what we see, in Hungary, where Orbán calls himself an illiberal democracy, or with Putin in Russia, that despots seem to love elections.

JK: Elections perform multiple functions. They allow, in the run-up to elections, a certain reshuffling of forces at the top. Elections also are mechanisms for finding fresh blood, you know, new accomplices of power. And finally, elections, when won, are manifestations of the magisterial splendor of the state, of the rulers, and confirmation that they are representatives of the people who are sovereign.

One of the features of these despotisms is that they are phantom democracies. There's lots of talk of democracy, of managed democracy, of people's democracy, for instance in Russia and China, and constant references to the sovereignty of the people, that the people are the source of authoritative power. Now, of course, it has a phantomic quality to it.

It's worth adding of course that there are moments when elections can go wrong. They did in 2009 in Iran, when I was accused, with Richard Rorty and Jürgen Habermas, of being the three masterminds, MI5, MI6, and CIA agents, who had engineered the disruption, the uprising that took place and was crushed by force. So, elections build in a measure of uncertainty, but the typical pattern is that elections are won by the despots through all kinds of amazing techniques of rigging the outcome. And, in this sense, elections perform all of these functions that are really important for ensuring the resilience and durability of despotism.

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SR: I like the idea of a phantom democracy. A phantom democracy that, not only mimics the practices of formal democracy, but also mocks at it. One element in winning elections is, of course, the use of the media. So, it's not just about the use of print media or radio or television, as in the old days, but also something has changed about the use of the digital media.

JK: These are regimes that are forms of harnessing of the unfinished digital-communications revolution that we're living through. The Chinese, the Iranians, the Singaporeans, the Russians show that governments can actually harness this revolution for despotic power. And they do so from above by means of multimedia spreading of messages. Gaslighting is one of their specialties. Producing a multiplicity of messages, very often with confabulations, with bullshit, with patterns of silence, but messages that are very difficult, actually, to understand. These are regimes that are dressed in a coat of many colors. But these are regimes that are not totalitarian, in the sense that there is the will to control all flows of information, even if that were technically possible. One of the remarkable things about this unfinished communications revolution is the possibility of, what I call, digital mutinies. And they happen chronically within all despotisms. A video is shot, it's circulated widely, and it is about corruption or some moment that causes a disturbance. And the rulers typically have to react to those digital mutinies. Corrupt officials are arrested. There is some redressing of an environmental

problem, and so on. So, there is a kind of cat-and-mouse, constant toing and froing. That turbulence is typical of life within these despotisms.

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SR: So, what I find really interesting here is the difference to totalitarian regimes. Right? This is not about censorship, this is not about restricting information to the population, but flooding the public sphere with conspiracy theories, fake news, all kinds of propaganda where it becomes almost impossible to know where something originates. What is striking about all the new despotisms, both democratically-elected ones and the others, is masculinity. Toxic masculinity somehow seems to go together, very intimately, with this new kind of power.

JK: Yes, some of them are regimes whose key players are homophobic. They are masculinist. Of course, they show their muscles, they ride Harley-Davidsons, they show off their bodies. There is a kind of re-embodiment of power in these despotisms that is rather analogous, for instance, to early modern monarchies where the body of the monarch is the visible sign of God on Earth and the body of the monarch is also the embodiment of the subjects of the realm.

Nyýazow, in Turkmenistan, I begin the book with a description of him, it's a phantasm of male power who's omniscient, who has the ability to rename the

months, to translate the Quran into Turkic language, who forces his cabinet to go on long walks. And when the meteorologists get the weather forecast wrong, sacks the lot of them.

So, there is this masculinity. And it's not surprising that the resistance to despotism, within despotisms, often has a feminist quality. That's true in China where there is considerable disgruntlement within and among the middle classes and more widely about the continuing discriminations against women in matters of abortion, in matters of divorce, in matters of domestic violence. These are sensitive matters that typically surface in the digital mutinies where there are protests against male power.

[00:15:30] One thing to add is that part of the male phantasm is eternal life. It greatly haunts despots. There is no known solution to death. They fear political death. They fear bodily death. And that helps explain why, for example in China, all of the key rulers never gray. Their hair is permanently blackened. They are supposed not to age.

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SR: There's another aspect to the new despotisms and that is, what you call, state capitalism. Which in a sense seems to be the new political economy of these regimes. They privatize the profits, they nationalize the costs, they redistribute some parts of the profits, patronage networks that are pervasive

and draw everyone into the web of power. And they are able to enormously concentrate capital and wealth in a few hands. So, plutocracy plus crony capitalism.

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JK: Yes, you know, it's as if there is socialism at the top and capitalism for the rest of the population. Socialism at the top because there is an entanglement of the political governing officials on the one side, and corporate tycoons on the other. The Hungarian researchers have come up with the very nice term "poligarchs" and "poligarchy." Big businesspeople are entangled with the highest levels of government and the highest governing officials are themselves in business. That is the way these systems work. And it is an open question, I think, whether the political economies of these despotisms are vulnerable to shocks. The smartest of them are well-aware that there can be bubbles, speculative bubbles that actually, when they burst, cause great shocks to the whole system.

[00:17:30] Hence, for example in China, there has been developed a new city, not that far from Beijing, called Beijing Fun Town where every player in China, plus foreign players in the field of banking and credit, are encouraged...actually it's becoming compulsory to locate in that town, in order that there be sunshine investment, that is the party's term. So, there is the realization, especially after the Shanghai stock-exchange crisis several years

ago, there is an awareness of those who rule in China that state capitalism is subject to contradictions and it can produce bubbles. And if those bubbles burst, they can be very damaging of the whole structures of power. Hence the attempt to build in control mechanism.

SR: Another very, very striking argument you make in the book. You say that, "Not only is new despotism not the opposite of liberal democracy, but, in fact, it's intimately tied to forms and practices adopted by formerly democratic countries, like the United States and India." It's also a question of someone like Trump, or Modi, or even Boris Johnson taking a lesson out of the authoritarian playbook and hollowing out democratic institutions from the inside.

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JK: Yes, it's the dynamic to watch, I think, in terms of a transition to despotism. You know, the entanglement of so-named democracies and despotisms is a theme of the book. The black cabs of London are produced by a Chinese firm. There are arms deals done with the Saudis and the Emirates backed by the United States, and so on. It's quite a complicated dynamic. One of the messages of the book is that we should not think in terms of a dualism between democracy and despotism. So-named democracies and actually existing despotisms reside on the same scale. The concentration of executive power in India under Modi, the weakening and taming of the judiciary, the attacks on presstitutes, investigative journalism, the taming of the legislature,

and doing all of this in the name of the nation. I mean, these are worrying trends in actually existing democracies.

[00:20:00] And disturbing is that the experience of Hungary, of Kazakhstan, of Russia, shows that you can move politically from a power-sharing democracy of some kind to a despotism in about 10 years. It only takes a decade to do it by stealth. There is no single tipping point, the transition rather resembles the transformation of the butterfly of democracy into the caterpillar of despotism. Building a democracy, sharing power, constructing rule of law, developing a civil society, cultivating investigative journalism, all of that takes decades. Despotism can be built quickly.

SR: So, one of the red lines, which probably we need to watch out for, is when all kinds of countervailing forces are being attacked. One of those would be, of course, freedom of the press, which we've just talked about. The other would be universities, which is what we have seen in Hungary as well. But another kind of force, which you have looked at in a lot of your writings, earlier writings on civil society, as a force which could monitor the accountability of power, hold it to account, to restrain power. Judicial activism, all kinds of tribunals, citizens justice initiatives, mechanisms of, say, participatory budgeting, etc. What can be done to strengthen these? Because they seem to be, at the moment, our only way to prevent a slide into soft authoritarian regimes.

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JK: Yes, we are back to civil society as a zone of resistance to concentrated despotic power. Within the actually existing despotisms, civil society is always on the point of extinction. You see that dynamic in Hungary, the closure of the Central European University, the shutting down of independent media platforms, the harassment of groups, for example, defending the rights of Romani people. It's as if these despotisms replace those watchdog and barking-dog institutions of civil society. They replace them with their own learning mechanisms. For example, all of these despotisms institutionalize mechanisms such as public-opinion polling. They have elections. They rely on think tanks. There are policy feedback forums. The Singaporeans were pioneers in that field. Happiness forums in the Emirates, to ask people to explain how happy they are with the way life is and how it could be improved. So, these despotisms institutionalize learning mechanisms that are substitutes for civil society.

[00:23:00] On the more positive side, it seems to me that resistance to despotic power has to involve a strong element of civil-society resistance, of a plurality of associations and networks, multimedia platforms that contest arbitrary power. And that rule applies also to life within those actually existing despotisms. What is happening in Belarus is a revolt of a civil society against despotic power. We shall see its outcomes. I expect that it will be a long-drawn-out drama that will not easily be suffocated by fear and violence alone.

SR: Thanks so much for this fascinating conversation, John. You alert us to the shape-shifting forms of arbitrary and accountable power, personalized power, exercised with impunity. But what you also point out to us is the resilience of these new despotic regimes because of the quiet conformity of their subjects. We are witnessing a new, less violent, despotism that is slowly, gradually, insidiously chipping away at democratic institutions, liberal principles, until the very lines between democracy and despotism are unrecognizably blurred.

[00:24:30] That's it for this episode of "Democracy in Question." Thank you very much for listening.