



Political chronicle
By George Monbiot,
published in the Guardian 27th July 2021
Posted on 16th August 2021

How to Rule Forever

Do new technologies make autocrats impossible to overthrow?

Democracy depends on an equality of arms. If governments acquire political weapons unavailable to their opponents, they become harder to dislodge. They now possess so many that I begin to wonder how an efficient autocracy, once established, might ever again be overthrown.

The Pegasus spyware¹, whose widespread use by governments *the Guardian* has helped reveal, is just the latest variety of asymmetric force. The ability to peer into someone's life from a distance, to track their every movement, word and intention, grants autocrats an unprecedented power. It turns us into informants against ourselves. No one subject to this spying can now plan, however peacefully and democratically, to replace a government without those plans being known in advance and in all likelihood thwarted.

Since the Berlin Wall came down, autocrats have refined a new strategy for perpetual governance: to maintain the process and appearance of democracy – including elections and parliaments – while ensuring it doesn't work. Power is sucked out of democratic structures and relocated to a place where it can scarcely be challenged²: an inner circle defended from opposition by a forcefield of money and patronage, a compliant judiciary and a grovelling media. Narendra Modi, Viktor Orbán, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Jarosław Kaczyński, Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko all know how it works.

Protest, as we have seen from Belarus to Hong Kong, often becomes ineffective. Huge numbers take to the streets, pull the lever of democratic moral authority that has toppled so many regimes in the past, and nothing happens. The autocrats sit and wait for the protest's energy to fizzle out, crack heads and imprison leaders, knowing they no longer need fear the people.

They now have the means either to win elections through rigging, suppression or beguilement, or to ignore the result if they lose. The arc of history no longer bends towards justice.

The new surveillance tools complement a formidable array of modern weapons. Dark ads³ on social media; thinktanks using dark money to turn outrageous ideas that favour the ruling class into apparent common sense⁴; voter suppression; the stuffing of the courts; the long march through the institutions⁵, shutting down opposition in the civic sphere; cleverly prosecuted culture wars: these are the ever more sophisticated tools of autocratic power in nominal democracies.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/pegasus-project>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/03/britain-democracy-tories-coronavirus-public-power>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jul/31/facebook-dark-ads-can-swing-opinions-politics-research-shows>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/01/rightwing-insurrection-usurps-democracy>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/nov/30/tories-thatcher-democracy-michael-gove-marxist-theorists>

Many of them are being deployed in the UK. While there is no evidence that the government has been using *Pegasus spyware*, we have seen ever greater snooping on citizens, from the surveillance networks developed by the government intelligence agency GCHQ and exposed by Edward Snowden⁶ to the undercover police deployed against peaceful protesters, some of whom they deceived into sexual relationships⁷. The cops promised, as revelations from this scandal piled up, to reform themselves. But last week, a former police officer who joined *Extinction Rebellion* alleged that the Metropolitan police had sought to recruit him⁸ as a spy. Given the characterisation by Priti Patel, the home secretary, of peaceful environmental protesters as “criminals”⁹, I would find it surprising if police spying had not resumed.

The government is turning politics into a one-way mirror. Just as it learns more about our lives, it ensures we learn ever less about its own machinations. Its proposed changes to the Official Secrets Act would treat journalists and other citizens making “unauthorised disclosures” as if they were spies, threatening them with “increased maximum sentences”¹⁰, which probably means 14 years. It has so far resisted calls for a public interest defence¹¹. But unauthorised disclosures of government malfeasance¹² are essential to democracy. While illegitimate scrutiny is ramped up, legitimate scrutiny is stifled.

For the past 35 years, our political freedoms have been eroded by a series of draconian acts of parliament, imposed by both Conservative and Labour governments: the *Public Order Act 1986*, the *Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1992*, the *Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994*, the *Terrorism Act 2000*, the *Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003*, the *Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005*, the *Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014*, the *Trade Union Act 2016*, the *Covert Human Intelligence Sources Act 2021*, to name just a few. But none has gone as far as the police, crime, sentencing and courts bill that has now passed unamended¹³ through the House of Commons. It grants the police powers to shut down protests on grounds defined so vaguely – including causing “serious unease” to bystanders – that they could apply to any public expression of dissent. Serious unease is the motor of democracy. When and how do we recover these lost political liberties?

The demand for proof of identity at polling booths is a blatant attempt at voter suppression, of the kind pioneered¹⁴ by US Republicans. To solve a nonexistent problem (widespread identity fraud at elections), it could disqualify 2 million people, generally the poorest and most marginalised, who are unlikely to vote Conservative, from casting their ballots¹⁵.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/the-usa-files>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/apr/20/police-spys-bosses-knew-activist-was-being-duped-into-sexual-relationship-court-told>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jul/24/met-police-recruit-ex-officer-spy-climate-change-activists-extinction-rebellion>

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/sep/08/extinction-rebellion-criminals-threaten-uks-way-of-life-says-priti-patel>

¹⁰ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/936013/Consultation_Document_-_Legislation_to_Counter_State_Threats.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/official-secrets-act-reform-harsher-penalties-for-journalists/>

¹² <https://theconversation.com/official-secrets-act-home-secretarys-planned-reform-will-make-criminals-out-of-journalists-164890>

¹³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-57680917>

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/jul/04/millions-in-uk-face-disenfranchisement-under-voter-id-plans>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/may/11/more-than-2m-voters-may-lack-photo-id-required-under-new-uk-bill>

The government has floated the idea of disbanding¹⁶ the Electoral Commission, stripping away the last, feeble controls on how it conducts elections and raises money. Its judicial review and courts bill will limit our ability to challenge its decisions. As recent cases involving environmentally damaging projects¹⁷ and Covid contracts¹⁸ show, legal challenges are essential to hold it to account. It has used culture wars to try to stamp out criticism in universities and other public institutions, and combined with the billionaire press to demonise anyone confronting the interests from which it draws its power, often to devastating effect¹⁹.

The government's only remaining weakness is its own incompetence. Donald Trump is no longer in office not because the US system worked, but because he was an inept autocrat: unfocused, impulsive, contradictory. He did not possess what Modi, Putin, Orbán, Erdoğan, Kaczyński and Lukashenko possess: a strategic, sophisticated drive for power.

Boris Johnson is a spectacularly incompetent administrator, as the 130,000 deaths from Covid-19 testify. It remains to be seen whether or not he is a competent autocrat. He has certainly been more effective at suppressing opposition than at governing the country. Through lucrative pandemic contracts for court favourites and assaults on the planning laws that favour property tycoons²⁰, his government has also started to build the networks of patronage and clientelism essential to all autocracies. Perhaps Johnson's general uselessness will prove fatal. Alternatively, his ruthless pursuit of power, assisted by new political weapons, could render his administrative failings irrelevant.

In either case, it seems to me that we have little time in which to move. If we cannot secure a change of government at the next election, and if the succeeding government is not prepared to return power to the people, I suspect there won't be another chance for a very long time.

www.monbiot.com

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/aug/31/tory-plans-to-scrap-election-watchdog-undermines-democracy>

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/dec/19/ministers-face-fresh-legal-challenge-over-heathrow-airport-plans>

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/10/high-court-michael-gove-law-cronyism-covid-contracts>

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/03/land-reform-brute-power-billionaire-press-attacks>

²⁰ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/20-tory-donations-come-property-tycoons/>