The New York Times

https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/21/opinion/authoritarianism-democracy-protest.html

NICHOLAS KRISTOF

Three Well-Tested Ways to Undermine an Autocrat

May 21, 2025, 5:00 p.m. ET

Listen to this article · 7:10 min Learn more

By Nicholas Kristof
Opinion Columnist

The question I get most often is: What can we do to take our country back?

So let me try to answer, drawing on lessons from other countries that have faced authoritarian challenges.

The funny thing is that there's a playbook for overturning autocrats. It was written here in America, by a rumpled political scientist I knew named Gene Sharp. While little known in the United States before his death in 2018, he was celebrated abroad, and his tool kit was used by activists in Eastern Europe, in the Middle East and across Asia. His books, emphasizing nonviolent protests that become contagious, have been translated into at least 34 languages.

"I would rather have this book than the nuclear bomb," a former Lithuanian defense minister once said of Sharp's writing.

A soft-spoken scholar working from his Boston apartment, Sharp recommended 198 actions that were often performative, ranging from hunger strikes to sex boycotts to mock funerals.

"Dictators are never as strong as they tell you they are," he once said, "and people are never as weak as they think they are."

The Democrats' message last year revolved in part around earnest appeals to democratic values, but one of the lessons from anti-authoritarian movements around the world is that

such abstract arguments aren't terribly effective. Rather, three other approaches, drawing on Sharp's work, seem to work better.

The first is mockery and humor — preferably salacious.

Wang Dan, a leader of China's 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy demonstrations, told me that in China, puns often "resonate more than solemn political slogans."

The Chinese internet for a time delighted in grass-mud horses — which may puzzle future zoologists exploring Chinese archives, for there is no such animal. It's all a bawdy joke: In Chinese, "grass-mud horse" sounds very much like a curse, one so vulgar it would make your screen blush. But on its face it is an innocent homonym about an animal and thus is used to mock China's censors.

Shops in China peddled dolls of grass-mud horses (resembling alpacas), and a faux nature documentary described their habits. One Chinese song recounted the epic conflict between grass-mud horses and river crabs — because "river crab" is a play on the Chinese term for censorship. It optimistically declared the horses triumphant.

"They defeated the river crabs in order to protect their grassland," it declared. "River crabs forever disappeared."

Humor puts autocrats in a difficult position. They look ridiculous if they crack down on jokes but look weak if they ignore them. What's a dictator to do?

Take President Xi Jinping of China, who is sometimes mocked for resembling Winnie-the-Pooh. So China bans Pooh bear images and movies — giving people more reason to laugh at him.

Neither Winnie-the-Pooh nor a cavalry of grass-mud horses will topple Xi, but wit did help overthrow the Serbian despot Slobodan Milosevic in 2000. A dissident group called Otpor was so modest in size that protests by it wouldn't have been noticed. But Otpor, relying heavily on Sharp's work, engaged in street theater that got people buzzing: In Belgrade it put Milosevic's image on a barrel and encouraged passers-by to whack it with a bat.

"Seeing a group of devil-may-care young people ridiculing Milosevic made onlookers smile," Tina Rosenberg writes in her book "Join the Club," "and encouraged them to think about the regime, and their own role, in a different light."

Rosenberg quoted one Otpor leader as saying, "It was a great party all the time." This made the protests trendy and cool, the ridicule grew contagious, and eventually the opposition became a mass movement that forced Milosevic to resign.

A second approach that has often succeeded is emphasizing not democracy as such but rather highlighting the leaders' corruption, hypocrisy and economic mismanagement.

Critics usually have plenty of ammunition when pointing to hypocrisy, for authoritarians tend to preen as moral guardians while the lack of accountability often leads to, er, lapses. One example: The police chief in Tehran, who was in charge of enforcing the Islamic dress code for women, was reportedly found naked in a brothel with six equally naked prostitutes.

Corruption is also usually an easy target, because as autocrats become increasingly powerful, they and their family members often decide to enrich themselves: Wherever there is authoritarianism, there is corruption.

Chinese officials understand the sensitivity of the issue: They have told me that they're fine with journalists like me criticizing the Communist Party for repression or bad policies, but can we please just lay off reporting on the finances of party leaders (like the former prime minister whose family was so hard working that it rose from poverty and amassed at least $2.7 billion)?

One of the people who seemed to scare President Vladimir Putin the most was Aleksei Navalny, a master of mockery who posted videos of extravagances such as Putin's apparent $1 billion pleasure palace — and who, when imprisoned in the gulag, announced that he had tried to unionize the guards.

The third approach that has often succeeded is focusing on the power of one — an individual tragedy rather than a sea of oppression. Protesters against apartheid used to employ the slogan, "Free South African political prisoners," but that never got much traction. Then they switched to "Free Nelson Mandela," and we know the rest.

Likewise, the Arab Spring began in 2010 with a single wrenching story: A 26-year-old Tunisian street vendor set himself on fire to protest corruption — and millions of other Arabs demonstrated against their rulers.

In Iran, six months of protests started in 2022 when a young woman, Mahsa Amini, died after being arrested by police for wearing her hijab improperly. "With her killing, people lost their patience and poured into the streets," Nasrin Sotoudeh, an Iranian lawyer known for her defense of human rights, told me.

Sotoudeh noted that even a single creative protest by an ordinary person can ignite a broader movement. She cited the woman who in 2017 stood on a Tehran street, removed her head scarf and waved it at the end of a stick; the incident went viral and began the "girls of revolution street" movement to end the compulsory hijab. And while the hijab law remains in place, women now sometimes get away with ignoring it.

We often think of politicians as the natural leaders of such movements. But it's striking how often the stars have been from other worlds. A shipyard electrician in Poland named Lech Walesa. A Czech playwright named Vaclav Havel. Female lawyers in Iran. A female engineering student in Sudan. A widow and housewife in the Philippines named Corazon Aquino.

There's no simple formula for challenging authoritarianism. But these approaches have enjoyed a measure of success abroad and may be ones we Americans could learn from.

In my next column, I'll look at how such a strategy might unfold in the United States.

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow the New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Bluesky, WhatsApp and Threads.

Nicholas Kristof became a columnist for The Times Opinion desk in 2001 and has won two Pulitzer Prizes. His new memoir is "Chasing Hope: A Reporter's Life." @NickKristof

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 23 of the New York edition with the headline: Well-Tested Ways to Undermine Autocrats