With the Breakdown of Democracy Comes the Rise of 'New Despotism' Globally

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From left to right: US President Donald Trup, Brazil President Jair Bolsonaro, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson (all Reuters); Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (PTI).

Books

In his latest book, 'The New Despotism', eminent scholar of democracy John Keane explores how populist leaders across the globe are holding sway on their "subjects", and offers ideas for challenging the new despots.

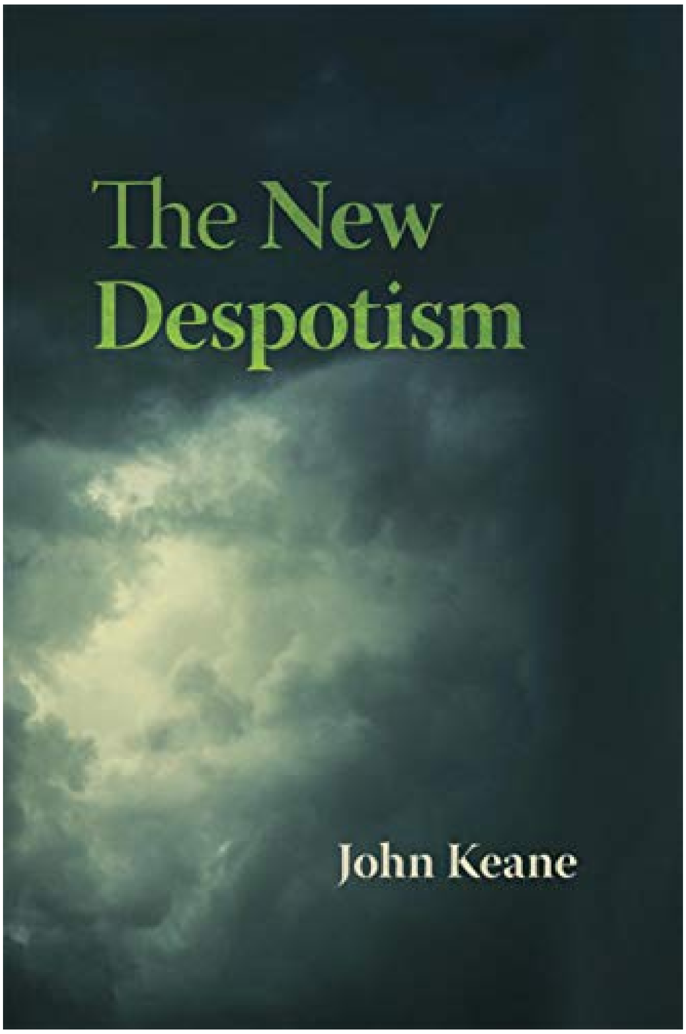
Badrinath Rao

Regardless of their political persuasion, astute observers of world politics almost unanimously agree that democracy and democratic institutions across the globe are under an eclipse. In countries as disparate as the Philippines, Turkey, Hungary, Poland, Brazil, Tajikistan, China, Russia, Vietnam and Saudi Arabia, one sees the attenuation of power-sharing institutions, lack of accountability, rampant electoral malpractices, the rising tide of corruption and cronyism, and systematic attempts to squelch dissent. That established democracies like the United States, India and the United Kingdom are also not immune to this malaise only underscores its severity.

The parlous state of democracy has garnered considerable scholarly attention. Some academics posit that democracy is going through a 'mid-life crisis'. Others, mainly from China, maintain that Western democracy, having outlived its utility, is showing signs of decay. Yet others blame populism for delivering 'a knockout blow to democracy'.

Democratic governance appears to have failed to empower people, uphold their dignity, and enhance their life chances. Equally disconcerting, the decline of Western democracies like the United States coincides with the ascent of China, universally denounced as a totalitarian state. Though these baffling phenomena have enormous implications for both theory and praxis, coming to terms with them requires conceptual clarity, foremost.

In his latest book *The New Despotism*, published by Harvard University Press, John Keane, political theorist and renown scholar of democracy, offers a seminal analysis of the aberrations of democracy and the rise of what he calls 'the new despotism'. He has spent decades tracking the trajectory of democracy across the globe and mapping the changes it has undergone in different settings.



The New Despotism by John Keane, Harvard University Press.

Drawing on his sustained engagement with democratic institutions, Keane delineates the contours of contemporary changes in a compelling manner. Subverting received scholarly wisdom that depicts the dystopian anomalies of democracy as 'authoritarianism', 'populism', 'totalitarianism', or 'dictatorship', he characterises them as 'the new despotism.' He characterises them as 'the new despotism'. The linchpin of this novel form of despotism, Keane maintains, is voluntary servitude.

New despotism, as a concept, will make little sense unless we disabuse ourselves of our traditional notion of despotism as a synonym for 'repression and raw force'. Just as vital is to stay away from dog-tired expressions like 'tyranny' or 'autocracy'. Keane clarifies that the Socratic notion of tyranny as 'an unjust type of rule by a strongman consumed by lawless desires' and ruling through 'fraud and force' cannot fully account for the nuances of the new despotism.

Similarly, albeit tempting, labelling leaders like Rodrigo Duterte, Viktor Orban and Vladimir Putin as 'authoritarian', though partially correct, mischaracterises the multifarious strategies through which they rule.

For instance, unlike dictators like Hitler, Saddam Hussein and Stalin, present-day rulers are not always heavy-handed and crude. Instead, they are 'masters of deception and seduction' who use an amalgam of artifices to secure the volitional obedience of their subjects. Since conventional terms have limited explanatory potential, Keane propounds an avant-garde expression: new despotism.

Features of new despotism

According to Keane, new despotism is a phantom democracy, 'a new type of pseudo-democratic government led by rulers skilled in the arts of manipulating and meddling with people's lives, marshalling their support, and winning their conformity'. It operates in insidious ways by ostensibly embracing the trappings of democratic polities. Despots outwardly affirm their allegiance to the rule of law, procedures and transparency. Yet, they excel in exploiting the law to frustrate the rule of law.

Keane points out that new despotisms have little faith in democracy and no patience for its niceties. Instead, they exercise power through 'trusted vassals' and patron-client networks. He rightly argues that the 'asymmetries of predatory power' arise from 'vertically arranged pyramids of privilege and injustice'.

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As 'big business states', new despotisms are plutocracies whose main goal is to regulate regimes of accumulation. They 'privatise profits and nationalise costs' by offering subsidies to corporate tycoons through loans from state-owned banks, giving them an unfair competitive edge. In several instances, there is no obligation to repay; these debts are written off as 'non-performing assets', a sleight-of-hand routinely practiced in India with consummate ease.

Keane rightly, therefore, describes the new despotisms as 'larcenous states'. Yet, unlike their authoritarian predecessors, they cover their tracks carefully. While assiduously promoting big business, they also cultivate 'petty capitalism' – small and medium enterprises – to burnish their credentials as creators of a level playing field. Nothing, however, can camouflage their theft. For example, criminal elements control about 25% of Russia's gross national income. Keane is thus spot on in portraying new despotisms as ‘wealth creation and protection rackets for the rich’.

Why do new despotisms flourish?

A quintessential feature of new despotism is that it flourishes despite creating unprecedented levels of precarity for vast swathes of the populace. With its remarkable capacity for metastasis, it masquerades as an efficient form of government, far superior to democracy.

While assiduously promoting big business, the new despots also cultivate ‘petty capitalism’ – small and medium enterprises – to burnish their credentials as creators of a level playing field. Photo: johnhain /Pixabay/ Public Domain

Keane explains this paradox by noting two basic facts. First, new despotism is not monocausal; it emerges from the confluence of several factors such as historical traditions, economic forces, and technological advances.

Second, as he pithily points out: ‘no despotism is fully despotic’. New despotism thrives by cultivating submission through bait and switch methods. Unlike 20th century authoritarianism, it does not resort to ‘denial and repression’. Alternatively, it seeks to ‘beguile and bewitch’ its subjects into accepting despotic governance.

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Keane outlines several ruses despots deploy to win the acquiescence of their subjects. New despotism thrives primarily by promoting hedonism, hyper consumerism, and embourgeoisment. It seduces through sops such as government handouts, token welfare programmes, gala events and dazzling construction projects.

Right after the 2011 Arab uprisings, all despotic regimes in the region hiked welfare payments to obviate potential rebellions. Saudi Arabia has earned mass approbation by erecting a $500 billion city called Neom, an innovation hub for engineering firms.

To complement these contrived spectacles, new despotisms manufacture a euphoric rhetoric, a grandiose vision that is awe-inspiring enough to make people endure present hardships. Keane perceptively notes that China habitually invokes fantasies like 'harmonious society', 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', and 'ancient Chinese civilisation.' These ersatz discourses, coupled with banal preoccupations like shopping, create 'quiet subservience', serve as the oxygen of despotic regimes.

Keane remarks that the middle class – 'fickle pragmatists' with a yearning for the good life, fun, stability, 'tough leadership', and 'top-down rule' – takes this amenability a notch higher and becomes ferociously loyal to the system.

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Aside from finessing public perception, new despots leverage inherited strengths – local customs, legacy institutions, and so on – to their advantage. Keane cites the example of Alexander Lukashenko, President of Belarus, who deftly appropriated the intelligence apparatus of the former Communist regime. Singapore, too, used the Westminster model to build a one-party state.

Another common trait of despots is their implacable hostility to dissent, exemplified by the draconian measures of states like Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan and China. Along with neutralising opposition, despots also sedulously guard their citadels, letting in just their trusted cronies and family members. Keane argues that this reliance on kinship networks, loyalists, and factotums is inevitable because life at the top is 'reptilian' and power has to be 'tightly regulated and carefully guarded.'

Calibrated coercion and measured use of violence

As closed systems, new despotisms are vulnerable to palace intrigues and popular revolts. Yet, departing from the practice of earlier dictatorial regimes, they are circumspect in using violence, reserving it only for intractable situations. New despotisms are police states with a difference. They believe, as Keane puts it, in 'calibrated coercion'. Since blanket use of force can alienate, they reserve their velvet fists for selective targets. They can, thus, be 'humane' and 'civilised' despite unleashing their secret police and surveillance machinery against dissidents.

This calculated approach is in tandem with the phantasmal rule of law favoured by despotic states. Keane acutely observes that new despotisms are 'a mishmash of legalisation and lawlessness.' Their preference is for ruling through law. 'Organised lawlessness' comes naturally to them. Small wonder new despotism embraces 'democratic' processes, reposes faith in elections, and launches anti-corruption drives. The luster of lawfulness covers a multitude of sins.

File photo of people standing on a Turkish army tank in Ankara, Turkey, July 16, 2016 during a failed coup. Photo: Reuters/Tumay Berkin

The veneer of legality, however, does not always guarantee peace. Managing popular expectations can be treacherous. If frequent use of violence is not an option, what steps do new despotisms take to ensure continuing compliance with their diktats? They accomplish this objective by lodging themselves in the minds of their subjects through elaborate theatrics.

Despots realise that losing ‘common touch’ is fatal for arbitrary rule. Hence, they spare no effort to nurture a folksy image and launch ‘people-friendly’ events. Consider this: the government of the United Arab Emirates has launched a national ‘happiness and positivity programme’ and set up ‘councils for happiness’ to promote happiness among its citizens. The overarching goal is to ensure that citizens are dutiful, quiet, and wedded to the endless pursuit of trivial pleasures.

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Unfortunately, however, state-induced joy and passivity often conflict with the brutal realities of everyday life. Quotidian struggles generate dissatisfaction. Keane states that the elites neutralise disaffection by allowing people to bellyache and vent their concerns. Rather than cracking down on critics, new despotisms encourage impotent grumbling. They can, then, flaunt their commitment to free speech and simultaneously ensure that citizens’ sense of agency is not eviscerated.

The Chinese government, for example, permits disgruntled citizens to file electronic complaints and virtual petitions on online fora exposing corrupt officials. Though ground realities barely change, squawking offers enormous psychic comfort. New despotisms prefer grumblers because they are 'gullible agents of blind conformity.'

New despotism and media power

A singular strength of the new despotism is its sophisticated analysis of the media power in nourishing despotism. Keane identifies 'communicative abundance' – the expansion of different media, particularly social media – as a significant driver of new despotism. In his view, the growth of media outlets aids despots in three ways.

First, a media-saturated environment enables despots to be heard and seen all the time. This high visibility aids indoctrination and provides rulers with additional sources of legitimacy. They use media to promote a new type of 'vaudeville government' that valorises 'national pride', 'sovereignty' and so on through carnivalesque shows, programmes, and celebrations.

Slick media management obliterates the failures of governance and creates avenues for 'business-like patter' about stability and growth. Second, communicative abundance spurs the government's ability to 'gaslight': 'to confuse, disorient, and destabilise people.'

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Keane defines gaslighting as 'the organised effort to mess with subjects' identities, to deploy entertainment, conflicting stories, lies, bullshit, and silence for the purpose of sowing seeds of confusion among subjects in order to control them fully and durably. The point is to drown subjects in shit, to flood their lives with gaseous excrement.' Third, through a judicious blend of relentless brainwashing and gaslighting, new despots acquire a monopoly over all forms of political discourse.

Formidable as these advantages are, they are not unalloyed blessings. Keane also underscores the promiscuous nature of the mass media and their subversive potential. Anticipating the impending threat of media-driven insurrection, new rulers detest journalists. If they cannot be bought, media professionals are persecuted. Additionally, the state tries to preempt digital mutinies through an extensive programme of surveillance. The slightest whiff of opposition incurs savage reprisal, particularly in places like China, Turkey, and Azerbaijan.

Democracy and new despotism

Of all the infernal characteristics of new despotism, the most egregious one is that it battens on support from democratic regimes. Keane offers two perceptive observations about the symbiotic relationship between the two.

First, he discusses the various ways in which democracy aids new despotism and profits from doing so. Countries like the United States and Britain have partnership in trade, technology and arms sales with despotic regimes. In fact, all advanced nations conclude trade deals, joint business ventures, and partnerships with despots with no compunctions.

Second, given the umbilical connection between democracy and despotism, Keane avers that we no longer live in a world that can be neatly divided into democracies and despotisms. Relatedly, the notion that an unsullied Atlantic-style liberal democracy is the gold standard for the world has become untenable. New despotism is ubiquitous; it thrives in the womb of democracies and authoritarian regimes alike.

An umbilical connection between democracy and despotism has emerged, as we no longer live in a world that can be neatly divided into democracies and despotisms. File photo of people casting their ballots for the US presidential elections in Ann Arbor, Michigan, US, September 24, 2020. Photo: REUTERS/Emily Elconin/File Photo

As far back as 1835, in his book *Democracy in America*, political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville first articulated the notion that democracy and despotism are not discrete, that they must be viewed as lying along a continuum. He argued that it was not tyranny that threatened democracy but an attractive form of democratic despotism backed by a bourgeoisie driven by crass individualism and materialism.

Keane provides a sumptuous historical account of how this incipient idea of despotism morphed into the theory of Oriental despotism, an ideology that justified European colonialism. Backed by official patronage, this thinking held sway till the late 19th century when sociologist Emile Durkheim finally debunked it. Keane justifies reviving this long-forgotten idea for three reasons.

First, he thinks despotism has ‘a powerful ethical sting in its tail’ that can alert us to its pernicious consequences. Second, it is a ‘foghorn concept’, an ‘early warning detector’ about arbitrary power. Third, despotism is ‘a precautionary concept’ that enables us to figure out its long-term effects. Keane, thus, revivifies a potent idea by tracing its ramifications.

Tackling new despotism: Issues and strategies

The new despotism is an intellectual tour de force because it provides a coherent framework for making sense of apparently disjointed developments. Using examples from across the globe, Keane proves that new despotism is not ‘a frozen form of power’, instead, it has a kaleidoscopic quality that can fool an unsuspecting observer.

Interrogating received wisdom, he shows that it is wrong to assume that, like authoritarianism, new despotism is ‘devoid of democracy’. Its appeal lies in its ability to be ‘democratic’ and ‘pro-people’ in order to exact voluntary servitude. New despotism is an exceptional form of power because it gently coaxes people to choose servitude. In Keane’s elegant expression, ‘people don’t lose their liberty; they win their enslavement.’

On the question of combating new despotism, Keane rejects violence, arguing that despotic states have a colossal capacity for retaliation. He surveys a slew of options – independently monitored elections, technological blockades, trade and tariff embargos, consumer boycotts, and so on – and maintains that their efficacy is limited. New despotism is a resilient form of domination with ‘recombinant qualities.’ It is nimble and capable of coping with crises. Despotic regimes like China and Vietnam have proven their ability to outperform Western democracies.

Keane contends that despotism derives its power from its subjects. Withholding this power collectively will deflate despotism. Keane pins his hopes on movements like the 2014 umbrella revolution in Hong Kong and suggests that they should be replicated elsewhere.

He also advocates defending power-sharing institutions and civil society associations. Keane thinks the absence of monitory democracy, the real threat of digital storms, and the sheer hubris of despots could be their undoing.

Ultimately, what will hasten their demise is our collective resolve to not participate in voluntary servitude. Since most of us cannot afford to make this choice, new despotisms will not disappear soon. Keane, therefore, fears that our democracies will ineluctably metamorphose into proto-despotisms in the coming decades.

Cogently argued and replete with apposite examples, Keane makes a forceful case for reexamining our thoughts about despotism. His book is a happy blend of prodigious scholarship, a riveting style, and original ideas. Such books are rare these days.

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