Pillars of Support

“By themselves, rulers cannot collect taxes, enforce repressive laws and regulations, keep trains running on time, prepare national budgets, direct traffic, manage ports, print money, repair roads, keep food supplied to the markets, make steel, build rockets, train the police and army, issue postage stamps or even milk a cow. People provide these services to the ruler through a variety of organizations and institutions. If the people stop providing these skills, the ruler cannot rule.”

Once we understand the nature of power, we must understand how they function in the society and which institutions help them keep power. These institutions holding up the building of power are called Pillars of Support. If you withdraw the institutional support, the government will collapse.

The Pillars of Support for any government are:

1. **Police (Law Enforcement):** the police are an important source of power in the society controlled by government as one of the most basic societal norms is to obey the police. They maintain law and order, they protect the government as well as the people, and they ensure that the system stays stable. A dictatorial government uses the police to enforce oppressive laws, to keep dissidents under surveillance, to break up demonstrations etc. In oppressive societies, thousands of police, secret police and military are used to spread fear of punishment if you “step out of line.”

2. **Bureaucracy (Civil Servants):** Civil servants are the workers of the government. The leaders make the decisions; the civil servants do all the work to make these decisions reality. The number of civil servants always massively outstrips the number of government leaders. Government could not function or even exist without these “beasts of burden” doing all the work. They have a lot of power within a government, regardless of whether the government is oppressive or not. They control so many aspects of society (getting a passport, health records, driver’s license, parole hearings, etc) that they can make your life miserable if they so choose. In an oppressive regime they are the true power. If the bureaucracy withdraws its support of the government, it’s all over.
3. **Educational System (Teachers and students):** Teachers and students are a primary pillar of support in many societies. Teachers form the minds of young children, and help older students to learn to think rationally. They give advice and teach information that supports the ruling norms and values of society. Through teachers, young members of the society learn to obey these norms and values. Teachers can begin revolutions though, if they encourage their students to stand up against the regime. Students, as a result, are often the beginnings of revolution, though they are often too small of a percentage of the population to complete the revolution on their own.

4. **Organized Religion (Church):** most organized religions are generally conservative (don’t like change) and support the current government as this gives them more influence and more freedom to operate within the society. Churches have the resources to reach a large number of people within a society quickly. It also has the power of “heaven” and “hell” to threaten people with. Within this organization though, there are often individuals who resist the conservatism of their church.

As a result of these pillars of support, dictatorships often appear invulnerable. Intelligence agencies, police, military forces, prisons, concentration camps and execution squads are controlled by a powerful few. A country’s finances, natural resources, and production capacities are often plundered by dictators and used to support their will. Educational systems are repressively controlled to ensure that the dictators values are integrated into the young and those people who gain from the power of the dictator willingly participate in the dictatorship to keep their power. However, ruthless dictatorships are not invulnerable. They too can be conquered, usually quickly and with little cost if their weaknesses can be identified and that attack concentrated on them.

**Weaknesses of Dictatorships**

1. the cooperation of a multitude of people, groups, and institutions needed to operate the system can be restricted or withdrawn
2. the system may become routine in its operation, and less able to adjust quickly to new situations
3. subordinates fearful of displeasing their superiors may not report accurate or complete information needed by the dictators to make decisions
4. deteriorating efficiency and competency of the bureaucracy, or excessive controls and regulations, may make the system's policies and operation ineffective
5. internal institutional conflicts and personal rivalries and hostilities may harm, and even disrupt, the operation of the dictatorship
6. intellectuals and students may become restless in response to conditions, restrictions, and repression
7. the general public may, over time, become apathetic, skeptical, or even hostile to the regime.
8. sections of the police or military forces may act to achieve their own objectives, even against the will of established dictators, including by coup d’etat (The sudden overthrow of a government by a usually small group of persons in or previously in positions of authority)
9. with so many decisions made by so few people in the dictatorship, mistakes of judgment, policy and action are likely to occur.

With knowledge of such inherent weaknesses, the democratic opposition can seek to aggravate these deliberately in order to alter the system or disintegrate it. At times, for example, even Hitler’s direct orders were never implemented because those beneath him in the hierarchy refused to carry them out.

This does not mean dictatorships can be destroyed without risks and casualties. And, of course, no means of action can ensure rapid success in every situation. However, types of struggle which target the dictatorship’s weaknesses have greater chance of success.