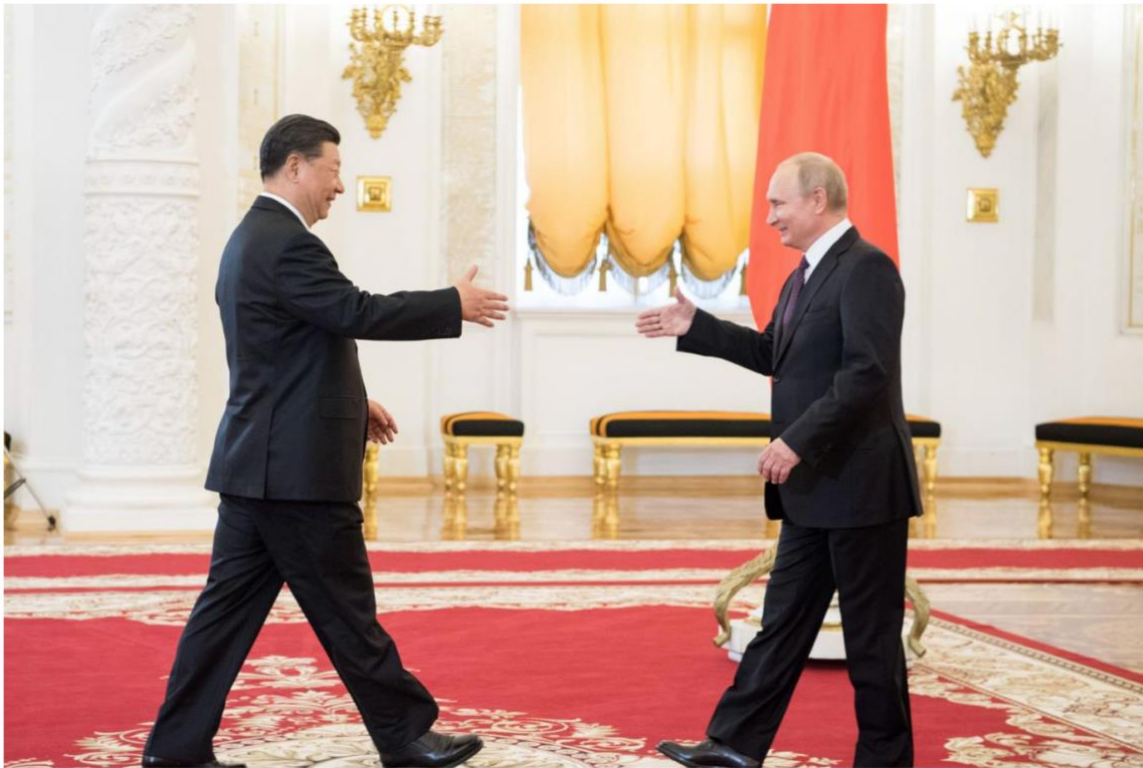




# The Weakness of the Strongman

Power Grabs by Putin and Xi May Bode Well for Democracy's Future

By Adam E. Casey and Seva Gunitsky March 23, 2020



Xi and Putin shake hands in Moscow, June 2019

Li Xueren Xinhua / eyevine / Redux

Earlier this month, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced his support for a constitutional change to allow him two more terms in office. When these terms end in 2036, he will be 84 years old and—if he makes it—the [longest-ruling leader](#) in Russian history.

Although Putin's longevity stands out, Russia's [turn to personalist rule](#)—in which political power is increasingly [concentrated in a single individual](#)—is part of a [broader trend](#). China, for example, seemed until recently to be cementing a one-party regime in which elites shared power and maintained a functional mechanism of succession. But over the past couple of years, Chinese President [Xi Jinping](#) has abolished term limits and [concentrated political power](#), often at the expense of other institutions, such as the Chinese Communist Party and the military. Other countries, such as

Turkey under [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#) and the Philippines under [Rodrigo Duterte](#), have also seen regimes coalesce around a single individual. The strongmen, it seems, are getting stronger.

But the rise of personalist rulers, despite the problems they pose, may have a silver lining for the [future of democracy](#). Personalist regimes are more fragile than other types of autocracies, and they tend to end badly for their leaders. By concentrating power in private hands, personalism breeds corruption and undermines state capacity. Most important, unlike single-party regimes, personalist regimes do not offer an easily exportable model of autocratic rule that other governments can imitate.

## THE PERILS OF PERSONALISM

Personalist rule emerges when other elites are [unable to successfully block](#) the accumulation of power by an autocrat. Personalism is bad for the other elites: fearing the rise of a rival, personalist dictators [frequently rotate](#), purge, imprison, and even execute their fellow ruling elites. Under these circumstances, it [becomes increasingly difficult](#) for other elites to coordinate with one another to remove the autocrat. Over time, personalist leaders become difficult to dislodge from within.

But in time, such paranoia-induced rigidity becomes the source of the regime's downfall. As research has repeatedly shown, personalist regimes are [less durable than those led by collegial ruling parties](#)—surviving in office about [half as long](#) as dominant party regimes—and their vulnerability grows out of the relentless accumulation of power. Since loyalty is key, security forces end up being led by sycophants and kept weak in the hopes that they will not be able to [stage a successful coup](#). As a result, personalist regimes are [less capable of fighting wars](#). And when mass protests do arise, these regimes are more likely to see defections by both the [armed forces](#) and the [elites](#).

When an unctuous Russian TV commentator recently explained that “without Putin, Russia is not viable,” he meant it as a compliment. But his phrase also highlights the tenuous nature of personalist regimes. To remain indispensable, Putin must perform a continuous balancing act among the competing factions in his regime, which places [real limits on his power](#) and keeps Russian institutions in a [permanent state of disorganization](#).

Once in power, personalist leaders find themselves locked in a web of favors in which personal connections take precedence over institutional interests. As a result, leadership transitions create immense amounts of uncertainty. In Putin's case, for example, the [prospect of his departure is destabilizing](#) even for people unhappy with

his leadership. Personalist regimes, not surprisingly, are [highly susceptible to crises of succession](#) after the death of the autocrat or before an anointed successor can successfully consolidate control.

## **LOCAL RULE, GLOBAL ORDER**

In the long run, therefore, the turn to personalism may help preserve the viability of liberal democracy as a universal model. Personalism can only be local. Its ideology is to amass power in whatever way possible; it is a tactic for personal empowerment, not a strategy for institutional rule. It therefore lacks the appeal of previous universalizing ideologies, such as fascism and communism, which offered credible, coherent, and at times extremely appealing regime alternatives to liberal democracy.

China's single-party state, until recently, seemed to offer one such rival ideology. Beijing appeared to have [developed a system](#) in which term limits were respected and a coterie of elites could pursue the national interest in a way that combined the advantages of capitalist flexibility with autocratic centralization. Instead of competing groups alternating power, a single body would represent the will of the people. In doing so, it promised to avoid the deadlock of multi-party democracy, improve government efficiency, and safeguard the country's sovereignty against the encroachments of the U.S.-led global order.

Personalist rulers can make the same promises as dominant ruling parties. But the promises of personalist rulers are backed up by the force of their charisma and personal loyalties, not by institutional mechanisms. As a result, their ability to govern is more limited than it looks. Most problematically, the power of their proclamations depends on collective estimations of how long they will remain in power. Regimes that appear stable and highly efficient when unchallenged begin to look fragile and hollow as soon as they are threatened.

A [recent defense](#) of Francis Fukuyama's argument about the end of history noted that his central contention—that “there is no conceivable ideological rival to liberal democracy”—remains true today. China, Russia, the Islamic State (or ISIS), nationalism: none offer a “comprehensive set of political and economic ideas poised as a rival to liberal democracy with universal aspirations and global appeal.” Although the single-party state, abetted by power sharing and institutionalized succession, might have become that rival, this now looks increasingly unlikely.

That is no reason to be sanguine about the rise of strongmen. The move toward personalism may be self-defeating in the long run, but in the long run, as John Maynard Keynes said, we are all dead. Personalist regimes [start more wars](#) and [make](#)

[life miserable for their people](#). Nor are personalist regimes incapable of adaptation: both China and the Soviet Union underwent [periods of intense personalization](#) (under Mao and Stalin) but managed to recover and return to single-party rule.

Still, even in an age of widespread disillusionment with democracy, a universally appealing alternative has yet to emerge. The turn to personalism, for all the potential problems it poses, only reinforces this reality. The strongmen may be getting stronger, but the ideology used to prop up their rule is not.