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Welcome to The Interpreter newsletter, by Max Fisher, who along with Amanda Taub writes a [column by the same name](#).

On our minds: The revolutionary exception to a big global rule.

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Why Revolutions Endure When Democracies (and Dictatorships) Don't



Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini waving to followers in Tehran on Feb. 2, 1979, after his return from exile. Thierry Campion/Associated Press

Sometimes you think you have a unifying rule for understanding the world. But then you find an exception to that rule, and it casts everything in a new light.

That was what happened when I spoke to Steven Levitsky, a Harvard University political scientist who co-authored “How Democracies Die,” which President Biden said has [reshaped](#) how he thinks about his job.

The rule is political instability, which is in many ways the global unifying trend of our era.

Democracies are increasingly prone to backsliding incrementally, or collapsing outright. Dictatorships are growing more common, but are also shakier and shorter lived. Public dissolution and civil unrest are [rising drastically](#) in both.

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Think of Thailand, which has rapidly cycled from democracy to military junta to civilian dictatorship. Or Bolivia, whose highly polarized democracy has [devolved](#) into disputed elections, military involvement, one president fleeing the country (then returning) and another president arrested. Or, you know, the United States.

But in a recent interview about this trend, Dr. Levitsky revealed that he and [Lucan Way](#) of the University of Toronto had identified a big, glaring exception to this rule.

They happened upon it several years ago while [investigating](#) the changing nature of authoritarianism. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, most Communist dictatorships did, too. Only five survived: China, Cuba, Vietnam, Laos and North Korea.

The scholars [realized](#) that all five had something in common: Their governments had been installed in violent social revolutions.

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This is a revolt that abolishes the old order root-and-branch, replacing virtually every social and political institution with itself. It’s not the Egyptian military nudging out one president for another. It’s Russian Bolsheviks smashing the monarchy and the class system, then reorganizing every aspect of society by force.

What did it mean that Communist governments brought about by social revolution mostly survived, but the others mostly collapsed?

Crunching the data on every government worldwide, going back to 1900, the scholars found that governments founded in social revolution, regardless of their animating ideology, proved consistently and remarkably long-lived.

Dictatorships generally last about a decade. But these were sticking around for three, four, five decades. The Soviet Union, one of the few Communist revolutionary states to fall in 1989, had survived 69 years.

Over the next several years, Drs. Levitsky and Way studied this trend, joined by [Jean Lachapelle](#) of the University of Gothenburg and [Adam E. Casey](#) at the University of Michigan.

The full picture, which they [revealed in a recent paper](#), is even starker than what they had initially thought.

Only 19 percent of non-revolutionary dictatorships survive to 30 years. But the overwhelming majority of revolutionary states — 71 percent — make it that far. These are numbers that defy the present-day trends.

“Since we started the project, none of the revolutionary regimes that we’re studying have collapsed,” Dr. Levitsky said. “They’re still there.”

When they first identified the trend, 10 countries fit their definition. Nearly a decade later, all 10 are still standing. And this at a time when virtually every other form of government is becoming shorter-lived and more unstable.

It’s as if these revolutionary countries were almost immune to the global forces battering everyone else — a narrow but glaring exception to the rule of rising instability.

They include rising powers like China and Vietnam. But also perennially troubled siege states like Iran, Cuba, North Korea and Eritrea, which have endured some of the worst crises of our era. And others that fit neither category, like Algeria, Rwanda and Mozambique.

So what explained their common longevity? And what does this exception to the global rule say about everyone else?

A big hint came in the data: Revolutionary countries experienced 72 percent fewer mass protests, attempted coups or fissures among the governing elite

than other countries did. These are the leading causes of death for an authoritarian government.

Iran, now 42 years into its revolution, drives home how surprising these findings are. It is a country with virtually every possible problem that a political system can face. A furious public. A free-falling economy. Quagmired abroad. Surrounded by enemies. Internationally isolated. Deep corruption and shallow governance.

“There have been so many crises that you would think the regime could not survive,” said Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, a political scientist at Texas A&M University. “And yet it survives.”

Dr. Levitsky’s team studied all 10 such countries for commonalities, as well as for what set them apart. They concluded that a handful of factors, all rooted in the way that social revolutions re-engineer government and society, explained the resilience. The answer was structural — not ideological.

Most governments, even dictatorships, are fractured among institutions that jostle to advance their agenda and interests. The president. The judiciary. The military. The bureaucracy. Social organizations, like the clergy or the landowners, hold their own informal but significant power.

But in revolutionary states, all are controlled by veterans of the uprising. Even if they compete or feud, their ultimate fealty is usually to the cause that brought them there. The revolutionary movement itself starts out as a kind of army — and often includes an actual armed wing — of which all remain officers for life, in addition to their second job as foreign minister or fleet admiral or religious leader.

That military-style unity is often cemented by actual military conflict. Most revolutions find themselves at war in their first years, often against countries that fear the movement spreading. It can rally the entire country behind the cause. And it can force the revolutionary movement to rebuild itself around a military-style discipline — which it keeps, and governs through, after the war.

That doesn’t make them better or wiser at governing. In most, misery is epidemic. But the system has proved more resistant to internal conflict or instability, as well as more effective at controlling society.

Dictatorships are increasingly likely to be ruled by strongmen who rise within a democracy, then tried to cement control — a symptom of an era when

democracies are weakening, societies are dividing, and many prize strong-fisted rule. It is the opposite of a revolutionary-style system.

“The single dictator — not institutionalized, no monopoly control over society,” Dr. Levitsky summarized. “They last eight, 10 years, 12 years. They have a crisis, they fall. They get old and they fall.”

But the contrast with democracies, beset by social divisions and institutional distrust, is just as stark.

“The kind of polarization that is threatening to wreck many democracies probably ends up reinforcing revolutionary regimes,” he said. “Polarization helps to reinforce elite cohesion and keeps the military in line. The Cuban regime wants to polarize. The North Korean regime wants to polarize.”

These are hardly systems to emulate. The research team’s [written findings](#) credit revolutionary longevity to traits like “a powerful coercive apparatus” and “the destruction of rival organizations and alternative centers of power in society.”

But there are two common points, worth paying attention to, in both the strength of revolutionary systems and the instability of democracies.

Common point No. 1 is institutionalization. Revolutionary institutions are remarkably cohesive and deeply built, like military units. (They are, unfortunately for citizens in these countries, only sometimes built to prioritize good governance as highly as maintaining the political system’s control.) Democratic institutions are usually more competent and responsible, but rising partisan fights to control them and politicized attacks on them are leaving them less well institutionalized all the time.

Common point No. 2 is social cohesion.

In revolutionary states, unity around a shared national purpose is sometimes voluntary and sometimes coerced. That is not as effective — and is certainly less respectful of basic human rights and dignity — than the fully voluntary social cohesion that democracies seek. But this cohesion is declining sharply in many democracies, eroded by partisan conflict and antagonism toward immigrants and minorities.

The route to social cohesion in democracies is very different from that in revolutionary dictatorships. But the contrast between them underscores the

value of restoring it, and the danger that lost cohesion poses to any country's future.

Systems like Iran's or China's, even if each lasts another half-century, will continue to be outliers. The revolutions that created them are simply too rare to be anything but exceptions. (The last one was nearly 30 years ago.) But their lessons for political stability everywhere else are only getting starker.

What We're Reading

- How do governments formulate their foreign policy? The last few years have, as you might imagine, upended the conventional wisdom of rational states maximizing their national interest. Georgetown University's Elizabeth N. Saunders [explores](#) how the Trump years changed our understanding of why countries do what they do.
 - If you have purchased a home, you have bought title insurance, probably for many thousands of dollars. Seth Harp [writes for the Texas Observer](#) on why many in the state's real estate industry and consumer protection groups believe it is, as one says, "a total scam."
 - Arash Arizi, an Iran scholar, [traces the life and strange career](#) of Iran's new president, which reveals a great deal about the country's trajectory and hints at its future.
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