

How to Defeat Authoritarianism in the United States

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Trump, Musk and their billionaire oligarch cronies are staging an authoritarian takeover of the United States.

Experts on democratic backsliding underscore that what we are witnessing is the deployment of the classic authoritarian playbook: a pattern of strategies that strongmen have deployed across the globe to overtake democracies. They warn that the rise of authoritarianism is often a gradual process that happens within and under a legal facade. And, once in power, would-be dictators use a series of aggressive tactics aimed at centralizing power by controlling the media and dismantling democratic norms and institutions.



On Feb. 27, Free Press Co-CEO Jessica J. González and Heidi Beirich of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism (GPAHE) co-hosted a [webinar about ways to defeat authoritarianism](#). The discussion featured Nobel Peace Prize winner Maria Ressa of the Rappler news organization in the Philippines, András Bíró-Nagy of Policy Solutions in Hungary and Rafal Pankowski of the Institute of Sociology of Collegium Civitas in Poland.

Our expert panelists discussed what had happened in their own countries to shed light on the red flags of authoritarianism and help us make sense of what is happening here. They also recommended strategies for pushing back against the current fascist takeover in the United States, urging us to “act quickly,” to stay engaged and to “hold the line.”

The authoritarian playbook

Heidi Beirich noted that Trump and Musk are using a classic authoritarian playbook. “When people talk about the U.S. going down an authoritarian path, people sometimes don’t understand what that means, they think the argument is overblown. They don’t understand that there is actually a playbook, a set of factors that happen as you backslide into authoritarianism.”

Beirich identified seven key strategies from the authoritarian playbook — many of are playing out in the United States today:

1. Politicizing independent institutions
2. Spreading misinformation
3. Expanding executive power
4. Quashing dissent
5. Corrupting elections
6. Scapegoating vulnerable populations
7. Stoking violence

Global lessons from Hungary, Poland and the Philippines

András Bíró-Nagy shared that in Hungary, democratic backsliding “was a carefully orchestrated 15-year strategy” that began in 2010. He said that this process included the creation of a new electoral system, the capture of independent oversight, attacks on the independent judiciary, attacks on civil society, the silencing of dissent through economic and legal threats, and the transformation of the media into a 24-hour propaganda machine.

“The Hungarian example shows us that once the government claims control over media, reversing the course becomes very difficult,” Bíró-Nagy said. “... Because misinformation becomes the norm, accountability for those in power becomes weaker, and opposition voices may even be considered as threats to the national interest. So the persecution of opposition voices ... becomes part of the agenda.”

We see similar patterns in the United States as the Trump regime has armed itself with a carefully orchestrated playbook: the far-right Project 2025 blueprint.

Rafal Pankowski shared that Poland’s experience was similar to Hungary’s, except that in Poland democratic forces prevailed after eight years of authoritarian rule — though the far-right has not been completely eradicated. Pankowski pointed to “strong civil-society activism” as an important counter-movement that helped push the right out of power. The red flags of authoritarianism from Poland included the vilification of minority communities, state control of the media and social media, assaults on the rule of law, assaults on freedom of the press, and attacks on civil society. These are all patterns that we are now seeing in the United States.

Nobel Peace Prize-winning journalist and Rappler CEO Maria Ressa lived through the 2015–2016 authoritarian takeover in the Philippines — and given what we are witnessing in the United States today, she feels like she is living through a takeover again. “The playbook is the playbook. Our countries have certain patterns that have been followed,” she said. “Within six months, Rodrigo Duterte crushed the checks and balances of institutions.”

The Philippines example is especially significant: Since it was once a U.S. colony, its constitution is patterned after ours. “It has three branches of government, a very strong executive — and we have had a dictator twice,” Ressa said.

The capture of the media was also key to Duterte’s control in the Philippines. As an opposition journalist, Ressa was persecuted. The regime used social media to attack her reputation. While other media entities sold their holdings, lost their broadcasting licenses or complied in advance, Ressa held the line and Rappler survived. However, she was bombarded with legal attacks from the government that included two investigations, threats to shut down Rappler and 10 arrest warrants.

Ressa offered a series of critical warnings that we must heed: While the deployment of the authoritarian playbook can differ in its timeframes, she noted that we “are in an accelerated process in the U.S.”

“A lot of whether the U.S. survives is dependent on what we do now,” Ressa added. “Every day that we do not act, we get weaker.”

Ways to fight Trump’s authoritarianism takeover

So what can we do? The panelists urged us to take action now and to hold the line. “It’s not going to be easy or easier to do it six months from now, and it’s going to be worse a year from now and even worse two years from now,” said Beirich.

“Every time you give up your rights, you’re pushed back further,” said Ressa. “Silence not only makes you complicit, it makes you weaker.” Panelists asked us to avoid indifference, to support nongovernmental organizations and independent media outlets, to stay active in our communities, to speak out and refuse to obey in advance.

For more information on what you can do to fight Trump’s authoritarian takeover, [watch the full webinar](#), and read our [“Red Flags of Authoritarianism” guide](#).

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