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# How Tyrants Fall

*And How Nations Survive*

MARCEL DIRSUS

JOHN MURRAY

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# *Contents*


Introduction: The Golden Gun 1

1. The Dictator's Treadmill 19
2. The Enemy Within 43
3. Weakening the Warriors 69
4. Rebels, Guns and Money 97
5. Enemies, Foreign and Domestic 119
6. You Shoot, You Lose 141
7. No Other Option 165
8. Be Careful What You Wish For 187
9. How to Topple a Tyrant 211

*Acknowledgements* 239
*Notes* 241
*Index* 283

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# Introduction: The Golden Gun

> I don't deny I'm lonely. Deeply so. A king, when he doesn't have to account to anyone for what he says and does, is inevitably very much alone.[1]
>
> Mohamed Reza Pahlavi, shah of Iran

The most powerful tyrants on earth are condemned to live their life in fear. They can make their enemies disappear with a snap of their fingers. They, their families and their acolytes may control entire countries from the luxury of their palace, but they also have to spend their every waking hour plagued by the fear of losing everything. No matter how powerful they become, they cannot pay for or order that fear to disappear. If such tyrants make one wrong move, they will fall. And when tyrants fall, they often land up in exile, in a jail cell, or under the ground.

On a cold winter day in late 2007, the patrolling Amazonian Guards in their green camouflage gave the all clear. A moment later, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi emerged from the Hôtel de Marigny in central Paris. After descending the steps, he walked along a red carpet draped over the pristine grass. At the end of the carpet lay a giant tent. The Hôtel de Marigny, the building used by the French government to accommodate state guests, was used to catering to the whims of powerful rulers, but never before had a Bedouin tent been

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constructed in the garden so that a visiting dictator could meet guests in the 'desert tradition'.[2]

Inside, the tent was adorned with images of camels and palm trees. It was furnished with huge leather chairs in which an attentive audience could sit and listen. In the evening, visitors were greeted by the flames of a large fire.

Beyond his tent, which was a workplace, Gaddafi made Paris his personal playground. Originally invited to France for just three days, he decided he would stay for five. He had arrived in Paris with his infamous all-female bodyguards and an entourage so large it required a hundred vehicles to snake through the city. He was received by President Nicolas Sarkozy with full military honours. When Gaddafi decided that he would like to see the Palace of Versailles because he was fascinated by Louis XIV, he brought with him a 'delegation' of a hundred people. He was whisked from his tent in an extra-long white limousine that caused traffic jams wherever it went. When he wanted to take a boat down the Seine, the bridges along the river had to be closed to the public.[3] Gaddafi even went on a pheasant shoot, a highly unusual outing for a twenty-first-century visiting head of state.[4] But for Gaddafi, it was normality. His high-handed approach to the rest of the world had been exemplified by his response to an incident in 2008 when his son was arrested in Geneva for assaulting two domestic employees in a luxury hotel. The following year the dictator asked Italy, Germany and France to 'abolish' Switzerland.[5] When that didn't happen, Gaddafi called on Muslims around the world to wage a holy war against the country. And at the United Nations General Assembly, where leaders usually get fifteen minutes to speak, Gaddafi spoke for ninety-three. During the speech, he called the Security Council the 'terror council', promoted his own website, complained about being jet-lagged and discussed the assassination of John F. Kennedy.[6]





Eccentricities aside, Gaddafi, who had controlled Libya since the late 1960s, was a murderous dictator.

If he wanted this life to continue, he needed to stay in power. And to stay in power, he relied on striking fear into everyone he ruled. On the streets of Tripoli, ordinary people, if they ever spoke out against the regime, faced immediate danger of imprisonment or even death. On a single day in the summer of 1996, his security forces massacred more than twelve hundred people in one of the regime's torture prisons.[7] Even anti-regime thoughts were deemed dangerous. As one Libyan put it: 'Not only would we not dare express any criticism, we wouldn't even dare *thinking* anything critical in our heads.'[8]

Yet even at the height of his power, with many of his enemies rotting underground or in prisons, Gaddafi saw threats all around. The walls around his main compound were four metres high and one metre thick. Underneath the compound, Gaddafi had his men construct a network of tunnels so vast that a golf cart was used to move around within it.[9] The tunnels served as a means of escape and also contained an underground television station to allow the dictator to address his people while under siege.[10] Another Gaddafi compound in Tripoli contained an operating theatre behind heavy blast doors, so the dictator's life could be saved, even during a bloody revolution. The underground labyrinth there was so extensive that one journalist referred to it as a 'maze'.[11]

A man who thinks his future will be bright doesn't need multiple compounds with kilometres of underground tunnels. But Gaddafi knew his future wasn't secure. For dictators, there is a very real need to construct such defences. The threats are huge and constant.

On 15 February 2011, protests broke out in Benghazi, Libya's second most populous city, after the regime arrested a

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lawyer who represented victims of the 1996 prison massacre. In Gaddafi's Libya, where opposition wasn't tolerated, it was a rare sign of dissent.[12] With the regime's armour cracked, the situation rapidly escalated as opposition intensified and spread to other cities. In response, Gaddafi gave a speech on national television in which he vowed to 'cleanse Libya house by house'.[13] 'I will not leave the country,' Gaddafi said, before adding that he would 'die as a martyr'.[14]

But at this stage, Gaddafi was still confident that he wouldn't have to die. And although the rebels came to control entire cities, the regime retained the ability to go on the offensive. By 16 March, Gaddafi's forces were closing in on rebel-held Benghazi when one of his sons gave an interview in which he boasted that 'everything will be over in 48 hours.'[15]

With Gaddafi having referred to his enemies as rats, there was now the real possibility that a campaign of mass killing would unfold in front of the world's eyes.[16] Faced with that prospect, the United Nations Security Council voted 10–0 in favour of taking 'all necessary measures' to protect civilians.[17] The end was a long time coming, but this was its beginning. Two days later, French fighter jets took to the air to attack the regime while warships of the United States Navy launched cruise missiles to neutralise Libyan air defence systems. Speaking from Brazil, President Barack Obama said: 'We cannot stand idly by when a tyrant tells his people there will be no mercy.'[18]

In October, with the regime severely diminished and bombs still falling from above, Gaddafi knew the moment he had long feared had arrived. There were no more compounds, no more tunnels, no more walls that could protect the dictator. Instead, Gaddafi and his men moved from house to house in Sirte, the coastal town near which the dictator had been born. Supplies were limited and his bodyguards were forced





to scrounge around to find pasta and rice to feed the group. Gaddafi himself was clearly confused. 'Why is there no water? Why is there no electricity?' he would ask the head of his guard. Trying to flee was risky, but with the rebels so close and the shelling constant, staying in Sirte was not an option. Eventually, a reluctant Gaddafi agreed to escape. Originally scheduled to leave at 3 a.m., under the cover of darkness, his convoy of around forty cars didn't leave until five hours later. By that time, the sun was up. Half an hour after the convoy left, it was struck by missiles. One of the explosions was so close that the airbag deployed in the Toyota Land Cruiser in which Gaddafi was travelling.[19] The leader and a few of his men decided to flee on foot. After making their way across a farm, they had no option other than to hide in a foul-smelling drain.[20]

When rebels grabbed him, he was unable to compute what was happening. He was Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, the Godfather of Libya, King of Kings of Africa. And, as he once described himself: the Leader Who Lived in All Libyans' Hearts. 'What's this? What's this, my sons? What are you doing?' Gaddafi asked.[21] His 'sons' proceeded to brutalise him. Beaten by the mob and sodomised with a bayonet, the last footage of Gaddafi shows him on top of a car, his head bloodied, asking for mercy.[22]

With the dictator finally under their control, the rebels celebrated. In one of the defining images of the conflict, a young rebel was seen being carried on his comrades' shoulders, holding a golden gun decorated with intricate engravings. That gun belonged to Gaddafi himself, supposedly given to him by one of his sons.[23] This is what I call the Golden Gun paradox: tyrants can have all the trappings of power, even a gun made of gold, but at the point where they need to use their power to save themselves, it is already too late. A dictator

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can never save himself with a golden gun. For Gaddafi, holding the gun only imbued power as long as people believed it did. The moment they stopped, the gun was useless.

By the end of that day, 20 October 2011, the gun was gone and the dictator was dead. As a final indignity, Gaddafi wasn't afforded the quick burial that is customary in Islam. Instead, his topless corpse was displayed in the meat locker of a local shopping mall for all to see.[24] When a journalist talked to a local man about it, he responded that Gaddafi had chosen his own destiny. 'If he had been a good man, we would have buried him,' he said.[25]

And indeed, if Gaddafi had been a good man, or even just a democratic leader instead of a dictator, chances are he would have had a very different end.

Tyranny is hazardous.

According to a recent study that examined the way 2,790 national rulers lost power, 1,925 (69 per cent) were just fine after leaving office. 'Only' about 23 per cent of them were exiled, imprisoned or killed.[26] But that was across all countries and political systems. Zoom in on the personalist dictators – the leaders with most power concentrated in their hands – and the numbers are reversed: 69 per cent of those tyrants are thrown into jail, forced to live their life abroad or killed.[27] The odds for a tranquil retirement are worse than the flip of a coin.

I've studied dictators and the way they stay in power or lose it for more than a decade. As a postgraduate at Oxford, I examined the lives of the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Who were these people? How did they rise to the top in a system that could be so hostile? And what did they care about?

After I left Oxford, I thought I was done with worrying about tyranny (and sitting in dusty libraries). Eager to see the world, I decided to work for a brewery in the Democratic





Republic of Congo. But the most memorable lessons I learned there weren't about hops or barley, but about how authoritarian regimes work – and how many tyrants are constantly living on a knife edge.

While I was in Lubumbashi on 30 December 2013, armed attackers stormed the studios of the national broadcaster in Kinshasa. Gunmen took control of the airwaves and delivered a message against the president, Joseph Kabila. They told him he was finished, his time was up. While they spoke, their accomplices attacked the country's main airport. A military base was hit.[28]

On the other side of the country in Lubumbashi, reliable information was hard to come by: 'Have you heard what's happening in Kinshasa?' curious people asked at the brewery. During lunch, I tried to find out what exactly was going on. Nobody knew. With the violence seemingly far away, I started to make my way back to the office which, like my bungalow, was within the same compound. On a normal Monday, this walk would have been one of the best parts of the day. Lubumbashi itself is not exactly a green city, but the vegetation within the compound was lush. While walking, I'd marvel at the size of the palm trees or watch strange-looking birds flying overhead. It seemed like an oasis.

That day was different. On my way back to work, the stillness of the air was broken with a crack. It was a gunshot. Then, another one and another one, a rat-a-tat of gunfire coming from three directions. Then I heard something bigger, an explosion. A million thoughts were running through my mind. Behind the walls of the compound, a stray bullet was unlikely to become a problem. But what if that explosion was a mortar? Another one of those could do serious damage even if I wasn't the intended target. I was more than 1,500 kilometres from the German Embassy. The airports were

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closed, so flying wasn't an option if things got worse. If we had to evacuate, it would have to be to the south, via land, across the border to Zambia. Now in a slight panic, I turned round to talk to colleagues. 'What are we going to do?' The answer was: 'Nothing.' Yes, they had heard the shots, but they had heard them before and nothing very serious ever affected them, so why should it now?

And that was that. As a visiting European behind a concrete wall, there was a layer of insulation between the danger and me. Out in the city, others weren't so lucky.

I turned around again and went back to work.

The coup attempt in Kinshasa had been launched by a religious leader – Paul-Joseph Mukungubila – and the military was attacking his church in Lubumbashi.[29] When it became evident to the self-declared prophet that he wasn't going to be successful, he fled the country with five of his eighteen wives and twelve of his nineteen children.[30] Joseph Kabila, who had ruled the country since his father was assassinated, stayed in power.

I remember thinking that the calm reactions were strange. Shouldn't *something* be done? But then again, when it comes to a struggle like Mukungubila's with Kabila, what can you do? Nothing. All you can do is wait and see if the tyrant will fall, paving the way for another tyrant to take his place.

A few months later, I returned to Europe, but I could never get that day out of my head. How can it be that some countries experience severe instability with such regularity that their people have grown so inured to it? Why did Kabila manage to hold onto power for five more years? When do leaders like him lose power? And, when they do, what happens next?

I decided to research how tyrants fall. During my doctorate I focused on irregular leadership changes like the one





Mukungubila attempted in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Since then, I have worked on these issues not just at university but also with multinational companies, foundations and international organisations such as NATO and the OECD, always drawn to the question of how tyrants fall.

In October 1938, when Nazi Germany had already annexed Austria and taken over the Sudetenland, Winston Churchill gave a speech to the people of the United States. It was a call to arms:

> You see these dictators on their pedestals, surrounded by the bayonets of their soldiers and the truncheons of their police. On all sides they are guarded by masses of armed men, cannons, aeroplanes, fortifications, and the like – they boast and vaunt themselves before the world, yet in their hearts there is unspoken fear.[31]

When most people think of tyrants, they conjure images of a man (and it is almost always a man) who wields absolute power. That is a myth. No political leader has ever had absolute power. Even the most powerful dictators need others in order to stay in power. To remain on their pedestal, they need to manage those closest to them. If they don't, they are at immediate risk.

The central problem that tyrants face is that eliminating the many immediate threats to their position can be costly and creates a never-ending cycle of new problems. Eventually, the tyrant may fall off his pedestal. And when that happens, it's not just the tyrant who is at risk, because entire countries can crumble under the weight of a falling dictator.

Before we go further, a word of caution: no two dictatorships are alike. North Korea isn't Turkmenistan and Cuba isn't Russia. Similarly, tyrants are different from one another.

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Nowadays, leaders are usually described as tyrants when they act in a way that is cruel and oppressive. That leads to an incredibly broad array of leaders. Since most of them are men, I will usually refer to the tyrant as he. The tyrant could be a king, a personalist dictator or the head of a military junta. Or perhaps the tyrant is general secretary of the party in a one-party state or at the top of a theocracy – deriving its legitimacy from God's supposed will. The nation he leads can be rich or poor, mountainous or flat.

This diversity also applies to the tyrants themselves. Some, such as Saddam Hussein, have had terrible childhoods in which they were regularly beaten and abused.[32] Others, such as Mao, were coddled when they were young.[33] Adolf Hitler was such a choleric that he could barely stop himself from shouting once he became agitated. Pol Pot rarely showed any emotion. There are also massive differences between the way these tyrants have attained power. Some have climbed the pedestal by being good at organising and outmanoeuvring their competitors. Others, such as Idi Amin, were simply more brutal than everyone else. The most 'successful' tyrants, for example Stalin, were good at both.

As a result of this diversity, every sweeping statement will have an exception. But there are patterns and common traits. By looking at the forest, we can better understand most of the trees. Unfortunately, we can't always inspect them close up. Unlike democracies, which are comparatively transparent and open, dictatorships are dens of secrets. People who talk out of turn can disappear. Government documents are laced with lies. Journalists who report the truth may not last long.

Trying to understand tyranny is not easy. Perhaps the deputy prime minister is a mere puppet, or perhaps he really is the second most important political figure in the country. Or perhaps the institutions of the state don't matter much





because they are controlled by a revolutionary political party. Or, maybe neither state nor party matters anymore because power is so personalised. It is quite possible that the tyrant's bodyguard is more powerful than cabinet members or party elites because he has the dictator's ear and proximity is more important than formal power. It's hard to tell. Dictatorships run on whispers, clandestine deals and cover-ups.

The other difficulty of studying the fall of tyrants is that, however severe the political instability, however frequent the rebellions, it's not every day that a tyrant actually falls.[34] In a functioning democracy with meaningful elections, you get plenty of chances to observe how leaders lose office. Dictators, on the other hand, can remain in office for many decades. When they do go, they might fall in an instant, taken out by a single gunshot, or toppled within hours during a coup. And it can be difficult to determine how exactly they did fall – partly because it happens so rarely, but partly because the fall of tyrants often involves a tipping point, at which leaders become so unstable that their supporters desert them en masse – only later to pretend that they had been opposed to them all along.[35]

You also can't understand tyrants just by looking at the person. They operate within a system – and they need that system to stay in power. We'll therefore be exploring how authoritarian regimes work. One way to think of a regime, as opposed to the leader, is to think of it as the rules by which new leaders are chosen.[36] So when the generals that make up a military dictatorship replace the top general with a new general, it's a different leader but still the same regime. But if protestors sweep away the entire military junta to create a democracy or a communist dictatorship in its stead, that's a new regime. It's not just the person, but the system itself, that has changed.