

Pathological power: The danger of governments led by narcissists and psychopaths

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Credit: Kelly from Pexels

After spending his early life suffering under the Nazis and then Stalin, the Polish psychologist [Andrew Lobaczewski](#) devoted his career to

studying the relationship between psychological disorders and politics. He wanted to understand why psychopaths and narcissists are so strongly attracted to power as well as the processes by which they take over governments and countries.

He eventually came up with the term "pathocracy" to describe governments made up of people with these disorders—and the concept is by no means confined to regimes of the past.

In the US, for example, despite a convention that psychologists shouldn't unofficially diagnose public figures they haven't examined (known as the "[Goldwater Rule](#)" after psychiatrists questioned the mental fitness of Senator Barry Goldwater in 1964), many have [publicly stated](#) that Donald Trump displays all the signs of narcissistic personality disorder.

Similar cases have been made by psychologists for other "strongman" politicians around the world, such as [Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey](#) and [Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines](#).

It's not really surprising that people with personality disorders are drawn to [political power](#)—narcissists crave attention and affirmation, and feel that they are superior to others and have the right to dominate them. They also lack empathy, which means that they are able to ruthlessly exploit and abuse people for the sake of power. Psychopaths feel a similar sense of superiority and lack of empathy, but without the same impulse for attention and adoration.

But pathocracy isn't just about individuals. As Lobaczewski [pointed out](#), pathological leaders tend to attract other people with psychological disorders. At the same time, empathetic and fair-minded people gradually fall away. They are either ostracised or step aside voluntarily, appalled by the growing pathology around them.

As a result, over time pathocracies become more entrenched and extreme. You can see this process in the [Nazi takeover of the German government](#) in the 1930s, when Germany moved from democracy to pathocracy in less than two years.

Democracy is an essential way of protecting people from pathological politicians, with principles and institutions that limit their power (the [Bill of Rights](#) in the US, which guarantees certain rights to citizens is a good example).

This is why pathocrats hate democracy. Once they attain power they do their best to dismantle and discredit [democratic institutions](#), including the freedom and legitimacy of the press. This is the first thing that [Hitler did](#) when he became German chancellor, and it is what autocrats such as Trump, Vladimir Putin and Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán have been attempting to do.

In the US, there has clearly been a movement towards pathocracy under Trump. As Lobaczewski's theory predicts, the old guard of more moderate White House officials—the "adults in the room" – [has fallen away](#). The president is now [surrounded by individuals](#) who share his authoritarian tendencies and lack of empathy and morality. Fortunately, to some extent, the democratic institutions of the US have managed to provide some push back.

Britain too has been fairly fortunate, compared to other countries. Certainly there have been some pathocratic tendencies in some of our recent prime ministers (and other prominent ministers), including a lack of empathy and a narcissistic sense of self importance. But the UK's parliamentary and electoral systems—and perhaps a cultural disposition towards fairness and social responsibility—have protected the UK from some of the worst excesses of pathocracy.

Pathocratic politics today

This is why recent political events seem so alarming. It seems as if the UK is closer to pathocracy than ever before. The recent [exodus of moderate Conservatives](#) is characteristic of the purges which occur as a democracy transitions into pathocracy.

The distrust and disregard for democratic processes shown by the UK prime minister, Boris Johnson, and his ministers and advisers—the [prorogation of parliament](#), the insinuation that they may not follow [laws they disagree with](#) – is also characteristic of pathocracy.

As a psychologist, I would certainly not attempt to assess Johnson, having never met him. But in my view he is certainly surrounding himself with the most ruthless and unprincipled—and so most pathocratic—elements of his party. The former prime minister David Cameron even referred to Johnson's chief adviser Dominic Cummings as a "[career psychopath](#)".

At the same time, it is important to point out that not everyone who becomes part of a pathocratic government has a psychological disorder. Some people may simply be callous and non-empathic without a fully fledged psychological disorder.

Others may simply possess the kind of narcissism (based on a sense of superiority and entitlement) which arises from a certain style of upbringing. Some politicians may simply follow the party line through loyalty or in the belief that they will be able to rein in the pathocratic impulses of the people around them.

So far, thanks to the actions of parliament and the bravery of a small number of principled Conservative MPs, the potential pathocracy of Johnson's government has been kept at bay.

But the danger of democracy transitioning into pathocracy is always real. It is always closer to us than we think, and once it has a foothold, will crush every obstacle in its way.

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