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# Belief Systems of Political Control: A Primer for Authoritarian and Totalitarian Regimes

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**Abstract.** This article employs common psychological constructs to describe belief systems concerning political control.

How to stay in control in order to stay in power? This is a premier question for authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. The essence of the question often comes down to the expected consequences of implementing coercion, deprivation, punishment--and occasionally positive and negative reinforcement. Leaders of regimes most often act according to their beliefs about these control techniques.

Some leaders seem to believe in a frustration-aggression hypothesis. In essence, one can only "turn the screws" so much before there'll be hell to pay. The people--or some of them with the support of more of them--will rise up and perhaps number the leaders' days. Thus, the overriding concern is how much is too much.

Some leaders seem to believe in a learned helplessness hypothesis. One need not worry about too much coercion, deprivation, and punishment, because those who are ruled finally arrive at a state wherein they believe that they have no control over their own fate, over events, and certainly over their political controllers. To qualify the leaders' lack of worry here, one might surmise that there may be a point when one arrives at "overkill." No more coercion, deprivation, and punishment is needed to instill and maintain learned helplessness. If one continues to increase the frequency or intensity of control techniques, one is needlessly wasting resources. (However, paranoid and paranoid-like leaders often believe that "overkill" is never reached.)

Some leaders seem to believe in variants of expectancy theory. Here leaders assume that the ruled seem to have expectations about what frequencies and intensities of coercion, deprivation, and punishment would be correlated with leaders' rise and fall in power. Leaders then need to create perceptions through these and other control techniques so that the ruled will believe that now is no time to even think of challenging power of the authorities. And now is when whenever now was, is, and will be.

Some leaders seem to believe in variants of id theory. The leaders may assume that the ruled will not mind being ruled with room for the smallest of political autonomies, as long as some of the more primitive needs are met. This usually includes anything from satisfaction of material needs to fulfilling the craving for spectacle, e.g., the circus. In these cases, positive and negative reinforcement in the context of political coercion, deprivation, and punishment will be pursued.

Experimental, empirical, and theoretical psychologies all contain examples of situations in which the above will and will not work. A primer of an all-encompassing prescriptive strategy would be much too speculative, however. In the same boat are domestic and international foes of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. They may counsel a regime to "let up" before the "inevitable" explosion. They may be wrong functionally, even if they are on the side of the angels. Letting up may lead to disaster--at least in the short term--much as keeping the screws on until some appropriate transition can be arranged

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may lead to the best of all possible worlds. Psychologists as well seem not to have apperceived that their well-meaning entries into the fora of political policy may not be based on any more credibility than any concerned citizen without "special knowledge."

The bottom line? For leaders and their opponents alike? There is much less control to control than meets the eye. (See A fateful miscalculation in Turkey. (November 9, 1997). *The New York Times*, 14; Burgess, P.G. (1973). Crisis rhetoric: Coercion vs. force. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 59, 61-73; Freedman, A.E., & Freedman, P.E. (1975). *The psychology of political control*. NY: St. Martin's; Lacombe, D. (1996). Reforming Foucault: A critique of the social control thesis. *British Journal of Sociology*, 47, 332-352; Poitou, J.P. (1969). Coercive power and interdependence. *Annee Psychologique*, 69, 435-453; The psychology of controlling control. (January 24, 1997). *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*, 19, <http://www.pr.erau.edu/~security>.) (Keywords: Behaviorist, Control.)