

Authoritarianism Risk Checklist

A plain language diagnostic for patterns, not isolated events

Authoritarianism does not arrive in a single moment, it arrives as a pattern. Political scientists have mapped the signs for years, and the United States now checks far too many boxes. Use this plain language diagnostic. If a country meets several of these criteria at once, it is not drifting, it is sliding.

Diagnostic criteria

☐ 1. Rejection of democratic rules

Leaders question the legitimacy of elections, threaten to jail opponents, refuse clear constraints from legislatures and courts, and treat checks and balances as optional.

☐ 2. Denial of opponents' legitimacy

Rivals are framed as enemies of the nation, criminals by definition, or agents of a hidden cabal. Once opponents are illegitimate, anything done to stop them is justified.

☐ 3. Tolerance or encouragement of violence

Street allies are winked at, officials flirt with vigilantism, security forces are told to be rough, and political violence is minimized as passion rather than crime.

☐ 4. Curtailment of civil liberties

Protest is recoded as disorder or terror, the press is painted as an enemy, academic freedom is chilled, and public broadcasters or cultural institutions are punished for independence.

☐ 5. Capture of referees

Prosecutors, police leadership, election administrators, inspectors general, and regulatory chairs are replaced first for loyalty, then for loyalty again. The rule becomes simple. Obedience in, integrity out.

☐ 6. Flooding the information space

Disinformation is constant, correction is mocked, and the goal is not persuasion but exhaustion. When truth becomes a matter of team identity, accountability dies.

☐ 7. Emergency rule without emergency

Leaders invoke crisis language to bypass ordinary process, then keep the emergency alive as a governing method. What begins as an exception becomes the norm.

☐ 8. Politicized national security

Intelligence and law enforcement are bent toward protecting the leader and targeting critics. Surveillance tools drift inward, and secrecy becomes a shield for abuse.

☐ 9. Systemic corruption

Conflicts of interest are normalized, self enrichment is excused as success, and public office is treated as a private asset. Oversight is dismantled because it might reveal the obvious.

☐ 10. Cult of personality

Institutions are hollowed out to elevate the will of one man. Loyalty oaths and public flattery become currency. Policy is made to fit the leader's image, not the public interest.

☐ 11. Electoral manipulation

Rules change to disadvantage critics, access to voting is narrowed, independent oversight is weakened, and losing is framed as impossible. If defeat occurs, the result is disputed by default.

Authoritarianism Risk Checklist, continued

☐ 12. Alliance with authoritarian peers

Foreign autocrats are praised as strong, liberal democracies are treated as adversaries, and international commitments are weaponized for domestic theater rather than shared security.

☐ 13. Targeting of minorities

Marginalized communities are used as scapegoats, legal protections are rolled back, and dehumanizing rhetoric prepares the ground for selective enforcement.

How to use this checklist

How to use this checklist. Ask three questions. First, how many boxes are checked at the same time. Second, how fast did the boxes fill, because acceleration matters. Third, what countervailing power still resists, for example independent courts, state institutions, civil society, and free media. If several boxes are checked quickly while referees are being captured, the situation is acute.

Prepared for civic use. Updated 18 Sep 2025. Print and share with your community.