15.3C: Dictatorship and Totalitarianism

Dictatorships govern without consent of the people and in totalitarian dictatorships the power to govern extends to all aspects of life.

Learning Objectives

- Compare and contrast dictatorships with totalitarian governments

Key Points

- Dictatorship is a form of government in which the ruler has the power to govern without consent of those being governed.
- Totalitarian governments are those that regulate nearly every aspect of public and private behavior.
- Dictatorship concerns the source of the governing power (where the power comes from, the people or a single leader) and totalitarianism concerns the scope of the governing power (what is the government and how extensive is its power).

Key Terms

- totalitarianism: A system of government in which the people have virtually no authority and the state wields absolute control, for example, a dictatorship.
- dictatorship: A type of government where absolute sovereignty is allotted to an individual or a small clique.

Dictatorship and totalitarianism are often associated, but they are actually two separate phenomena. Dictatorship is a...
form of government in which the ruler has the power to govern without consent of those being governed. Dictatorship can also be defined simply as "a system that does not adhere to democracy," where democracy is defined as a form of government where those who govern are selected through contested elections. A dictator's power can originate in his or her family, political position, or military authority.

Many dictatorships are also totalitarian. Totalitarian governments are those that exert total control over the governed; they regulate nearly every aspect of public and private behavior. Totalitarianism entails a political system where the state recognizes no limits to its authority, and it strives to regulate every aspect of public and private life wherever feasible. Totalitarian regimes stay in political power through all-encompassing propaganda campaigns (disseminated through the state-controlled mass media), a single party that is often marked by political repression, personality cultism, control over the economy, regulation and restriction of speech, mass surveillance, and widespread use of terror.

In other words, dictatorship concerns the source of the governing power (where the power comes from—the people or a single leader) and totalitarianism concerns the scope of the governing power (what is the government and how extensive is its power). In this sense, dictatorship (government without people’s consent) exists in contrast with democracy (government whose power comes from people) and totalitarianism (where government controls every aspect of people's lives) exists in contrast with pluralism (where government allows multiple lifestyles and opinions).

President Nixon and Mao Zedong, 1972: In 1972, Nixon traveled to China and met with Mao Zedong, the leader of the totalitarian Chinese Communist Party.