Tyranny and mental health

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Tyrannical states came into existence with the emergence of the state as a socio-political phenomenon a few thousand years ago and are, therefore, novel creations from the standpoint of human evolution. A recent and particularly virulent form of tyranny was invented during the twentieth century in the form of totalitarianism. Such states utilise physical and psychological coercion as their primary method of governance. It is proposed that this will have mental health consequences on both the rulers and the ruled. The psychological roots of tyrannical systems are explored and some of the possible socio-psychological effects are discussed. The Iraqi Ba’th regime is used as an exemplar of a third world totalitarian state. It is suggested that the prevention of mass violations of basic human rights should become an international responsibility and this may, therefore, require a redefinition of the concept of sovereignty. Furthermore, it is proposed that the international community should share the responsibility of assisting in the process of social repair in the aftermath of the fall of tyrannical states.

Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed both the rise of extremes of tyranny (leading to devastating wars and untold atrocities) and, towards its end, a global movement towards democracy. The number of totalitarian states has declined sharply to a fraction of what it was only a few decades ago, primarily as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its East European satellite states. The effect that tyranny has on people’s mental health and well-being is not fully understood. This question deserves the attention of health professionals, given the widespread and devastating effects tyrannical regimes can have on the lives of their victims.

To trace the history of tyranny it is necessary to trace the history of the state as a sociopolitical phenomenon as true tyrannies can only exist in state societies. For most of their history humans have lived as hunter-gatherers in small egalitarian bands of 100 or so individuals with no state structures. In such bands there was no means by which any single individual or elite could exercise permanent coercive dominance over others. Indeed, if dominant males within these bands were seen to exercise an
inordinate degree of power over others the interesting phenomenon of reverse dominance tended to take place through the collective action of otherwise subordinate members of the band to curb the dominant individual’s authority over the group. Following the Neolithic Revolution about 10 000 years ago when, with the advent of agriculture and animal domestication, settled socially stratified societies appeared for the first time, there was a massive rise in food productivity. A few thousand years after this the first states were formed. States were then repeatedly and independently invented half a dozen or so times around the world (Table 1).

Paradoxically, the increase in food productivity in the settled agricultural societies was associated with the creation of a social underclass who suffered chronic and persistent biological distress due to malnutrition and infections to a degree unknown among hunter-gatherers. This state of chronic biological stress continues among the urban poor in low-income countries even today, and did not disappear in advanced Western countries until well into the nineteenth century. Main- 
tainence of control over such a biologically distressed underclass would have required coercive (and at times tyrannical) strategies to be exercised by the state. Although the state has many characteristics, Sanderson contends that fundamentally it is a form of sociopolitical organization that has achieved a monopoly over the means of violence within a specified territory. This definition is consistent with the views of a range of political thinkers, for example Max Weber, who defined the state as ‘a relation of men dominating men’, and Marx, who considered the state to be an instrument of class tyranny.

Until the advent of Western liberal democracy all states, with very few exceptions, were tyrannical to varying degrees in the sense that rulers frequently possessed absolute power and the ruled had limited or no say in the way that they were governed. Also, the population enjoyed limited or no protection from the power of the state. Nevertheless, excessive exercise of coercive dominance led sooner or later to revolt, which has been a recurring phenomenon throughout the history of the state.

There is no universally agreed definition of tyranny. Standard dictionary definitions make little or no distinction between the terms ‘tyranny’, ‘despotism’ and ‘dictatorship’. Aristotle believed tyranny to be an unnatural
human condition and defined it as a kind of monarchy which takes into consideration only the interests of the monarch. Arendt defines tyranny as ‘arbitrary power, unrestricted by law, wielded in the interest of the ruler and hostile to the interests of the governed’.

The twentieth century saw the emergence of a new and particularly malignant form of tyranny, namely totalitarianism. This form of government differs in important ways from other types of tyranny (Table 2). The experience of the individual citizen under a totalitarian regime differs radically from that under other forms of tyranny, and this may lead to distinct psychological and psychosocial consequences. Old-style tyrannies and more modern authoritarian regimes tend to establish a state that is situated at the pinnacle of an existing and well-established social order. The ruling elite show little interest in altering the socioeconomic status quo except in so far as this facilitates the process of governance and the extraction of the desired resources from the given society. Examples of modern authoritarian regimes include Franco’s Spain and military rule in Argentina and Chile in the 1970s and 1980s. Sultanistic regimes take the exploitative process a step further, causing partial subversion of sectors of civil society and the economy and thus eroding, corrupting and personalizing certain state institutions to better serve the interests of the ruling elite. Examples of such states include Iran under the Shah and Haiti under the rule of the Duvaliers. Nevertheless, whole areas of society remain untouched or minimally affected under sultanistic regimes. It is under totalitarian regimes that we witness wholesale subversion of the institutions of civil society in the interest of creating a new social reality in the service of the state ideology. It is under totalitarian regimes that the removal of the last vestiges of protection for the individual against the might of the state takes place. Society is re-engineered under the guiding principles of the state ideology (communism, nationalism, fundamentalism etc.) in a process that frequently leads to intense suffering, mass murder and a variety of mass human rights violations. The totalitarian regime relies on the loneliness of the individual; a reality that it actively promotes through its policy of atomization of society into isolated (ineffectual) individuals, its imposition of a state ideology and its

Table 2 A comparison of three modern forms of tyranny

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regime type</th>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th>Institutional structure</th>
<th>Penetration/subversion of civil society</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>State institutions largely intact</td>
<td>Not subverted; many areas left unaffected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sultanistic</td>
<td>Pseudo-ideology or none</td>
<td>Personalized state</td>
<td>Patchy penetration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totalitarian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Dual state and party structures</td>
<td>Complete subversion</td>
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Adapted from Chehabi and Linz.
systematic use of terror. The disappearance of any semblance of legal protection for the individual results in a state of constant vulnerability and near-complete powerlessness that leads to depoliticization, infantilization\textsuperscript{12} and a state of passivity of the individual. Citizens are systematically deprived of autonomous decision-making and action in whole areas of their life. This can result in an impaired sense of personal responsibility and a tendency to blame outside agencies for all negative events. Terror is used as a routine instrument of governance and not simply as a deterrent or punishment to the opponents of the regime. The strategies implemented are those familiar to all tyrannies and include abduction, disappearance, confiscation of property, deportation, torture, extra-judicial killings and a variety of collective punishments. However, the totalitarian state demonstrates a unique ability to carry out such violations on a scale previously unimaginable. Thus the victims of the Nazi Holocaust, the Stalin purges and the Cambodian killing fields involved millions of victims who were not guilty of any conventional crime. This is also true of Saddam’s mass grave victims who count in the hundreds of thousands.

Totalitarian regimes systemically destroy trust between individuals by rendering every citizen a potential informer for the state. They also suppress civil society, thus stifling any prospect of spontaneous collective action by individuals in defence of their collective interests, however mundane and innocuous. Such regimes also subvert accepted ethical and moral codes and in the process normalize moral transgressions and criminality in whole areas of social life (e.g. through permitting violence against ‘enemies of the state’, sanctioning the looting of their property etc.). The destruction of trust between individuals and the suppression of civil society leads to a wider suppression of cooperative and collaborative behaviour and potentially to the suppression of altruistic behaviour towards others. It is paradoxical that suppression of collective altruistic behaviour (except for isolated individual acts) is likely to occur even in totalitarian regimes that profess an egalitarian ideology (e.g. communism) as such behaviour requires a degree of political freedom, autonomy and the opportunity to collaborate with others.

Another characteristic of totalitarian regimes is their total preoccupation with control of the media. Every effort is made to ensure that the population is prevented from exposure to extraneous sources of information. The state-controlled media pumps out an unbroken stream of falsehoods which mix complete fiction with half-truths. While no-one believes what the media says, they may not entirely disbelieve it either. The population remain trapped in a strange world where nothing is known for certain and where any explanation, however ridiculous and far-fetched, seems plausible. This creates a strange mixture of cynicism and gullibility.\textsuperscript{7} The effect of this on people’s
judgement is not fully understood. The individual who is constantly bombarded by explanations of their state of misery and deprivation but deprived of the means to assess the veracity of any such explanation resorts to cynicism. Motives become embedded within other clandestine motives in an endless regression that can lead to a state of paralysis of the will. Al-Khalil put this succinctly in his now classic analysis of the nature of the Iraqi Ba’th: ‘What does the administration of lies from the cradle to the grave do to a people’s judgement, especially when they are afraid? No one knows.’

According to Arendt the media under totalitarianism is not used to inform but to organize. In addition, the media under totalitarian regimes has a primary function in the process of indoctrinating the population into the state ideology. Indoctrination is now a well-understood technique that consists of a number of basic elements. These include intimidation, information control, severance of previous relationships of authority and loyalty and ritual hatred of an enemy. On the face of it all the actions of the totalitarian regime are carried out in name of the state ideology. Given that such states are entirely unbound by conventional calculations of profit and loss, they can engage in blatant non-utilitarian policies that can ultimately and paradoxically cause harm to the interests of the state itself. Examples of non-utilitarian acts include the extermination of the ‘inferior races’ by the Nazis at the time of severe labour shortages in the Third Reich and the execution of tens of thousands of senior officers of the Red Army in Stalin’s purges just as the Nazi threat was rising. The central position of state ideology is a defining feature of totalitarian regimes.

**How does the totalitarian state damage mental health?**

Many of the policies of the totalitarian state have the potential to cause severe psychological distress. State policies create numerous victims who remain invisible and unrecognized during the life of the regime and may remain so after its downfall (Table 3). In order to legitimize its own existence the totalitarian state constantly invents internal and external

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How does the totalitarian state damage mental health?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diverting resources away from mental health services leading to deterioration in the condition of the mentally ill</td>
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<tr>
<td>Direct damage caused to the mental health of victims of the totalitarian state (torture, detention, deportation and other violations of human rights)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect damage caused to the mental health of the general population through disempowerment, terror, the normalization of violence and the erosion of socially accepted moral values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damage caused to the perpetrators of state violence themselves</td>
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</tbody>
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enemies. Thus such states are in a condition of continuous internal and/or external war against real and imaginary enemies, and therefore their top priority is to strengthen their armed forces and forces of internal repression, leading inevitably to human rights violations. This diversion of state resources leads inevitably to the neglect of health and social services, including mental health.

Naturally, the totalitarian state does not only consist of victims. The state recruits large numbers of willing citizens into its service both formally and informally, thus turning many of them in one way or another into perpetrators of gross violations against others. However, the perpetrators themselves do not necessarily escape from the effects of their own acts. Those directly involved in acts of repression and liquidation of the opponents or supposed enemies of the regime become increasingly brutalized through the routine use of extreme violence which is facilitated by systematically dehumanizing their victims. Such a process, given time, leads to the erosion of accepted social norms of behaviour and the normalization of violence with psychosocial consequences that can last beyond the regime’s lifespan.

**Saddam’s Iraq: an example of a Third World totalitarian state**

The Ba’th Party (literal meaning in Arabic: Rebirth) came to power in Iraq in 1968 and set about the gradual subversion of the Iraqi state and the annihilation of civil society. Its guiding ideology is an extreme variant of Arab nationalism that preaches an eternal and universal role for the Arab Nation in world history. The ideological model of Arab nationalism is the German nationalism of the nineteenth century. The Ba’th as an offshoot of the Arab nationalist movement was formed as a distinct political movement in Syria in 1948. It subsequently came to power through military coups in both Syria and Iraq in the 1960s and different factions ruled both countries for the best part of four decades. The Iraqi Ba’th came to power briefly in 1963 in a bloody coup but soon lost power to its rivals. However, in 1968 it returned to power through another military coup and this time managed to build a totalitarian state designed to implement and further Ba’th ideology.

From the start the regime engaged in political assassination of its opponents, detention without trial and extra-judicial executions. The regime then proceeded with large-scale ethnic cleansing, first against those of Iranian origin and then against Kurds and Iraqi Shi’ites. Civil society ceased to exist entirely by 1977 as all political parties were either banned or became puppets of the regime and no professional association or trade union was allowed to exist unless it submitted entirely to the control of the ruling party. In effect all previous components of civil
society either ceased to exist or became de facto organs of the state security apparatus. The regime pursued a policy of deliberate pauperization of the population with the aim of creating a situation of universal dependency on handouts by the state. It also pursued a policy of mass and persistent militarization of society. Along with this, individuals were stripped of their legal protection against the increasingly intrusive and all-powerful state. The victims of the Ba’th count in the millions (Table 4).

The Iraqi state under the Ba’th operated under conditions of total secrecy. State budgets were never published and therefore its expenditure on defence and security remains a matter of speculation and conjecture. However, estimates by experts in the field of Iraq’s expenditure on the defence and security sectors as a proportion of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) during the 1970s and 1980s place the country at the very top of the international league (Table 5). For comparison, Table 6 gives military expenditure as a proportion of GDP for nine high-spending Middle Eastern countries. It is clear that during 1975, a year when the country was not at war, Iraq was spending over a third more as a percentage of its GDP compared with the highest-spending country in Table 6. Military and security expenditure reached even higher levels following the start of the war with Iran and continued to grow as a proportion of GDP until the regime’s demise in 2003; however, it is not possible to obtain precise figures for this. Needless to say, resources expended on military and security organizations will not be available for welfare projects. Thus health and social programmes were severely neglected.

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<tr>
<th>Table 4</th>
<th>Victims of the Ba’th regime 1968–2003</th>
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<tr>
<td>Killed in wars</td>
<td>0.75–1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabled during wars</td>
<td>~1.5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victims of torture</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victims of mutilative punishments (ear and limb amputation, branding of the forehead)</td>
<td>4500–5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political prisoners at the time of fall of regime</td>
<td>Approximately 100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of mass graves in the South</td>
<td>280 (discovered)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victims buried in mass graves in the South (during 1991 uprising)</td>
<td>Minimum 300 000; Maximum 1.25 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victims of campaign of genocide in Kurdish North 1987–1988</td>
<td>~180 000 (4500 villages were destroyed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of deportees (to Iran)</td>
<td>~1 million</td>
</tr>
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<th>Table 5</th>
<th>Military expenditure in Iraq as share of GDP</th>
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<tr>
<td>Expenditure (% GDP)</td>
<td>19.4</td>
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Data from Al-Khalil.13
One of the characteristics of totalitarian states is the institutionalization of torture, and Iraq under the Ba’th bureaucratized and normalized torture to an unprecedented extent. The number of victims of torture in Iraq is unknown but is likely to count in the tens of thousands if not higher. The torture chambers of the much-feared Iraqi security services have been available on public display for over a decade in Iraqi Kurdistan and in the rest of Iraq since the fall of the regime. Given what we know about the psychiatric morbidity among victims of torture,15–19 it can be predicted that many thousands of Iraqis are likely to suffer from a range of unrecognized and untreated psychiatric disorders. The scale of other human rights violations is also unknown, but a survey undertaken by Amowitz et al.20 in three major southern Iraqi cities found that 47% of households surveyed reported abuses including torture, killing, disappearance, beating, gunshot wounds, kidnapping, being held hostage, amputation of an ear, exposure to chemical or biological weapons, and so forth.

One manifestation of the role of the state through its security organizations in actively corrupting accepted ethical and moral norms is the encouragement and coercion of physicians to participate in human rights violations. This question was explored in a survey by Reis et al.21 who sent questionnaires to 98 Iraqi physicians within southern Iraq and obtained a 71% response rate. Fifty per cent of respondents reported being extremely or ‘quite a bit’ involved in ear amputation; 49% in falsification of medicolegal reports on torture and 32% in falsification of death certification. Fear of harm to themselves or their families was the most common explanation given for complicity.

A variety of psychiatric disorders have been identified in victims of state violence and repression. The most common conditions include...
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post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety disorders. In addition there are reports of schizophrenia-like states. Victims frequently report symptoms of chronic low mood, lack of interest and sleep disturbance. They may also report classic post-traumatic symptoms of flashbacks, recurrent nightmares, anxiety, reduced interest, poor concentration and generally impaired functioning. A variety of somatic symptoms are also commonly present, including sexual dysfunction, chronic hyperventilation syndrome and cognitive impairment akin to pseudodementia.

In addition, personality change has been noted in a number of studies and has been recognized by ICD-10. The most prominent features of this include symptoms of apathy, chronic tiredness, lack of initiative, poor concentration and paranoid thoughts.

Are there specific psychiatric disorders associated with tyrannical or totalitarian regimes? The difficulties in answering such a question are immense at both the conceptual and methodological levels. It is clear that this area warrants further theoretical work as well as epidemiological study.

Implications for clinicians who treat refugees and survivors of tyrannical states

It is clear that some of the victims of tyrannical/totalitarian states who seek refuge in other countries suffer psychological damage as a result of the conventional traumas of detention, torture, loss of loved ones and displacement. However, it is possible that some suffer additional or even exclusive psychological damage through the effect of exposure to the tyrannical state’s general system of social and political control. However, as with the effects of structural state violence in general, the precise effects of the tyrannical state can frequently defy clear understanding.

Nevertheless, it seems likely that a basic understanding of the state system from which a given refugee has fled would assist in the process of empathic understanding of the victim’s predicament. The average clinician may have no more than a rudimentary understanding of political systems and their possible effects on psychological health, and this may prove to be a significant barrier to both the diagnostic and therapeutic process for those dealing regularly with refugees.

What are the psychological roots of tyranny?

Tyranny has arisen time and again in different parts of the world wherever states have been formed. Totalitarian regimes, although much rarer and
a much more recent phenomena, have also arisen repeatedly in a variety of societies. In addition, an entirely novel phenomenon has arisen recently, i.e. the emergence of a non-state worldwide totalitarian organization complete with an ideology and a political programme that utilizes terror as its main strategy. Therefore it is of interest to understand what it is about the architecture of the human mind that renders humans susceptible to particular kinds of ideologies that lead them to submit to systems of tyranny that create human suffering on such a vast scale. As only certain types of ideologies have created the conditions for totalitarianism, it is also important to gain a better understanding of the characteristics of ideologies that possess such a potential.

Social stratification and submission to high-ranking members of a group is an ancient evolutionary trait and is a characteristic of group-living primates. Tyrannical regimes are an extreme example of social stratification where the high-ranking elite maintain their status primarily through the use of force. However, as explained earlier, there is evidence that egalitarianism and reverse dominance are also ancient traits which probably have their roots in ancestral species within the hominid line. Before the emergence of the state and in hunter–gatherer societies the economic return on the exercise of unlimited power was limited and probably not worth the effort. Nevertheless, there were undoubted reproductive and material rewards to attaining a high rather than a low rank within the group. Such nascent social stratification was effectively held in check by a set of egalitarian mechanisms that ensured that no dominant member of the group had absolute ascendancy. However, once the state was formed dominance hierarchies went largely unchecked, and it was not until the advent of modern Western liberal democracy that an effective countermeasure to tyranny was discovered in the form of the modern democratic state. It is plausible from what we know of the egalitarianism of hunter–gatherers that the modern democratic system has unwittingly utilized an effective and ancient universal human psychological strategy that is designed to facilitate group living, i.e. the tendency to form social alliances to limit the power of dominant members of the group and hand back a measure of political power to the alliance of subordinates.

The world order and tyrannical states

Despite the International Declaration of Human Rights that was promulgated in 1948, the United Nations has operated on the basis of absolute respect for the sovereignty of its Member States as long as they do not endanger world peace. This has given many tyrannical regimes a free hand to repress their own people and to commit gross violations, including
genocide, while the international community has been powerless to intervene. The genocide in Cambodia in the 1970s and in Rwanda in the 1990s are stark examples. Also, the use of chemical weapons by Saddam Hussein against his own citizens in the 1980s is a well-known and much publicized atrocity that elicited little reaction from the international community and none from the United Nations. A notable exception was the international action in Kosovo that took place without United Nations authorization and led to the toppling of the murderous regime of Milosovic in Serbia.

An increasingly powerful voice has emerged internationally that is urging a redrawing of the limits of sovereignty. For example the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), while still upholding the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, has outlined circumstances where international action, including military intervention, can be taken. It incorporates into the definition of sovereignty a duty and responsibility to protect its citizens. According to the ICISS report a state would risk having its sovereignty violated if it fails to protect its citizens or actively engages in mass violence against them. At the time that this article was being written a human catastrophe was unfolding in the Darfur region of Sudan as a direct result of actions and omissions of the Sudanese government, and for the first time the United Nations Security Council has taken a few tentative measures. If the citizens of the world are to be offered better protection from their own governments then it may be necessary to strengthen the rights of individuals while weakening those of the state. This may require an amendment of the United Nations Charter and a change in its structure.

**What should happen after the fall of tyranny?**

The consequences of mass violence perpetrated by tyrannical or totalitarian states has effects that go beyond psychological damage to individuals and the destruction of the physical infrastructure of the country. Such sustained mass violence frequently leads to the destruction of the fabric of society. Nevertheless, the assumption that all those who have been exposed to a particular trauma are psychologically damaged and therefore in need of psychosocial intervention is patently incorrect and disregards resilience factors. Any planned psychosocial program that targets individual victims will need to take into account specific cultural and social factors relating to the society in question, but even then should be viewed as part of a larger programme for social repair. The basic elements of such programmes must ultimately tackle fundamental issues of justice, democracy, economic prosperity and reconciliation. Whether the emphasis
in a given country will be on criminal trials or truth commissions will depend on numerous cultural, social and political considerations as well as international factors. There is a lack of empirical evidence to support any given strategy over any other for social repair. Hence there is a need for greater international collaboration and a strengthening of the role and mandate of the United Nations through its various agencies, including the World Health Organization, in the process of social repair following mass violence and tyranny so that responses can be better planned and the complex social processes involved can be better understood.

References