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Elections, Populism and the ‘Supreme Leader’

The Rise of Authoritarian Democracies

By: Manjari Katju

The structure of a democracy has elements that can enable the rise of a strong political executive. We are now witnessing many elected leaders across the world draw upon ‘people’s will’ & aspirations to transform their states into authoritarian democracies.

The rise of populist leaderships with strong authoritarian streaks in democracies and across the world shows us that the path of democracy is not always linear. Democracy does not necessarily move on a ‘progressive’ or ‘enlightened’ route; it does not necessarily enhance individual liberties and free thought. There are interludes and reverses where one sees the rise of authoritarian figures who come to power through legal and democratic means and rule with popular mandates. If conditions are right, these authoritarian regimes turn into full-blown totalitarianism.

There are, conversely, also big progressive ‘leaps’ of which India in 1947 was seen by some as an example. It was argued that the ‘poor’ and ‘underdeveloped’ India made an unprecedented leap to a democratic form of government. There were prophecies too at the time that this was an aberration which would break down sooner or later. India did see twists and reverses, but its democratisation was real. It constitutionally recognised the free individual and brought the erstwhile marginalised into the arena of politics.

What needs to be taken stock of in these times is the emergence of populist democratically-elected regimes that are right wing and going the authoritarian way in a number of countries. It is worth thinking about the fact that such leadership is emerging in economically developing states that had succeeded in raising the standard of living of their people and simultaneously building a certain attachment to individual rights.

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The rise of Recep Erdogan in Turkey, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Narendra Modi in India, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and many others, together represent the coming to power of democratically elected leaders who have displayed clear populist traits with authoritarian tendencies. Under their leadership, the political culture has seen stronger state controls, consistent suppression of dissent, and pandering to populist sentiments. Critics, minorities, and journalists have often been demonised as ‘anti-national’, ‘anti-people’, ‘red outlaws’, or ‘liberals’ and become the ‘Other’ of society.

Their personal popularity apart, what is it that helps the rise of such leaders and maintains their grip over power? Despite making undemocratic decisions, why do these leaders continue their hold on the state apparatus and people’s imaginations in democracies? What are the socio-economic and institutional reasons that keep them in power? These are some questions that we need to answer.

The popularity of authoritarianism

Hannah Arendt had pointed out that totalitarian regimes are preceded by mass movements and when in power rest upon mass support. She emphasised that they would not be able to survive the many interior and exterior crises if they did not have the confidence of the masses (Arendt 1963, 440). Contemporary authoritarian governments, while being intolerant of dissent, have enjoyed popular support and have found in people’s backing a bulwark that has kept them comfortably in power, despite disastrous economic decisions and trampling upon civil liberties. They have smoothly tided over all adversities. People voluntarily give their support to these leaderships, bringing to mind the phrases coined by political theorist John Keane (2020), “voluntary servitude” and the “new despotism,” that aptly describe the contemporary situation.

In Turkey, the institution of a strong executive exercising centralised power was always present over the decades (though dotted with military takeovers). With the coming of Recep Erdogan, political affairs have moved more stringently in the direction of populist right-wing authoritarianism. Erdogan was the prime minister of Turkey from 2003 to 2014. Under his leadership, the parliamentary system

(with a ceremonial president) was replaced by an executive presidential system in 2017 with Erdogan himself became the president. In the last few years, Erdogan has curbed the freedom of the press and social media. His popularity has slightly declined, yet a military coup of 2016 against him failed largely because it had little popular support and people continued to rally behind him.

Turkey's secular nationalist modernisation, which began in the mid-1920s under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and remained the country's guiding ideology has since frayed. The changing characterisation of the Hagia Sophia, that was built originally as a cathedral, exemplifies this change. The cathedral had been converted into a mosque after the Ottoman take-over in 1453. Ataturk, to affirm Turkey's secular status, converted it into a museum in 1934. In the summer of 2020, a local Turkish court ruled that the Hagia Sophia would be a mosque again.

Vladimir Putin's rise in Russia that began in late 1999 (when he was appointed prime minister by the-then President Boris Yeltsin) was seen as a welcome change in a country going through traumatic changes and instability due to its transition from communism to a more liberal form of democracy. Boris Yeltsin's presidency had brought all-round difficulties and weakened Russia's role on the world stage. On assuming power, Putin, a former intelligence officer in the KGB, curtailed the power of the oligarchs, put limits on the power of the regional administrative divisions, reduced the number of political parties, and streamlined a drifting administration. He also turned Russia into a one-man regime, consolidated his grip on state power and further reoriented the bureaucracy towards excessive centralisation. His authority reigns supreme in Russia today.

Jair Bolsonaro, a former military captain, became Brazil's president in 2019. A charismatic personality, "his main asset is his ability to mobilize and redirect feelings of frustration, aggression and conservatism by offering simple explanations to complex problems like urban violence and the increasing power of drug traffickers" (Pinheiro-Machado 2018). Giving simple and unrealistic answers to complex problems is a typical trait of populist rulers. During his campaign, Bolsonaro projected himself as an outsider who had nothing to do with the former 'corrupt' regimes and promised to fight crime and corruption. He also cast himself as an upholder of family values. He became immensely popular in a country that was fatigued with political corruption and was known for its social conservatism. His unabashed racist and misogynist stances have been seen by commentators as adding to his popularity.

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India went through a long era of democratisation from 1950 onwards, cementing universal adult franchise, regular elections, enhancement of rights, secularism, and rule by institutions as its salient elements. The coming of Narendra Modi as prime minister in 2014 and again in 2019 through democratic elections has seen a marked personalisation of power and a strengthening of the office of the prime minister. Under his leadership, India's constitutional democracy has seen extreme centralisation, erosion of political institutions, taming of the media, Hindu right-wing propaganda, attacks on minorities, and little tolerance for dissent. Drastic decisions like demonetisation, the hurried and haphazard introduction of a Goods and Services Tax, and nation-wide Covid-19 lockdowns have badly hurt the economy. Yet Modi's popularity has not seen major dents and his Bharatiya Janata Party continues to do well in elections. Populist promises like creating 1 crore jobs for India's youth, bringing back black money to the economy, and putting Rs 15 lakhs into each person's account if voted to power, made Modi a favourite of the masses. These promises are far from fulfilled but his leadership remains firm.

The seeds of authoritarianism

To answer the questions about the rise and continuation of populist authoritarian democracies, one has to remember that the institutional structure of a democracy is such that there is always space for the rise of a strong political executive. A popularly elected leader can lean on people's backing to personalise state power. This authoritarian tendency is built into the institutional apparatus of democracy and has been a feature of both parliamentary and presidential systems. Popularity and state power make a formidable combination — it equips one with tremendous power and the ability to rule with an iron hand. This concentration of power can range from mild to heavy, and is morally justified as an expression of 'people's will'.

Paradoxically, 'people's will' becomes a weapon to subvert people's choices and freedoms. Criticisms are warded off as 'attacks' on people's will or subversion of the people's choice. The leader can take the most unpopular of decisions or those that completely purge dissent. The leader often builds a small group, a coterie of trusted individuals that becomes a centre of all important decisions. This is institutionally permissible, formally as a 'cabinet' or informally in a variety of advisory groups. Such a caucus becomes a site of power

and the executive at the helm of affairs is often found to ignore legislative opinions or heavily influence them. In any case, since the legislatures are composed of ruling party majorities, there is no problem in carrying out the whims of the executive leader.

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Another trait that transitional, new, and developing democracies share is 'statism'. Power is centralised in the state, and it is seen as an overarching institution of not only authority but also custodianship. This all-embracing state takes up the responsibility of economic development and industrialisation to put society onto a path of wealth creation and prosperity. The state's deep involvement in economic planning and execution gives it a definitive position. The legitimacy that it thus acquires gives it a decisive role in social affairs too — it is looked up to for guidance in social life. This pivotal position of the state often continues even after a considerable period of economic development and democratisation — as one sees in Russia and India, respectively, as also in Turkey.

Allegiance to a strong state leads to allegiance to the government and in turn to the leader. A strong paternalistic hold on the people and exhortations to 'make the country great again' defines this populist authoritarian strain. Political slogans range from the greatness of the state in the world community to the greatness of the leader to merging of the two. These slogans reflect the pervasive hold of the leader on the socio-political terrain and the life of the citizen.

In Brazil, Bolsonaro's campaign slogan in 2018 was, "Brazil above everything, God above everyone." In Russia, Putin in 2018 went with the slogan, "A strong president — a strong Russia." In Turkey, Erdogan after his victory in 2018 announced that "Turkey has decided to take the side of growth, development, investment, enrichment and a reputable, honourable and influential country in all areas in the world" (Tuysuz et al 2018). In India slogans like "Indira is India and India is Indira," and "Mera Bharat Mahan" tell the story. This has fortified under Modi with, "Har Har Modi Ghar Ghar Modi". More recently we have had Narendra Modi frequently say — in the middle of a loss of livelihoods, mass migration following a national lockdown, and encroachment by China in the western Himalayas — "The world is now taking notice of India".

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Another characteristic that these leaders have in common is 'populism'. A distinction is made by the leader between the 'people' and the 'elite' — usually the former ruling regime or the opponent. The leader positions himself as representative of the 'people', who has come to fight the corruption of the 'elite', protect public wealth, and return the 'siphoned' money back to the people. The people, fed up of slow change, throw their weight behind a 'messiah' in the expectation of rooting out the corrupt and bringing a quick change in their economic position.

The BJP government of Narendra Modi in India rode to power on the shoulders of the India Against Corruption campaign of 2011. Modi's decision in 2016 to demonetise nearly 86% of the Indian currency in circulation was done with a promise of wiping out black money and striking at the supposed ill-gotten wealth of the elite — an action that won him immense popularity. Bolsonaro came to power promising to root out corruption, wipe out crime and clean up politics. That these promises fade away and the leader himself or his party get embroiled in corruption scandals is another matter (but it is usually forgiven by the people).

Middle class nationalism

Middle-class support is crucial for keeping these leaders in power. A widening of the middle class and a rise in their prosperity in these countries have in some measure accounted for the success of these leader-centric regimes. The middle class in the new and developing democracies looks up to the state to lay out an assortment of economic and educational opportunities before it to augment its economic status.

The aspiration for development, modernisation and opportunity also sways the middle class to offer its support to a leader who promises to bring these in a fast-forward mode.

The middle class classically is identified with moderation, tolerance, openness and free speech, and its struggles for more freedom have fired many a national campaign for self-determination. However, the aspiration for development, modernisation and opportunity also

sways the middle class to offer its support to a leader who promises to bring these in a fast-forward mode. The failed military coup in Turkey in 2016 against Erdogan's leadership has been attributed in a large measure to his support among the country's growing middle class. In India, similar support for Narendra Modi among India's growing and prospering middle class explains the BJP's comfortable victories in two successive general elections. The story is similar in Putin's Russia. The middle-class support for Putin is remarkable and accounts for his continuation as the 'supreme' leader of Russia for years.

But economic promises are not enough. These right-wing authoritarian leaders also smartly use the rhetoric of 'nationalism', 'national spirit', and 'patriotism' to exercise a hold on the polity. Constructs like 'great nation', 'growing superpower', 'eternal nation', and 'glorious nation' might be mythic, but they are elixirs that have an attraction and an emotional reverberation that are real. People identify with their 'nation'; it is a construct which invokes a sense of belonging, unity, oneness, greatness, and sanctuary in them when other social havens have faded away or are not in a position to give emotional security. This emotional identification with the 'nation' becomes so strong that people are moved more by faith and emotion in the nation than the objective conditions in which they find themselves, like losing jobs, being displaced, being exposed to violence, or facing disease.

Development and nationalism when combined with 'people's rule' is a potent blend that mobilises the middle class into constructing a united defence of the leader.

It is here that we have to locate the supreme leader's building of the great-nation or offering great-power visions. Putin has tried to restore Russia's great power status, and this is the "mainstay of his popular appeal" among a people who cherish international honour and prestige (Fish 2018, 331). In Turkey, Islamic religious nationalism was gradually replacing the staunch secularism associated with Kemalism even before the coming to power of Erdogan (Karaveli 2016,128). With the coming of Erdogan, Islamic nationalism has only strengthened itself.

This nation-invoking language has a strong resonance among the middle classes. Development and nationalism when combined with 'people's rule' is a potent blend that mobilises the middle class into constructing a united defence of the leader. Till the middle class turns its back on this rhetoric and resumes the defence of civil liberties and speech freedoms, authoritarian regimes can work without much challenge.

Institutionalising authoritarianism

It might be useful to glance at the relationship between institutions and dictatorships. It is generally believed that dictatorships are single-individual oriented; that they rest on the dictates of a single leader and have no need for institutions. As such, they do away with institutions and their power flows from a single leader and a small coterie of advisors.

Dictatorial regimes rely on institutions for effective functioning for increasing their lifespans [...] Political parties and legislatures help dictatorial regimes to distribute spoils and co-opt potential opponents.

In actuality, the reality is much more complex. Research shows that dictatorial regimes rely on institutions for effective functioning for increasing their lifespans (Ezrow and Frantz 2011). Political parties and legislatures help dictatorial regimes to distribute spoils and co-opt potential opponents. They give party members access to scarce resources and contracts, and circumvent government restrictions (Brownlee 2007; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Ezrow and Frantz 2011). The end result is that because of their reliance on institutions these regimes last longer. The countries mentioned in this article might not seem to be full-fledged dictatorships, but going by the logic delineated above one might be compelled to characterise them as such. Conversely, it can also be argued that the era of full-fledged dictatorships is over, and it is the individual-institution hybrid that makes the authoritarianism of today.

In a totalitarian democracy, liberty is affirmed in the attainment of an absolute collective purpose.

It should be added that usually 'liberty' is viewed as a feature of liberal democracies. However, a theoretical analysis of democracy tells us 'liberty' is valued in both liberal and totalitarian democracies. The difference is that in a liberal democracy there is spontaneity and an absence of coercion (Talmon 1963, 459). There is no absoluteness and concreteness of the final goal. The use of force is frowned upon. In a totalitarian democracy, liberty is affirmed in the attainment of an absolute collective purpose (*ibid.*). Individuals pledge themselves to the realisation of this collective purpose, which has preciseness and a concrete nature. In the attainment of this

precise aim, they find their liberty. Totalitarian democracies regard human freedom completely compatible with an exclusive pattern of social existence (*ibid.*).

The institutional design of democracy, the statist nature of the polity, and the populist politics of the leader largely account for the emergence of authoritarian leadership that is able to entrench itself in office. The support of an aspirational and ‘nationalistic’ middle class fortifies this leadership. Added to these are the regime’s reliance on the democratic apparatus (such as the legislature and political parties) and espousal of a particular notion of liberty that is accepted by the citizen. Put together they camouflage authoritarian traits and provide longevity to the rule of the supreme leader.

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