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Why are Democracies Caving In?

By: Satish B. Agnihotri

Both corporations and states seek to collect data and influence behaviour, driving a symbiotic relationship between capital and the state at the expense of citizens. Promising well-being, predatory capital and avaricious rulers now demand digital slavery to maintain their profits and control.

Yes, you read the title right. The question facing us today is not whether democracies are caving in, but why they are caving in. It is not a phenomenon confined to one nation. A lurch towards right-wing autocracies is discernible the world over, whether a Turkey here or a Hungary or an Argentina there. And, more recently, the Netherlands and Italy. France has survived this lurch so far, due perhaps to the depth of its democratic ethos, but the increased popularity of Marine Le Pen makes one wonder what the outcome will be in 2027. Do the election results in Britain, Sri Lanka or earlier in Brazil represent a reversal? Only time will tell.

The United States escaped this lurch in the 2020 presidential election by a whisker, thanks again to the depth of the democratic tradition that saw a government official, a political appointee of the regime, stand his guard and assert that the elections results of that year could not be faulted. This was quite in contrast with cases where the constitutional or statutory authorities were complicit with the regime, willingly or out of fear.

In India, the rightward lurch towards electoral autocracy is a work in progress—its tell-tale signs are visible everywhere. Some people blame the Narendra Modi-Amit Shah leadership for it, while some give them the credit, and approvingly so. But we need to move beyond the individual-centric blame game or the credit game, because, and this is the central theme of the argument here, these individual leaders do not really matter. They are but what is described in the Bhagavad Gita as mere “*nimitta*”; incidental accelerators of a process that would have run its course even otherwise, perhaps at a different pace, but definitely in the same direction.

It is essential, therefore, to identify the larger forces that are driving nation states towards right-wing autocracy marked by an increasing impatience with democracy, a hasty and predatory accumulation of assets, a consequent disdain for equity, human rights, and all liberal values and institutions.

This impatience with democracy has not come all of a sudden. It has been in the making for some years now, but accelerated in the first decade of this century. The new age technologies driven largely by information technology have created avenues for unprecedented accumulation. Thomas Friedman, in his *Thank You for Being Late*, fixes 2007-08 as a watershed year of sorts for convergence of various technologies; digital, electronic and the biological, which created such huge avenues for accumulation that there was no looking back after it. These technologies have enabled the big four like GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon) or X now to even spar with nation states if necessary.

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This new phase of capitalism—highly predatory, acquisitive and impatient in nature—considers democracy a liability and is therefore ready to jettison it. It considers all checks and balances on capital acquisition as impediments to growth and wants to rein them in, including the citizen. What predatory capital needs is not questioning citizens, but compliant subjects who also become willing consumers. Liberal democracies would not, however, deliver compliant citizen and institutions, so capital must find alternatives.

The trouble, however, is that the accumulators—call them corporates or by any other name—cannot rein in citizens by themselves. People, even subjects, will not relish such a world order. So, capital needs the state to carry out the task of subjugating the citizen. Since liberal democracies are inherently an antithesis of this idea, capital needs autocracies, or, if need be, dictatorships. Gone, therefore, are the days when capital needed democracy to subjugate the feudal order. It now needs strong-arm autocracies to create compliant institutions and citizens, invoking security concerns, internal or external, as required.

As ill luck would have it, invoking fear of the pandemic or public health also came in handy. It is not a coincidence that states used the pandemic very effectively to instill an unquestioning adherence among citizens to even irrational decisions taken in its name. Some of these fiats continue long after the pandemic ended.

But all this does not happen overnight. It needs concerted efforts to orchestrate and create perceptions, and this is done through a compliant media and effective propaganda. This task includes exaggerating the deficiencies of democracies, eulogisation of the uniform and “discipline”, and blaming past regimes for all the projected ills of the system. More important is the necessity to create an “other” that can be demonised. It can be variously projected; somewhere as terrorist, or as “infiltrator”, or elsewhere as a religious or ethnic denomination. The whipping up of sentiments against Muslim immigrants in Europe is a case in point.

Gradually the shrill propaganda targets ideologies as well—first against the left, then against the centrists, and gradually all liberal views, indirectly to begin with and brazenly eventually. All of them are gradually painted as dangerous elements that are anti-tradition, anti-social, and, finally, anti-national.

Even the warring factions during the Cold War adopted these techniques in their own countries and among their subjugated allies. What is new then?

Such propaganda is quite obviously challenged and usually by intellectuals, artists, and students. They are therefore the prime targets of any autocracy, and certainly of every dictatorship, which would like to see them subjugated.

Is this happening for the first time? Powerful forces have traditionally been doing such experiments; whether it was Minister Vassakara who was tasked with splitting the democratic state of the Licchavis, or the American intelligence apparatus complicit in the overthrow of the Sukarno regime in Indonesia, or, for that matter, Senator Joseph MacCarthy, who could quite effectively establish a vice-like grip over American academia in the 1950s. Even the warring factions during the Cold War adopted these techniques in their own countries and amongst their subjugated allies. What is new then?

Well, earlier the task of regime change was carried out by the state apparatus and the operations used to be confined to a specific nation state. Besides, the media and the propaganda apparatus also operated on a limited canvas well within the control of state power. The Rupert Murdoch media empire is a standing example of this. Notwithstanding all the power it has wielded, it has never been quite beyond the reach of a powerful nation state.

The current cocktail is altogether different. It has taken roots through the convergence of communication technology and capital, reflected in the speed and the reach of electronic media, which has enabled instant visual communication from any part of the world. This communication apparatus has a reach well beyond the boundaries of nation states. Global giants such as Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Twitter, or X, are products of this communication revolution. Their grip over technology and the reach they have established, right down to the “last consumer standing”, have opened up before them opportunities for unprecedented profit making.

Predatory capital is in a hurry to accumulate profits and autocracy is in a hurry to control its citizen, and, more important, both want freedom from any accountability. What can be a better option than to establish complete control over the media and information?

The fruits of this communication link with consumers are not confined merely to these big giants but to the entire corporate world, which can use communication to reach their customers and influence their behaviour, thanks to the treasure trove of information that helps build consumer profiles. The more the information, the better and more effective the communication, the business, and the profit. Information is now oil; in fact, an ocean of it. The deeper you dive, the wider the consumer base and the more the profit.

The desire to collect information about customers and influence their thoughts and actions is not confined to the corporate world. The state has an equally strong desire to collect information about its subjects and to influence their thoughts and actions. They too need the new technologies. This is where the symbiotic relationship between capital and the state begins—at the cost of the citizen. Predatory capital is in a hurry to accumulate profits and autocracy is in a hurry to control its citizen, and, more important, both want freedom from any accountability. What can be a better option than to establish complete control over the media and information?

The strong emphasis on digital governance in recent years needs to be seen in this light. It has led to a surveillance government in most autocracies and the global giants have chosen to be co-opted as long as it helps their accumulation. There is now an emphasis on maintaining order—even if it is at the cost of the law. The “legibility” of the citizen becomes a lot more granular now, and, coupled with the collapse of regulatory institutions and a prostrate civil society, as James C. Scott would term it, the preconditions for an autocratic takeover of the state apparatus are fully in place.

Predatory capital and the avarice-led ruling class now follow a common script—promising their subjects physical well-being, but demanding digital slavery as an important ingredient to keep the profit earning intact. They can draw comfort in the cold logic of economist Robert Fogel, winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize, that slavery was an efficient market solution despite its moral heinousness. So, in the post-pandemic era, the state can ask citizens to be thankful for their survival and physical comfort, perish any thought of dissent, and submit to cyber slavery as an efficient solution despite its moral heinousness!

The calibrated high-handedness of the state apparatus, is now aimed at one goal—converting the questioning citizen into a compliant subject to further corporate accumulation. The compact between the citizen and the state to rein in capital is dead and gone. Henceforth it will be capital and the surveillance state that will join hands to rein in the citizen. Like Mark Antony did after Julius Caesar’s assassination, crony capital will inform us loftily that democracy is dead, yet assert, “Long live democracy!”

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This piece is translated from Kyon Darak Rahe Hai Loktantra?, which appeared in Hans, February 2024.

Footnotes:

1 Interactive Encyclopaedia of the Palestine Question, “Demography and the Palestine Question (I)”. <https://www.palquest.org/en/highlight/294/demography-and-palestine-question-i> ; Rohini Hensman, 2023, “Palestine and Israel: Political, Legal and Moral Issues”, The India Forum. <https://www.theindiaforum.in/history/palestine-and-israel-historical-legal-and-moral-issues>

2 The quotations that follow are from the One Democratic State Initiative website. See <https://odsi.co/en/#faqR>

1 The poetic passages in this essay are the author’s compositions, inspired by the cited chapters and verses of the Bible.