

Populism: a threat to Democracy

OUTLINE

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ESSAY

For those who believe in liberal democracy, it is sobering to review the events of the past quarter century when liberal democracy was on the march. The Berlin wall had fallen; the Soviet Union had collapsed; new democracies were emerging throughout Europe, and Russia seemed to be in transition as well. South Africa's apartheid regime was tottering. Liberal democracy had triumphed and was perceived as the only legitimate form of government. However, today, liberal democracy faces multiple internal and external challenges. Among them, rising populism is the most perilous one which seek to drive a wedge between democracy and liberalism. As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt in their book "How Democracies Die", argue that the greatest threats to democracy today are not old fashioned military coups but its dismantling by elected leaders who undermine the democratic systems that brought them to power in the first place.

Therefore, it can be rightly said that ~~division~~ rise in populism threatens democratic norms, necessary for the durability of democracy. Thus rising populism is a perilous threat to democracy; because it polarizes electorate, marginalizes the vulnerable, attacks civil liberties and poses considerable threat to multilateralism. Moreover, factors like economic instability, inequality and conducive media environment contribute to its rise. However by shaping mass perceptions, successful gate keeping and reducing inequality ~~and~~ by timely implementation of ~~steps~~ ~~in~~ this menace can be thwarted.

To begin with, Populism refers to range of political stances that juxtapose the common people against the elite. It is frequently associated with anti-establishment and anti-political sentiment.

Jan Warrner Muller in his book,

"What is Populism", defines it as a particular moralistic imagination of politics, that sets morally pure, and fully unified, but ultimately fictional people against elites who are deemed corruptor, in some other way morally inferior. Moreover, populists claim that

they, and only they represent people. In addition to that, Populism follows democracy like a shadow. For example, if aspirations generated by democracy are not satisfied with, political discontent is created thus leading towards the rise of populism. In a nutshell, it is a by product of democracy, which now threatens democracy itself.

First and foremost, Populist mobilization polarizes the electorate into exclusionary groups. It disregards diversity and leads to creation of "us" and "them" camps. Milan W. Svoblic, a professor of political science at Yale University, writes in his article, "Polarization versus Democracy" that political polarization undermines the public's ability to serve as a democratic check. Moreover, in polarized electorates voters are willing to trade off democratic principles for partisan interests. Additionally, in such dynamics, each side views the other party with increasing distrust, bias and enmity. Perceptions that "if you win, I lose" grow. Thus, populism shatters the core of democracy by breeding polarization, which further paves way for marginalization.

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Another worrisome perspective to ~~populism~~ populism is that, it disrupts the existing normative consensus within a society. Thanks to its use of marginalization and bogeyman tactics, the socio-political fabric of the country is damaged. Human rights abuses and hatred become rampant. For instance Narendra Modi and his party, Bharatiya Janata Party used nationalism as a weapon and eroded the secular image of India. As Umar Ashraf writes in his article for Pakistan Today, "Is rising populism a problem for democracy" that Modi has built his base on Hindutva ideology and can be regarded as a classic example of populism. Thus, by impacting the roots of democracy that are based in diversity, Populism creates ground for marginalization and other anti-democratic tendencies.

In addition to that, Populists have anti democratic tendencies. For instance they attack civil liberties, which are necessary for the durability of democracy. They undermine freedom of expression, put curbs on media freedom and create

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barriers in working of independent, human rights non-governmental organizations. Jan Wagner Muller in his book "What is Populism" argues that illebrat elements are in fact threats to democracy. Similarly,

The Economist Intelligence Unit described India as "Flawed democracy" and slipped its ranking to 53rd on Democracy Index. Attacks on Muslims, increased pressure on human rights group and ~~attacks~~ intimidation of journalists and civil rights activists were the main reason behind the drop. Thus, populism endangers civil liberties making populists to rise further and avoid accountability.

In the same way, Populists erode the institutional checks on executive power. By doing this, they damage the basic structure of Democratic system. Moreover, they set the scene for a sort of autocratic style of governance. For example The Justice and Development Party of Tayyip Erdogan passed law to restructure judiciary. As reported in Reuters "Turkey's parliament passes law to restructuring judiciary, bolstering Erdogan".

lead to erosion of judicial independence and tightening of Erdogan's grip over judiciary. Similarly in 2004, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez stacked the Supreme Court and electoral committee with his supporters, later in 2008 electoral committee disqualified hundreds of opposition candidates. Thus, Populist's tendency to crush institutional checks leads to crumbling democracy and gives them free hand to attack opposition.

Populists abuse the power of government to attack opposition. They often demonize the opposition as illegitimate and unpatriotic. To quote an example, During the Hugo Chavez presidency, Venezuela blacklisted citizens from government jobs who had signed a petition in support of a referendum to recall Chavez from office. As reported in Reuters "We don't accept fascists", Chavez political ally Alberto Muller said, while referring to more than two million Venezuelans. They had just exercised a right introduced in the constitution rewritten under Chavez. However, they became fascists

and illegitimate. The State was justified to keep them jobless and poor.

Thus, there is no doubt left, that populists not only harm democracy on domestic level but also pose threat to international cooperation.

Last but not the least, the rise of populists constitutes significant threat to multilateralism and integration.

As Jan Warner Muller argues that Populists expand their support base by employing Clientelist practices, they often focus on issues that support their narrative.

Prominent example of this can be Donald Trump's withdrawal from various international organizations citing his "America First" policy. Among them withdrawal from Paris Agreement, Trans-Pacific Partnership, United Nations Human Rights Council, United Nations' Culture and Education body, UNESCO and the withdrawal from Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action are the most prominent ones.

Thus, the menace of populism not only derail democracy but can emerge as an existential threat to humanity. Therefore factors contributing to the rise of populism

should be dismantled.

First of all, short sighted economic policies are the bane of democratic advancements. Internationally acclaimed economist Dambisa Moyo in her book, "Edge of Chaos: Why Democracy is Failing to Deliver Economic Growth", argues that, "around the world, people who are angry at stagnant wages and growing inequalities have rebelled against established governments and turned to political extremes. Liberal democracy now struggles to overcome unprecedented economic headwinds from scarce resources to unsustainable debt burdens. Democracies risk falling prey to nationalism and protectionism." Therefore, it can be observed that, in crisis situation populists get opportunity to turn the deprived ones against the elite and populism balloons.

In addition to economic instability, rising inequality becomes fodder for populist rhetoric. Income inequality results in myriad of other inequalities such as living standard, education and health. Thus, in such circumstances, masses look for

a menial and consequently become prey to populist narratives like anti-immigration. According to Nat O'Connor, lecturer at Ulster University, "Populists portray extreme inequality as evidence that the political establishment has lost its credibility." In his ~~article~~ Research paper, "Three Connections between Rising economic inequality and the Rise of Populism," He adds that, "Extreme inequality chimes with the populist Credo that "the people" are pitted against a self-serving, if not corrupt elite. Thus, it can be deduced from the above arguments, that, due to populist rhetoric of holistically addressing the decline of prosperity, masses turn to support them. The slogan of Donald Trump, "Make America Great Again" clearly validates the argument.

In the similar manner, Media environment conducive to populist rhetoric bolsters support for populism. Media give disproportionate attention to the sensational ideas of the populists. Most notably, Social media can set the agenda and attract coverage in the mainstream media. Additionally, it provides them freedom to articulate their ideology and spread

their messages without filters or framing from mainstream media.

To quote a case, Donald Trump's campaign in 2016 was largely based on social media, particularly his twitter account. Later on, he was also active after becoming president. He had close to 90 million followers.

According to a CNN report, "Donald Trump's presidency by the numbers" he tweeted for more than twenty five thousand times during his presidency which were considered official statements. Similarly, January 6 storming of Capitol Hill was largely influenced by social media. Thus, it can be concluded that media plays a major role in the surge of populism.

Even though, media contributes to the upswing of populism, it can reshape people's perception of norms. By reshaping people's perception, political polarization can be reduced. According to (Matthew J. Goodwin, "Right Response: Understanding and Countering Populist Extremism" Chatham House) The professionalization of politics has arguably left large numbers of voters "enfranchised". By shifting focus towards grass root level

awareness of socio-political issues like immigration and economy can help in thwarting extremist rhetoric of populists. Thus the role of media is important in moulding the narrative against populists.

Likewise, the process of ^{democratic} reverse backsliding can help in countering the rising populism. The said model has remained successful in the case of Slovakia. Democracies around the world can learn from the Slovakian model that involves three strategies.

The first among them is civil resistance that involves mass protests against civil rights abuses. Secondly, rejection of Manichean mindset and emphasizing on inclusivity proved effective. Thirdly, debating the populists and negating their misinformation proved beneficial for Zuzana Caputova. She became the first female president of Slovakia. Thus democratic backsliding can be reversed.

In the same way, successful gatekeeping can keep anti-democratic forces at bay. Parties have the power to accept and reject candidates. Thus they

can keep extremist out of the public view. In their book, "How Democracies Die", Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt compared two different scenarios. First the case of Venezuelan populist dictator Hugo Chavez, who rose to power even after his anti-democratic actions. Chavez led a failed take over and was arrested for ~~murder~~ treason. In the second case, The Swedish conservative party ousted fascist sympathizers in 1933. Both the instances bore different results. In case of the former, it proved fatal for democracy when Chavez won land sliding victory in 1998 elections and dismantled democratic structure. While in the case of latter, even though the party lost votes but were successful in protecting democracy. Therefore, democratic parties can play beneficial role in protecting democratic norms.

Finally, the successful implementation of Sustainable Development Goals can end inequality, that provides fertile ground for populism. The SDGs are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. Most importantly the SDGs and 10 are should be prioritized to eradicate inequality and leave no place for populists.

to make their extremist narratives around these issues. The former is concerned about poverty eradication while the latter targets reducing inequalities. Thus, by incorporating these goals in national policies and their timely implementation can lead to socio-political development of a country. To wrap the argument, it can be stated, that, by reducing wealth disparity extremist rhetorics of populists will vanish, thus SDG implementation is imperative. Taking everything into account, the surge in populism is a grave threat to democracy. It not only influences the democratic culture of a society but also leads to toxic divisions in society. Populists after coming in power, commit human rights violations. They not only harm basic liberties at national level but also pose threat to international cooperation. Moreover, they target the most vulnerable like minority groups, and bars non-profit organizations from work. Similarly, to empower themselves, they change rules in their favor and circumvent the accountability process. Not only this,

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their authoritarian style of administration provides them with opportunity to harass opposition and disregard them. Unfortunately, poor economic conditions coupled with inequality provide enough ground to populists, for the nourishment of their extremist agendas. Similarly, media particularly social media aggravate the impact of their narratives. However, as it is known, there is always light at the end of a tunnel, in the same way, the alarming surge of populism can be thwarted. Indubitably, positive media role for exposing their agendas is necessary for anti-populist narrative building. Similarly, the slovakian example of exposing their lies with facts and mass movement can be instrumental. In a nutshell achieving policy goals set by UN can eradicate inequality, and thus populists will never be able to set their agendas around these issues.