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**Populism and counter-populism**

Populist leaders portray themselves as capable of jolting the failed status quo and dynastic politics by invoking the rhetoric of the ‘aam admi’, asserting to bring in an egalitarian society to attract the lower rungs of society. However, once in power, populists largely end up – with some variation – polarizing society, threatening democratic institutions and norms, and eroding individual rights and freedom. Pakistan’s democratic institutions and norms, civil society and liberties and governance are under the threat of Khan’s populism.

Cas Mudde, a political scientist, argues that populism is a thin-centered ideology that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonist groups of pure people (led by a populist) and corrupt elites (generally led by traditional politicians). Populists construct an ‘enemy’ through rhetoric and slogans that is not an outsider but their fellow countryfolk that generates polarisation within the society.

For instance, Trump used the ‘Save America’ rhetoric to paint the news media, big tech organizations, political opposition and the Supreme Court as an ‘enemy’ of people’s freedom of speech and thought. Modi’s Hindutva ideology clearly differentiates Hindus as the pure people of India and has portrayed the corrupt elite of the Indian National Congress as secularists that do not represent Hindus – the pure people.

In their attempt to construct an ‘enemy’ and implement their agenda of change, populists start hurting individual and minority rights. Trump’s hostile policies against Blacks, Muslims and Hispanics, and Bolsonaro’s rhetoric of anti-migration are cases in point. Moving towards South Asian populism, Khan claimed to stand for minority rights but had to reverse his decision of appointing economist Atif Mian in his Economic Advisory Council. His recent reaction to the Hazara community’s protest over the murdered Hazara miners showed his wavering commitment towards his claim to support minority rights. In India, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) is a glaring manifestation of Modi’s anti-pluralistic populism. Furthermore, Modi’s slogan of ‘Sabka saath sabka vikas’ contradicts his actions of infringing minority rights.

Slogans are important for populists as they help them connect with the people and portray them as the only hope to change the system. To assert and implement those slogans, populists require an authoritarian style of leadership that damages democratic institutions and norms. Political scientists call populists’ tenure ‘democratic backsliding’. Populists’ ascendancy to power relies upon using their rights and free press to express their frustrations with the government and to mobilise support under democratic pluralistic governments. Once in power, they turn out to be the real menace to those institutions.

The populist rhetoric of all leaders is based on extensive use of the personal pronoun to portray themselves as the only agent/leader who can change and enhanced emphasis on creating a deep divide between corrupt elites and people of the country. For example, Modi’s ‘I am new India’ was used to bring himself and his party in equilibrium with the nation. Comparatively, Khan constructed his image as the ‘Kaptaan’ who is the one capable of driving forward. Such populist authoritarian leadership comes in direct confrontation with civil society, that is responsible to defend liberal democracy, and adversely affects civil society and civil liberties.

Trump’s claim of ‘drain the swamp’ was to overthrow the existing political setup and then, being an agent of change, revive the system. To fulfil his claim, authoritative Trump blamed the judiciary, lawyers, political opposition, bureaucracy and journalists supported by the establishment for all the ills existing in the system. By the same token, Khan built his rhetoric of ‘Naya Pakistan’ on the discourse of removing the evil of political corruption and bringing in transparent governance.

His slogan ‘Naya Pakistan’ met a different fate, though. He promised to bring new faces to govern Pakistan but landed in government with the same old technocrats and electables that have been part of every government and who are supported by powerful quarters. Khan’s larger-than-life claim that his fight is against the corrupt political elite of Pakistan suffers when he is seen surrounded by friends like Zulfi Bokhari and Pervez Khattak (under pending NAB investigation), Jahangir Tareen and Khusro Bakhtiar (top beneficiaries of the sugar crisis), Abdul Razzaq Dawood (conflict of interest contrary to Khan’s claim of conflict of interest before coming to power). Khan himself had to pay a meagre fine to regularise his illegal encroachment to construct his Bani Gala palace.

Evidently, the basic assumptions about populist leaders are that they tend to stay in power for long and threaten democratic institutions through their authoritarian style of leadership. Nonetheless, examples of South Korea and South Africa are important reminders where populist leaders remained under pressure from the electorate to follow their reform agenda. Hence, citizens have a critical role in defending democracy and fundamental rights from being manipulated or undermined by populism.

Furthermore, Trump’s defeat is an important reminder for populist leaders who, once in power, tend to undermine democratic institutions and norms. Americans’ rise against Trump’s populism is an encouraging sign for countries with populist leaders. Nonetheless, to restore the damage done to democracy and address the deep polarization carried out under the period of populist rule is a daunting challenge for the counter-populist leader coming to power after a populist rule. The next elections in Brazil (2022), Philippines (2022) and Pakistan (2023) could prove critical for such efforts in maintaining and/or restoring democratic institutions and norms in those countries. Among these, Philippines has an advantage because presidents there are limited to one six-year term in office thus there is a hope that after Duterte’s illiberal rule ending in 2022, Philippines could get an opportunity to restore the damage done by Duterte to institutions if he is not succeeded by another populist leader.

In Pakistan too, there is hope. Progressively developing as it seems to be, the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) emerged as a counter-populist movement that is questioning ‘Naya Pakistan’ and Khan’s claim to be a people’s leader to eliminate the common citizen’s economic miseries. The PDM has also challenged Khan’s reliance on the establishment. Khan’s recent attack on the Election Commission of Pakistan is also a glaring example of his populist tendencies.

Claiming to be a proponent of free press and the right to dissent before, suddenly the PM’s thinking seemed to have changed completely; under his government the media has faced severe restrictions on its independence, including the finances of media houses being curtailed, journalists censored and even arrest of a media house owner. This is done to curb any criticism on poor governance and squeezing the space for the PDM to organize and mobilise public grievances effectively.

And, yet, the PDM is moving forward. Importantly, within the PDM the PPP has an instrumental role in defending democratic institutions and norms from being damaged further as the party has continued its emphasis to bring the PDM’s fight within the remit of constitutional and parliamentary practices such as contesting by-elections, Senate elections, and in the process constraining space for populism to inflict lasting damage to Pakistan’s nascent democracy and prevent democracy backsliding in country.

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