

Populism: the illusion of change | The Express Tribune

Abbas Moosvi June 13, 2023

Pakistan's various power centres must acknowledge that business as usual is simply no longer an option

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Populism has been on the rise across the globe. Leaders like Trump, Putin, Bolsonaro, Johnson and — closer to home — Modi and Khan have capitalised upon a particular kind of void in the political arena, one characterised by a breakdown of trust in institutions and a generalised sense of insecurity and suspicion among the masses. These apprehensions are fundamentally linked to economic precarity, whereby ordinary (non-propertied) citizens seem to be experiencing greater levels of difficulty in meeting their basic sustenance related needs in the form of food, shelter, education and healthcare. Populist leaders have capitalised on these frustrations by presenting themselves as allies to the people — the only problem being that they are hardly ever interested in genuine change. Au contraire, most only aggravate miseries by detracting from material conditions and discreetly advancing the interests of the ruling elite under the guise of pragmatism.

The populist playbook revolves around convenient scapegoats — moral decay, threats to ethnic/racial supremacy, the loss of religious glories, departures from historic norms and traditions, etc — rather than an acknowledgment of the root cause of people's troubles, namely of power being excessively concentrated within a small elite. Once having made their case, leaders project themselves as the only individuals capable of functioning as saviours in an intricately constructed 'good versus evil' drama. Within this modality, they position themselves as heroes destined to lead the vulnerable masses out of their subjugation.

As is evident by now, however, populists are ultimately part of the same economic elite: those that have benefitted from the status quo. Rather than substantive change, therefore, they only manage to create the illusion of it. These are wolves in sheep clothing, who deploy their charisma to manufacture consent for the interests of their class by cleverly diverting attention away from the genuine causes of popular discontent. The outcome is increased politicisation in society, a generalised rage: anger with no direction or clear outlet. Labourers pit against one another on the basis of identity-based frictions

while those at the top continue to enjoy lavish lifestyles in insulated spaces. The eventuality of such governance arrangements is the preservation of perverse incentive structures within key institutions, which continue to operate on the basis of extraction.

A key component within populist rhetoric is that of exceptionalism. “I am not like them,” says the leader, referring to career politicians: those who have constantly reneged on their promises to the public. This is not altogether misplaced. Indeed, the ‘cabal’ (a secret, closed circuit network of elites that control decision making) is not mere conspiracy theory. Faces in government will thus periodically change, creating the impression of democratic transition, but policies largely remain the same: favouring certain power centres over the nation at large. Over time, people have picked up on this grand deception — demanding political representatives who will not talk down to them, as if they were inconveniences in the way. Ruling elites have responded to this grievance by conjuring the populist. In him they present a man who behaves like the archetypal nationalist: dressing accordingly, using the same kind of language, feigning sympathy for people’s grievances, and promising to ‘clean up the rot’ in typical macho style.

Elaborate performances are thus staged in which the populist rules — at least in appearance — with an iron fist, cracking down on minorities of all kinds and adopting aggressive foreign policy that seeks to reignite old frictions with rival nations. While this rigid, tunnel-visioned ‘strongman’ is successfully able to convince most that he is engaged in a project that aims to reset society and revive a collective feeling of pride, his economic policy only functions to make lives increasingly miserable for anyone not among the top echelons. His chants of freedom, sovereignty and independence ring hollow when the facts of his governance are laid bare: cutting education/healthcare budgets, refusing to tax wealth/property, engaging in patronage politics with landed elites, bending the knee to international financial institutions, pumping the security apparatus with endless funds, pandering to hyper-conservative elements of society, and censoring journalists who challenge him — just to name a few.

The nature of politics in such a context is terribly worrisome: with symbols, rituals and simulations more broadly taking the place of real contestations of power. This is made all the easier with the rise of digital technologies — particularly online spaces — which are designed to present content that is geared to one’s preferences, creating echo chambers of misinformation and fuelling a toxic form of tribalism in society. Indeed, social polarisation and political populism have risen in tandem over the past decade or so, creating unresolvable tensions between (two) major groups in society. The defining feature of these tussles, however, is that in terms of actual economic and social policy, both ‘sides’ are in actuality quite similar to one another — the only points of departure being trivial differences in narrative. In the words of Noam Chomsky, “The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum.”

The only hope of departing from the perversions of populism is to reorient the focus of politics

towards real concerns affecting ordinary citizens. Easy, if not free, access to high quality nutrition, education, healthcare and housing ought to be top priorities in this regard. A well-fed, intelligent and proactive populace is less likely to be pulled in by deceptive 'leaders' that are ultimately just useful tools for the establishment. Once these basic needs are satisfied, the nature of politics will automatically be elevated: with questions of decolonisation, land reform, industrial policy, institutional reform, climate mitigation, regional cooperation, curtailment of inequality, devolution of power, etc finally being granted the attention and careful thought that they deserve. The key point here is that when people are not spending the entirety of their waking hours worried about how to make ends meet, they will have the freedom to think critically and demand for progressive agendas from political parties.

For all this to be possible, Pakistan's various power centres must acknowledge that business as usual is simply no longer an option. A simple choice confronts them: cede space and promote genuine democratisation or be witness to increasing levels of unrest and a possible disintegration of the state.

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