POLITICAL MASCULINITIES: THE RISE OF 'STRONGMEN'

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During a 2011 international media conference organised by the British Council in London, I was approached by a group of Indian journalists who were curious to know my views on Pakistan's former dictator and 'strongman' General Pervez Musharraf.

I must clarify that the term 'strongman' was used by them. This wasn't the first time I had come across Indians praising Musharraf as a strongman. So on the last day of the conference, I asked one of them to explain to me their fascination with Musharraf.

"They want their own strongman, which they never had," he chuckled.

"But why would they want a 'strongman' when elected men and women in your country have done rather well compared to all the strongmen that have ruled Pakistan?" I asked.
He replied by saying that India's new middle-classes feel that their country's political system is corrupt and weak and unable to defend its Hindu majority from brazen attacks from Pakistan.

This left me scratching my head: "But India's economy has been outperforming that of Pakistan's for years now, and India has a much better image abroad," I smiled.

"No, boss," he replied, "what is the use of a good economy or image if they can't stop attacks on our pride and people." He almost sounded melancholic.

Three years later, India elected the unabashed Hindu nationalist, Narendra Modi as PM. India's own 'strongman.'

The term 'strongmen' (in politics) is rooted in the largely mythical exploits of ancient monarchs who 'ruled like benevolent kings but with an iron fist.' It's an expression of a political masculinity driven by fearlessness, fairness, ambition and mental and physical strength. However, the more immediate roots of the term lie in the ways certain authoritarian rulers and dictators came to power and conducted matters of the state and government during the Cold War (1945-1990).
The size of authoritarian regimes peaked in the 1970s, when 75 percent of the governments in the world were authoritarian. They were said to be ruled by 'strongmen.' The term had a negative connotation when used by political scientists, but it was actually celebrated by those for whom it was being used. Some of these 'strongmen' were romanticised through state propaganda as men who were boldly protecting their societies from malevolent forces that were out to usurp a country's

resources, progress, pride, and existence. After the collapse of the Cold War in 1990, it was widely believed that in the defeat and absence of the Soviet Union and because of the triumph of capitalism, liberal democracy would rapidly proliferate in former dictatorships. The era of 'strongmen' was understood to be over.

Nevertheless, after 1990, the term 'strongmen' did recede, and many countries adopted democracy, in one form or the other. But the term returned with a bang after 2010, mainly on the wings of two democracies gradually sliding into autocracies. Russia was a 'hybrid democracy' and, like most post-Cold War hybrid regimes, never fully developed into the kind of liberal democracy that most analysts believed it would evolve into. More striking was the case of Turkey which, after decades of military interventions, did manage to make a successful transition with the 2003 election of Recep Erdogan as PM and the rapid erosion of the political influence of Turkey's military.

However, Russia's Vladimir Putin and Turkey's Erdoğan soon discovered that an authoritarian set-up can last longer behind a facade of liberal democracy, compared to the bygone nature of dictatorship, which was openly antagonistic towards democracy. Their 'success' in this respect did not go unnoticed. After 2014, a wave began to sweep across various regions in which democratically elected men started to use similar tactics, putting themselves at the centre of an authoritarian set-up but giving it a veneer of democracy. They all became the new 'strongmen.'

More alarmingly, this not only happened in hybrid set-ups in former dictatorships (such as Pakistan, for example) but also in developed democracies in various European countries, and in India and the US.

According to a detailed study on the 'new strongmen' published in the journal, Political Research Exchange (Vol: 2, Issue 1, 2020), the current breed of 'strongmen' share similar characteristics with the 'strongmen' of the Cold War. The only difference is, unlike their Cold War contemporaries, the new ones come to power through a democratic process. But they mould, turn and twist democratic institutions and tools to formulate an authoritarian set-up.

The study defines the personalities of strongmen as 'dark traits' which include, 'narcissism (grandiosity, ego-reinforcement behaviours, tendency to seek attention and admiration), subclinical psychopathy (lack of remorse, insensitivity, impulsivity); and Machiavellianism (tendency to use manipulation and strategic behaviours).' They embody a push for a centralisation of executive power, hierarchical governance, muscular treatment of opponents and the media, and the promotion of nationalism.

The study further states that the electoral attraction for the new strongmen is because of disillusionment with established democratic models. However, a May 10, 2018 report by the International Association for Political Science Studies (IAPSS) posits that 'a combination of uncertainty with the false perception of an escalating threat has led to an increase in calls for strong leaders.' It adds that societies are now more vulnerable and under the influence of personalist authoritarian strongmen that provide simple answers — often fallacies — to the complex issues of today's world.

The report argues that, psychologically, new strongmen regimes use old authoritarian tactics of inducing anxiety in the polity about fears that may be exaggerated, or non-existent. For example, returning to my conversation with the Indian journalist in London — someone who I am sure rejoiced at Modi's election — the Modi regime's 'manly' anti-Muslim/ anti-Pakistan bent and actions against ideas such as 'love jihad' may be a carryover from a decades-old Hindu middle-class anxiety.

According to the German historian Markus Daechsel, in the early 20th century, there was a feeling among Hindu nationalists that the Hindus (as opposed to India's Muslims) lacked militant virtues. Daechel writes that it was widely believed (by the Hindu middle-classes) that 'Muslims had a higher birth rate than Hindus because of their unrestrained sexuality.' Is it possible then that those middle-class Indians who were looking for a 'strongman' also had this embedded in their psyches? Perhaps.

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