

OPINION POLITICS

Old Wine in New Bottles: Watching the Rise of the Global Far Right

This too shall pass, like the 1930s did. But the latter exited after a huge catastrophe that underlay the long peace and strengthened institutions of the postwar era. Can we see off the new bottle without major catastrophe?



Illustration: Pariplab Chakraborty



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POLITICS 7 HOURS AGO

It is once again that time of the year when one cannot help taking stock of the human condition. A little over seven years ago, I **speculated** about whether the history of the catastrophic 1930s that saw the rise of far right-wing regimes in Europe was about to repeat itself. While noting similarities with the present, including the culpability of old elites that facilitated the rise of charismatic right-wing populist leaders, I concluded that while history was unlikely to be repeated in the same manner, human tragedy of indeterminate magnitude was likely.

The totalitarian states in Europe in the 1930s preyed on their own citizens. The brunt of current right-wing extremism in the west was now likely to be felt by the large number of immigrants with no voting rights, from the developing, and particularly Muslim, world, fleeing right-wing regimes in their own countries. Classic fascist regimes, that target and polarise their own citizens, were more likely in developing countries where liberalism, civil society organisations and institutions are still relatively weak.

Nothing has happened over the last seven years – the tragedy unfolding in Europe and the Middle East, and the continued triumphal march of the far right across the globe, of which the prospects of a second Trump presidency in the US is emblematic – to allay these fears. Indeed, the continued inability of entrenched elites to address subaltern concerns of joblessness, particularly growing youth unemployment, and inequality, have amplified these fears. What has been clarified in the interim is that while it might not be very different in substance, the face of the 21st century far right would be quite different from what it was a hundred years ago. Like old wine in new bottles.

Perhaps the biggest lesson that the far right has learnt since is that given the hegemony of democratic ideas in civil society, formal institutions of state power, such as the constitution, extant laws, the judiciary, the ballot box, electoral machinery, the media, etc. cannot simply be cast aside like a century ago. Indeed, retaining the trappings of democracy as smokescreen while hollowing it out from inside by capturing its apparatus so that it works exclusively in your favour, enhances legitimacy. This is made possible by taking advantage of loopholes in the constitution or extant laws to appoint those you can somehow control, through shared ideology, and through carrot and stick when required.

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The second big difference between the old and new far right lies in leveraging communication for mass mobilisation in the ‘post-truth’ digital era. The 20th century fascist dictatorships controlled the media, and through it information. The new right knows that it is impossible to control information in the digital age so injects instead a barrage of falsehoods and deep fakes into the public domain through social media, amplifying fear, uncertainty and doubt to win arguments through evidence and reason. George Orwell (*Animal Farm*) feared States who would deprive us of information, Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*) those that would overwhelm us with so much that truth would be drowned out. The 20th century fascist dictatorships used Orwellian tools, their 21st century counterparts Huxleyan.

India is a frontrunner of these trends, or at least that part of the country north of the Vindhyas. One is led to wonder how this far right turn could have occurred in ‘secular’ India whose foundational ideology is Gandhian-Nehruvian. This stems at least partly from the smugness of old elites in brushing aside subaltern concerns. Similar questions were asked by historians of the far right turn in Germany in the 1930s. Why was there so little resistance and outrage in civil society. It is important however to look beyond the surface to the currents in motion beneath it. Despite the overt secular democratic framework, soft Hindutva has been the dominant ideology in large parts of northern India since the days of the national movement. This has now morphed into hard Hindutva. Those who were socialised into soft Hindutva are perhaps not sufficiently motivated or outraged to oppose

hard Hindutva.

But India is only a microcosm of what is occurring globally. Old wine in new bottles is the zeitgeist of our current times. Look about you. Turkey and Eastern Europe have been veering rightwards for a while. Both China and Russia have taken a sharp nationalist right-wing turn under Xi and Putin. The prospects for the return of Trump are strong. The far right coasted to victory in Italy, and more recently in the Netherlands, both core countries of the European Union, the bastion of liberalism and democracy. Marine Le Pen in France and the AfD in Germany are on the rampage in what is the heart of Europe.

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Those of my generation brought up on a diet of individual rights, democracy, secularism and universalist beliefs will just have to sit out the decline of populist and charismatic right-wing authorities. They have nothing new to contribute to human progress over the long run, as these are counterrevolutionary attempts to put the clock back. This too shall pass, like the 1930s did. But the latter exited after a huge catastrophe that underlay the long peace and strengthened institutions of the postwar era. Can we see off the new bottle without major catastrophe? I normally send out a forward-looking message of hope to friends at the beginning of each year. I struggled to pen something hopeful that could also be straight from the heart. The best I could come up with was my translation of a poem by the Urdu poet Faiz Ludhianvi:

New Year what about you is new?
What of all this festivity?
For the self-same daylight I view,
The self-same stars at night there be.

It looks like yesterday to me,
Neither the skies above have changed;
Nor the ground below that I see,
Just some numbers are rearranged.

Will this year be like those before,
And with it the same twelve months bring?
If you are new then show me more,
A new dawn, new awakening!

Many years come and go these eyes have seen,
New Year take me where they have never been.

Alok Sheel is a former civil servant and writer.

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