

The Far Right in today's world: Formidable but not Unbeatable

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The Covid-19 pandemic has frozen much social and economic life throughout the world, but it has not stopped political polarization. In the US, there has been a welcome push-back from the left as millions of people throughout the country went to the streets to protest police repression and racism. The right has been stunned, and hopefully, the surge from the left will lead to the ouster of Donald Trump in the November elections.

In the rest of the world, however, Covid 19 did not prevent far right figures from consolidating their power. In the most egregious example, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines got the Congress to approve an Anti-Terrorism Bill that would allow the government to arrest people suspected of "terrorism" without warrant and hold them for 24 days.

One of the consequences of the obligatory lull in political activity prompted by Covid-19 is that it allowed many to reflect more profoundly on the sources of the rise of far right and its dynamism during webinars that enabled activists and scholars from all over the world to share their insights on a phenomenon that is as threatening as climate change.

Following are the lessons that some have distilled from some of these very productive sessions.

The Momentum of the Far Right

The two biggest surprises of the last half century were the collapse of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the last decade of the 20th century and the coming to power of extreme right regimes in different parts of the world in the second decade of the 21st century.

When the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe fell, it was proclaimed that the future belonged to liberal democracy, a mood of liberal optimism that was captured by Francis Fukuyama's thesis of "the end of history," that is, that there was no longer any system of rule that could compete with liberal democracy for the future of humanity. Indeed, the first decade of new century appeared to bear him out. The next ten years, however, proved to be a different story.

In 2010, there were no regimes of what we might call the “new far right” globally except for Hungary. Now we have seen far right personalities come to power in four of the seven biggest democracies: India, United States, Brazil, and the Philippines. And even where they are not part of coalitions in power, by their electoral weight, they have in many instances moved the center of gravity of politics to the right, as in Germany, Denmark, and Italy. To take just one example, in Denmark, to be able to win the elections in 2019, the Danish Social Democratic Party adopted an anti-immigration stance.

What are the factors that have propelled the right to power or the ante-chamber of power?

The Rise of the Extreme Right in the Global North

Right-wing regimes have come to power in both the global North and the global South. While sharing common characteristics in their genesis, there are also unique features to these regimes associated with their place in the global political economy, so that it is useful to consider them separately for the purposes of analysis.

What factors account for the rise of far right regimes and personalities in the global North.

First, the far right in Europe and the United States was able to take advantage of the negative impact of neoliberal policies on people’s living conditions. Social Democrats, or the center left, were implicated in the formulation and implementation of neoliberal policies, so this left a big part of their base feeling they could no longer rely on Social Democratic parties to protect them, leaving them vulnerable to being pirated by other parties. The far right, sensing an opportunity, abandoned the opposition to social welfare policies characteristic of the center-right, and opportunistically championed some anti-neoliberal and pro-welfare state policies to win working class votes. The best example of this was Donald Trump’s use of his opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) to win key mid-west states to come to power and, once he came to power, his withdrawing the US from the TPP.

Second, in Europe, the far right was able to harvest resentment against the European Union by riding on the democracy issue, saying that the unelected technocratic leadership of the EU was lording it over the democratically elected national leaders of the member states. Thus, when, in 2015, the so-called Troika disregarded the results of the Greek referendum on the austerity program it imposed on the Greek people, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the National Front in France, draped herself as a democrat, proclaiming, “The choice is either democracy or Euro-dictatorship.” The Peace and Justice Party in Poland and Viktor Orban in Hungary have harvested a lot of support with the same battle cry.

Third, extreme right wing parties have been able to dominate the migrant issue, with little effective opposition. They have not only accused the center-right and center-left of having no viable policy on migration, but have advanced the conspiracy theory that the center right, the center left, and the European Union are complicit with what they describe as the “migrant hordes” to subvert European and American society. Once more, Le Pen captured these themes in the right wing narrative when she said, “Immigration is the organized replacement of our population. This threatens our very survival. We don’t have the means to integrate those who are already here. The result is endless cultural conflict.”

Opposition to migration and ensuring dominance of white society over minorities is the central issue the far right is riding and mobilizing on, and it is within a racist gestalt that they have positioned their opportunistic advocacy of anti-globalization, anti-neoliberal, and “pro-democracy” stands.

Certain measures to safeguard and promote social welfare, save jobs, and protect the economy are all fine, they say, so long as the beneficiaries are only people of the “right” skin color, the “right” culture, and the “right” ethnic stock. Of course, this stance may not be stated that explicitly, but that’s essentially the message that comes through.

The Rise of the Far Right in the Global South

Turning to the global South, while it is certainly true that, as in the North, neoliberal structural adjustment contributed to worsening the already terrible conditions of existence of the vast majority of citizens of democracies in the global South, what was occurring in places like the Philippines, India, and Brazil was something more fundamental: a repudiation of liberal democracy. Rodrigo Duterte, Narendra Modi in India, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil personify this rejection: Duterte boasts about violating due process as he presides over the extra-judicial execution of thousands, Modi glories in the fall of secular and diverse India, and Bolsonaro waxes nostalgic over the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil for 20 years.

The following observations focus mainly on India and the Philippines, which have been regarded as the two of the most durable democracies in the global South (though they have experienced major interruptions or interludes of authoritarian rule).

What mainly accounted for citizens’ alienation from liberal democracy was simply the massive gap between the promise of liberal democracy and its reality. This disillusionment is perhaps best described by Pankaj Mishra: “Rived by caste as well as class divisions, and dominated in Bollywood as well as politics by dynasties, India is a grotesquely unequal society. Its constitution, and much political rhetoric, upholds the notion that all individuals are equal and possess the same right to education and job opportunities; but the everyday experience of most Indians testify to appalling violations of this principle. A great majority of Indians, forced to inhabit the vast gap between a glossy democratic ideal and a squalid undemocratic reality, have long stored up deep feelings of injury, weakness, inferiority, degradation, inadequacy and envy; these stem from defeats or humiliation suffered at the hands of those of higher status than themselves in a rigid hierarchy.” The same resentment could be said to have marked pre-Duterte Philippines.

The rise to power of the far right cannot be understood without taking into consideration the disillusionment of the middle class. The middle class was in the last 30 years of the 20th century a central factor in the undermining of dictatorships throughout the global South. Over the last two decades, however, they have been greatly disillusioned at the failure of liberal democracy to deliver on its promises and at the deterioration of their living standards. They have become open to more drastic political solutions and some have even endorsed neoliberalism though neoliberal policies have had contradictory effects on them. These policies eroded their conditions of life for some in the class but has simultaneously benefited others as well as some members of the lower classes, creating what some have called the “aspirational middle class,” or people who are in income terms not middle class but aspire to be such.

The fear of crime and the so-called “dangerous classes” is also a factor behind middle class mobilization towards the right, and this is especially when inequality and poverty are so rampant that some people turn to drugs and crime. It is certainly the genius of the Philippines’ Duterte to take drugs and crime out of their social context and demagogically turn them into the main problems confronting all classes, rich, middle class, and poor.

There is also the powerful appeal of an anti-corruption stance, and not just to the middle class. There comes a time, however, when every party that comes to power on an anti-corruption platform

becomes corrupt in power, so that people become very cynical of electoral exercises and are attracted to leaders like India's Modi, who they might not agree with on many points, but seem to be singularly non-corrupt.

Anti-corruption was a sub-theme in Duterte's 2016 campaign for the presidency, which overwhelmingly focused on crime. But many people seeking a savior read in Duterte what they wanted and they saw him as one who would bring his tough stance on crime to taming corruption as well as disciplining a corrupt oligarchy. In office, he has reinforced his anti-corruption credentials by the high profile firing of close associates from government office, one of them in the midst of a cabinet meeting, an event that, of course, contributed to his mystique.

The rise of the right also cannot be understood without the support of the economic elites. However, one must not fall into the erroneous notion, common on the left, that right wing personalities are merely doing the bidding of the elites. Duterte and Modi have a great deal of autonomy from them, and in the case of both (as well as Bolsonaro in Brazil), the relationship is an uneasy one. Indeed, in the case of the Philippines, the elites' support of Duterte is motivated partly by fear, fear that he might expropriate them or adopt some redistributionist policies. Indeed, he is now in the process of expropriating the powerful Lopez family, which owns the country's largest television network. Both Duterte and Modi have power bases in civil society and government that affords them this position of strength vis a vis the dominant elites although they do not breach the political economy of capitalism.

As for the working class, the peasantry, urban and rural poor, and the working class, it would be foolish to deny that Duterte and Modi enjoy widespread support among them. It might be said, however, that there is a difference in the support given to these personalities by the lower classes from that of the middle class. Borrowing from Gramsci, one would say that theirs is more of a "passive consensus," while that of the middle class is more of an "active consensus" manifested in the opinions articulated in television, the internet, and the print media. The middle class intelligentsia has always taken the lead in forming public opinion, and in India and the Philippines a large sector of this stratum has supported Modi and Duterte.

One also cannot understand the success of some of these far right personalities without taking into consideration their charisma. Both Duterte and Modi are charismatic individuals, though they have different types of charisma. Both are case studies of a troubling relationship between charisma and democracy. This is the paradox whereby free elections are resoundingly confirming their hold on power and leading to even more concentration of power in their hands. Even if people may not agree with all of their actions, they are holding their critical faculties in abeyance and identify with these dangerous but charismatic personalities, who announce their disdain for liberal and progressive values—for due process in the case of Duterte and secularism in that of Modi.

These personalities may not deliver on their promises, and their economic policies may be causing major problems, like those caused among the urban and rural poor by Modi's program of "demonetization," or withdrawal of 500 and 1000 rupee notes from circulation, but no matter, they get thumping majorities. In this sense, democracy, paradoxically, strengthens authoritarianism. These personalities have cross-class appeal, and this is why charisma must be considered a central reason for their success, though the left tends to be skeptical or even hostile to explanations based on charismatic appeal. Charisma is a social relationship between leader and the led that is subversive of reason. Without trying to come to grips with it, it would be difficult to understand why in the midst of the heaviest bombing in the history of warfare, the vast majority of the German people—including the young SS recruit (but later Social Democrat) Gunter Grass—remained loyal to Hitler even after der Fuhrer had shot himself in the bunker. The charismatic appeal of Modi to Indians is one of the reasons that Amit Shah, Modi's second in command, has boasted that the BJP

will be in power for the next 50 years.

A few other observations are in order from the experiences of India, the Philippines, and Brazil.

Othering and Trolling

One is that a great part of the success of these dangerous personalities is they are experts at “Othering,” or scapegoating certain social groups, at concentrating popular hatred on them as the source of all of society’s ills—in the case of Modi and the BJP party he leads, Muslims occupy this special place; in the case of Duterte, drug users and drug dealers. There are, of course, other groups that are the focus of anger. In the case of Duterte, so-called “yellow” opposition politicians, communists, and some oligarchs. In the case of Modi and the BJP, westernized intellectuals, Marxists, and Christians.

The second is that it would be a big mistake to attribute the rise of these personalities to trolls. Trolls assist these people come to power and help them to consolidate their power, but mainly by reinforcing popular attitudes already partial to them. From the author’s own personal experience, some 75 per cent of the pro-Duterte responses his posts critical of the president receive on Facebook are made by people who are true believers, not trolls. Reprehensible though these leaders are, they are popular.

Third, beyond shared structural and political realities, there are some forces unique to each country whose intervention has been critical to the success of these far right personalities. One is an old actor in Indian politics, the disciplined radical Hindu nationalist organization RSS, whose roots go back to the early 20th century and which was greatly influenced by fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany, that is the anchor of Modi’s reign. Another is a relatively new decisive actor in Brazilian politics, the non-Catholic evangelicals that played such an important part in Bolsonaro’s election in 2018.

Confronting the Far Right

What steps can be taken by left in both the global South and the global North to challenge, compete with, and, in the end, vanquish the right?

There are many recommendations that emerged in these webinars, but six deserve to be highlighted.

1. First, we need to stop resorting to easy explanations about the rise of far right, like the claim that it’s trolls that are responsible for it, and acknowledge that far right personalities and movements have a critical mass of popular support.
2. We need to find ways of stopping the extreme right from coming to power in the first place, like building broad united electoral fronts, even with non-fascist groups we may have differences with. It’s much harder to remove the far right once they’re in power.
3. We need to make sure we have at the leading edge of our resistance those movements which have a great deal of resonance among broad sectors of the population, including the middle classes, such the movements to stop climate change, promote gender equality, and advance racial justice.
4. We must fiercely defend human rights and democratic values, even where-or especially where-they have become unpopular. This will involve aggressively championing people and groups

that are currently persecuted, with majority opinion being whipped up against them, like Muslims in India and drug users in the Philippines, more than 27,000 of whom have reportedly been slain by Duterte's police. The current generation may well be compromised by the acquiescence or support that large numbers of them have given to far right figures but our resistance and defense of these values will be an example to the coming generation and will play a role in turning things around.

5. Let's not fear to see what we can learn from the extreme right, especially when it comes to the politics of passion or the politics of charisma, and see how we can see how our values can be advanced or promoted in passionate and charismatic ways. We must unite reason to passion, and not see them as being in contradiction, though, of course, we must not violate our commitments to truth, justice, and fair play in the process.

6. But, probably most important, we need to have a transformative vision that can compete with that of the far right, one based on genuine equality and genuine democratic empowerment that goes beyond the now discredited liberal democracy. Some call this vision socialism. Others would prefer another term, but the important thing is its message of radical, real equality beyond class, gender, and race.

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P.S.

• Focus on the Global South. Jul 6, 2020 :

<https://focusweb.org/the-far-right-formidable-but-not-unbeatable/>

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