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## Populism, against the people

### What is the issue?

- The story of democracy in the last century was claiming the right to rule for majorities from unrepresentative elites.
- The populists put pressure on the counter-majoritarian institutions that are capable of monitoring them.

### What is Populism?

- Populism is a political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people.
- These people are those who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups.

### How the form was varied?

- The form varied but the implication was the same: the only legitimate source of power was the people. They are varied due to following reasons.
- Seizing independence from colonial empires under the rallying cry of national self-determination.
- Overthrowing dictatorships of the left and right whose governments ruled by fiat and with military force.
- Questioning the divine right of kings to rule and replacing royal courts with parliamentary debates.

### Why election is used to get into power?

- The success of this change in popular imagination is evident in the omnipresence of elections around the world.
- Despite the quality of these elections, they are an efficient way of determining the will of the majority.
- Establishing democracy required replacing unelected elites with the representatives of the 'people'; but preserving democracy requires defending it against the 'people'.

### What does democracy require?

- Democracy requires two things:
  1. Rulers who reflect the majority's choice, and
  2. Respect for those in the minority.
- This is critical because the power of free and fair elections is that today's government can be tomorrow's opposition.
- Democracy presumes the possibility that voters might shift their loyalty depending on the issues most salient to them.
- This fluidity means that rational voters fully expect to be in the opposition at some point.
- When this happens, the voters want to know that their rights will not be trampled upon by the newly empowered.
- This is the point of constitutional democracy: the constitution guarantees us certain inalienable rights that cannot be rescinded by the whims of those in power.

### How can the abuse of power be confronted?

- When government's overreach threatens to violate constitutional principles, **the courts and the press** are obliged to step in to confront the abuse of power by them.
- Ironically, by constraining the abuse of power by the majority, these institutions preserve the legitimacy of majority rule.
- **Pressure** - By framing their responsibility as being to the 'true' national interest, populists accuse counter-majoritarian checks and balances on executive authority, as anti-national.
- Indeed, rather than guardians of liberty, judges and journalists are portrayed as anti-majority, against the will of the people.
- Not even staid bureaucrats in their dusty cubicles are safe.
- The **wordplay and interplay between governments and opposition** is sustainable when winning elections are constructed on programmatic appeals.

### What do the politicians need?

- For politicians to win on the basis of policy promise requires state capacity like **fiscal space and bureaucratic wherewithal** to deliver government services broadly and fairly.
- This service will also be delivered to those who might not have voted for the government.
- But when state capacity is limited or non-existent, politicians target their efforts to narrower slices of society.
- To get credit for the targeted provision of public goods, politicians must target on the basis of a clearly identifiable marker such as religion, etc.,

- In this equilibrium, politicians do not represent ideas or policy positions; they stand for groups of people.
- No wonder that election analysis in India is couched more in terms of ethnic combinatorics, what is referred to as caste-community arithmetic.
- Populists understand this dynamic and so their instinct is to build **identity-based coalitions** that harness a majoritarian impulse.
- The legitimacy populists' claim is cloaked in the will of the majority, but the premise of their appeal is that the majority has until now been undermined by the minority.

### What is the impact of populists' politics?

- For advocates of democracy, the pressure of populists on the judges and journalists are worrying times.
- Over the past 30 years, national elections worldwide are more likely to result in the deterioration of democracy than its deepening.
- The populist revolt dovetailed with **technocratic middle-class scepticism** about the 'state'.
- **Politics becomes a bad word** to be avoided personally and hedged against professionally.
- Democracy is the casualty - mocked by technocrats and populists, it is stripped of its constitutional guardians.
- This is the irony of democracy: government of the people, for the people, and by the people, works best when it is **protected from 'the people'**.
- The responsibility for this debacle is equally shared by the left and the right.

### Why populists shouldn't win?

- Democracies work best when we remember that there is no one people or party or politician has a monopoly on knowing what the people want.
- Unless today's winners can expect and accept that they might be tomorrow's losers, electoral democracy is doomed.
- And unless today's losers can have confidence that their rights will be defended by democratic counter-majoritarian institutions, they have no reason to keep faith with elections.
- When that happens, the populists win, the people lose, and democracy dies.

**Source: The Hindu**



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