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 varies 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This is the point of constitutional democracy: the constitution guarantees us certain inalienable rights that cannot be rescinded by the whims of those in power.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 refered 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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