

Is right-wing populism seeing a resurgence across the world?



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Recently, Geert Wilders, an anti-Islam, far-right populist, won the general elections in the Netherlands. In Argentina, the far-right politician, Javier Milei, won the presidential elections. In 2022, Marine Le Pen finished a close second in the French presidential elections; and a party with roots in the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement won the general elections in Italy. In the U.S., early polls suggest that Donald Trump has a chance of returning to power again. In India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is widely expected to win a third term. Is right-wing populism seeing a resurgence across the world? Irfan Nooruddin and Rahul Mukherji discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Radhika Santhanam**. Edited excerpts:

Let us start with a basic question. How would you define right-wing populism?

Irfan Nooruddin: Populism is generally thought of as a political phenomenon in which a voice of the people begins to argue that they are being kept out of power by some elite forces or some non-representative, non-legitimate forces in society. There is scepticism about democratic institutions as a way in which the people's voice can be heard. And so you have actors, either individual politicians or political parties, saying that we are the true representative of the people and that our voice has been denied in politics because of some shadowy cabal, the elites, and international forces. What they are striking at is the legitimacy of the liberal, democratic process in which elections lead to certain winners.

The distinction between left-wing and right-wing populism lies at the roots of the de-legitimisation of the system. Left-wing populists would argue that the masses, the general public, the working class were not being allowed to influence public policy because the rich, the political elites, dominated by capitalist interests, were exerting undue influence on the system. The right-wing version of this can often sound quite similar. If you listen to Trumpian rhetoric, for instance, there is a hint of this. But the right-wing version in the world now also asks a powerful question, which is whether the liberal, democratic project of inclusion is legitimate. The targets here are racial, religious minorities in society. There is a suggestion that these groups are not true, loyal citizens and so their voices are illegitimate. A mix of economic appeals with identity appeals combines to form the version of right-wing populism we see today. But the distinction between right wing and left wing is less meaningful today than the focus on the anti-democratic nature of populism.

Rahul Mukherji: This phase of populism has a majoritarian, ethno-nationalist flavour. There



Geert Wilders (left) takes a selfie during the swearing-in of the House of Representatives as Parliament sits for the first time after the recent election, in The Hague, on December 6. AFP

can be a Muslim 'other' to the Hindus, or a Tamil 'other' to the Sinhalese, or a Muslim 'other' to Christians, or a non-White 'other' to the White people. The manner in which this 'othering' is happening undermines democratic institutions. In *Pacific Affairs*, I argue with Seyed Hossein Zarhani that there has been a systematic decimation of public institutions in three ways: one, by interpreting rules differently; two, by changing rules incrementally, such as by bringing in a Bill (in India) regulating the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner; and three, by completely displacing rules, such as in the abrogation of Article 370 (in Jammu and Kashmir). This is not only happening to public institutions, but also to civil society. These are mechanisms, but the idea that is driving these mechanisms is Hindu majoritarianism (in India).

Prof. Nooruddin, are there similar issues in the countries mentioned in the introduction?

IN: Yes and no. At the core, we have this trend of ethno-nationalist identity-based grievances. There is a general sense that there are other people, both outside and within the country, to blame for many of the ills that are going on. That is a common trend. But the particular issues are different. And part of it is because the systems that we are talking about are different. What is happening in Germany or the Netherlands or India is occurring in the context of well-established democratic systems with strong political parties. But in Hungary or in Argentina, political parties themselves have become very weak; they are personalist vehicles. What Javier Milei was able to do was essentially make himself the focus of that election. Over the last eight years, Mr. Trump has been taking the Republican Party and making it all about himself. So, it's more about the test of loyalty to Mr. Trump than it is about Republican values. As a result, we get very different kinds of appeals being made. In Argentina, the powerful



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appeal is of a country whose economic crisis has been so long-standing that it allows someone like Mr. Milei to come and say, everyone has let you down and 40 years of austerity measures periodically by the International Monetary Fund have made your lives terrible. We are blaming the elites for this, but also the international economic system. In Hungary, for Viktor Orban, it was about migrants, but within the context of the European Union. Most citizens might not understand exactly what the EU does, but it becomes an easy target for some people to say the reason you are unhappy is because you have got Western Europeans, who look down on Central Europeans, sitting in Brussels.

In the Netherlands, India, or France, these actors have been around in the party system as fringe elements for a long time. How did they suddenly become so powerful? Partly, there are grievances fuelling support for their appeals, but part of it also the collapse of the centrist parties. What we are seeing is a blowing up of traditional party systems which have largely been intact for the most part of the post-World War-II era. The U.K. is an interesting case. There is no right-wing populism; we've got the Tories and the Labour Party in a traditional competition. But if you think about the performance of the Tories over the last 10 years, there has been crisis after crisis. And yet no one thinks the Labour Party is really going to be an alternative.

RM: This is also the question of resilience, which is discussed in the December issue of the *Journal of Democracy*. The resilience is not just in India but in Guatemala, for instance, where Bernardo Arevalo was able to beat Alejandro Giammattei. A few things come out of an empirical understanding of such situations. One is that when repression is at an intermediate level, there is some chance of bouncing back. At very low levels of repression, it seems that centrist and centrist-Left parties which had become lazy, had not organised themselves, lose out. When you have high levels of repression, which would be characteristic of, say, Mr. Orban's Hungary, the scope for democratic opposition is remote. But at intermediate levels, there may be possibilities for bouncing back. Our preliminary research suggests that you need three things: a narrative of being a strong democratic leader; a clear message of being secular and not ethno-nationalist; and perhaps attending to welfare goals. In India, such

leadership was able to mobilise a large part of civil society.

You spoke of resilience. We can argue that there are countries, such as in Latin America, where the Left is in power. So, is the theory that ringwing populism has risen a reality or an exaggeration?

IN: One of the dangers of any political commentary is that we have a presentist bias. But the longer perspective suggests that history repeats itself. There have been moments in the past of democratic crises. In the 1970s, Latin America saw a collapse of democratic systems and the rise of bureaucratic authoritarianism. The U.S. Senate and the U.S. House now are more diverse than ever. So, it is worth tempering the feeling of a real crisis.

But what we do have is a broader crisis of governance. This is a sense that the government is not really a source of solutions for many day-to-day problems. The work of government is largely spending tax revenues on building better roads and highways, clean water and health facilities. Globalisation, corruption and bureaucratic ineffectiveness mean that many developing countries lack the fiscal space to do all this. In 2008, Pradeep Chhibber and I found that Indian States that have less fiscal space experienced higher electoral volatility and higher rates of anti-incumbency. Thomas Flores and I wrote in 2016 that countries that have less fiscal space have much worse democratic resilience. When governments lack fiscal resources to effectively conduct public policy, they resort to other ways of winning elections, such as making identity appeals. What we might be experiencing is a real lack of trust in the act of governance, and in democracy.

Prof. Mukherji, why do you think this is happening, this growing distrust?

RM: I agree with Irfan, but I do want to put my finger on ideology. People are beginning to understand that ideology matters. In Rajasthan, the governance situation was not that bad, but the Hindu nationalists won (in the Assembly elections). This is not to underestimate the importance of governance and of economic crisis, which produced the results in Argentina. In India, there was no great economic crisis; yet, there is a steady ideological build up around an idea of ethno-nationalism which has come to assume much greater power both in the social and the political space. I believe that the two spaces are connected. Of course, the ideological battle has to be fought with governance.



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NOTEBOOK

The tricky job of curating the best books of the year

Book editors need the perfect combination of instinct and information

Swati Daftuar

Every year, sometime in November, media publications come up with end-of-the-year lists. These have become a fixture now, and act as a kind of stocktaking – of remembering the best and worst of what the past year offered. We have lists for nearly everything now – from celebrity weddings to indie movies, to songs and podcasts, to influencers and scandals. And of course, books.

The book list is a staple, and considering the volume of titles that are released in the market every year, we need, and have, several of these now. To cover as much ground as possible, we also have all sorts of categories and segments, from fiction and non-fiction to coffee-table books, children's books, and more.

Apart from being a great way to remember and honour some of our favorite books, these lists serve as a discovery platform for readers. Both curating and consuming these lists provides both a bird's-eye view of the year's crop and standout trends and patterns. For example, while curating this year's best fiction list, I noticed how many of our big hits this year were chunky books you could really sink your teeth into, such as Paul Murray's *The Bee Sting*, Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water*, K. R. Meera's *Assassin*, and Deepthi Kapoor's *Age of Vice*.

But curating these book lists can be tricky. The first cut I made for the best fiction list had 40 titles more than it was supposed to. This was an indulgence, a personal hat-tip to all the books I have loved over the year. And while culling them down to just 10 was tough, it also made my job easier to see the names put down in black and white. I could immediately sense how some of them elicited, for one reason or another, a stronger reaction in me. So, to begin with, I followed my gut.

A lot about my job is that – following my instinct that tells me to read this book or to spend more time on that title. It isn't,

obviously, an exact science. But all book editors have their own personal set of rules and standards of measurement. This is good, for it is what brings variety. It is why there are some lists that are translation-heavy, some that are filled with international books, and others that tend to favour Indian literary fiction. The difficult part is to figure out one's own rules.

My first rule is to remember that I read for pleasure. This is important, since I also read for work. It is to remind myself that I can't read everything, but because I might find myself trying to, there is the danger of reading beginning to look like a chore.

Then comes the question of personal taste and subjectivity. If I liked a book, is that enough for it to go on the list of the best? Is it enough that I couldn't put down *Assassin*, or that I thought Lydia Davis's *Our Strangers* is a stunning piece of art? That can't be enough, so what else makes a title deserving of inches in print? It is a tough question with no single answer.

The first step is easy, which is to pick a great story told well. But then, this has been a particularly great year for fiction, and there have been many great stories told incredibly well. So, I looked for stories that gave way to more stories, that sparked conversations that then led to more conversations. R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface* comes to mind, or Perumal Murugan's *Fire Bird*. While picking a book, and not just for this list, I also look for diversity and representation – and not only in who is telling the story, but also the stories themselves.

As an exercise, this is a fascinating one, allowing for not just a revisit, but also a chance to go back to a beloved book with a new set of questions. And once a book editor has asked and answered these questions, they are left with pretty much the perfect combination of instinct and information – tools needed to make a choice that we can stand by.

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PHOTO OF THE WEEK

Oil and troubled waters



A spot-billed pelican affected by the oil spill in Ennore during Cyclone Michaung in Chennai on December 4 is being cleaned and treated by experts from the Guindy National Park. A wildlife team is in the process of enumerating such pelicans that have settled near water bodies in Chennai. B. Jothi Ramalingam

FROM THE ARCHIVES



FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 29, 1973

Heavy rain in Thanjavur Dt.

Thanjavur, Dec. 28: Continuous and heavy rains all over the Thanjavur delta during the last two days have been causing anxiety to farmers, since the early samba crop, almost ready for harvest in some places, may get

affected. The Agriculture Department officials feel that it is premature to say anything about crop prospects following the rains, but the rains are positively beneficial to thaladi paddy crop raised in over four lakh acres. Even in the case of late samba planting, no damage is likely to be caused. Low-lying areas will of course be flooded, but if water recedes in the next 10 hours and if there is a decrease in rains, there is no cause for any anxiety, officials say.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 29, 1923

Tinnevely floods

Tinnevely, Dec 27: To-day's reports state that the salt pans of Arumuga have suffered great damage by the breaches in the Kadamba tank. It is said that about ten thousand maunds of salt have dissolved in the floods. The remaining salt is in a fluid and damaged condition not identifiable by their owners. The pans themselves have been levelled in many places and require to be reformed in some.