

What is authoritarian populism and why should it be combatted?

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April 10, 2019

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Like maggots crawling out of a decaying carcass, authoritarian populist parties and politicians have emerged in many parts of the world over the last few years. All of these parties and politicians practice a vile form of politics based on hatred, crass stereotypes, blatant lying, spectacle, bigotry, anti-democracy, misogyny, racism, and militarism.

This brew of toxic politics has been served up as “anti-establishment” and in the interest of the common people by the strongmen that are at the heart of these authoritarian populist movements. In reality such politics are profoundly frightening – they point to the possibility of a future not of hope and greater egalitarianism, but decay, intolerance, enforced inequality through extreme violence and ethnic cleansing. They are, in many ways, the frightening side of identity politics.

Prime examples of hatred

The prime examples of such authoritarian populist politicians, in Europe and North America include the likes of far right wing fanatics such Donald Trump in the United States (US), Marine Le Pen of *Front Nationale* in France, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Danish People’s Party, Alternative for Germany, Golden Dawn in Greece and the League in Italy. All of these parties and politicians share a platform of white supremacy and islamophobia.

Their “anti-establishment” politics goes no further than blaming immigrants or minority groups for all problems. They claim to oppose the unfairness of free trade, yet deny that internal class rule lies at the heart of economic inequalities that are driving discontent. Likewise, few of these right-wing fanatics identify capitalism as the cause of people’s misery. Given their deliberately shallow and crude analyses, for these politicians the solution is the ridiculous and racist notion of keeping immigrants out and for the return to some mythological past – which never existed – of a white Europe or North America in which prosperity reigns under capitalism.

While sharing racism, nationalism and a commitment to some form of capitalism, not all of the authoritarian populist parties and politicians in Europe and North America share exactly the same economic policies, at least on the surface. While all rail against the “establishment” and claim to be for the “common” people and even to be “anti-globalisation”, some like Trump on a domestic front follow a rabid form of neoliberalism that has involved huge tax cuts for corporations, which he falsely sells as a stimulus to encourage investment in production and to create jobs, along with slashing welfare for the working class. Yet others like the openly fascist Golden Dawn in Greece (who are not in power), rhetorically are proponents of bringing back welfare capitalism for ethnic Greeks.

Such politicians and parties are not just present in the heartlands of imperialism; they are also to be found in parts of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East (this does not even include the long established authoritarian regimes in places such as Russia and China). In India there is Narendra Modi. He harks back to a mythical golden age when only Hindus were supposedly citizens and seeks to ultimately ethnically cleanse India of people that are part of religious minorities – such as Christians and Muslims – who he blames for the country’s ills. In Brazil, the far right misogynist Jair Bolsonaro has vowed to kill progressive activists from the Landless People’s Movement. He is also fanatically anti-immigrants having called people from Africa, the Middle East, and the Caribbean coming to Brazil the “the scum of humanity”.

During his rise to power, Recep Erdogan in Turkey – an authoritarian Muslim fundamentalist and right wing nationalist – railed against the Kurdish minority blaming them for all tribulations

in Turkey; while claiming that he would provide welfare for ethnic Turks should he become president. Once in power, however, he imposed further neoliberalism. But the one frightening promise he did keep was to ethnically cleanse hundreds of Kurdish villages. As the economy declined, far from moving away from neoliberal policies that were driving the crisis, he began to blame unnamed foreign powers for Turkey's economic woes. In this Erdogan followed the long history of far right, authoritarian populist and fascist politicians scapegoating specific ethnic/race groups or immigrants.

In the Middle East and parts of Africa we have also seen the rise of the authoritarian Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This is a fascist movement based on religion that is misogynistic to its core. Thousands of people have been killed and raped by this movement on the basis of not fitting into ISIS's view of religion. ISIS, like all of the above authoritarian politicians, grew out of a crisis – in its case it was birthed in the chaos of war and economic collapse in which the US played a central role.

Why the rise of authoritarian populists globally?

The reality is that the rise of authoritarian populist politicians can largely be traced back to the worldwide crisis of capitalism that erupted in 2008. In the prelude to the crisis, established political parties around the world had imposed neoliberal policies that set the stage for the crisis. In Europe, it was mostly the established social democratic parties that had imposed these policies. In the US it was both the Republicans and Democrats; and in many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America it was former liberation movements.

It is these policies that freed up financial capital, which then set the crisis off: through unregulated financial institutions and speculation on debt derivatives on a massive scale. Along with this, in most countries, neoliberal policies that allowed corporations to shift to regions of the globe where wages were lower caused discontent amongst the working class who lost their jobs in the process. Sections of the ruling classes in such cases did not blame themselves or neoliberalism; they blamed the "other" and turned to racism to deflect attention – for example, against the "Chinese" or "Mexicans". Adding to the working class's misery, established parties then bailed out the very same corporations that were central to the crisis and made the poorest pay for it by ransacking social benefits. Since then, such established parties have been unable to resolve the capitalist crisis – all they have done is to protect the interests of their class, the ruling class, and shift the burden to the poor and workers.

The attack of neoliberalism also restructured the working class on a global scale. There has been a weakening of the traditional organisations of the working class, such as trade unions. The working class has become more fragmented. Permanent lifelong jobs have largely disappeared, and there has been a rise in low paid and precarious work. In many countries unemployment has grown and the share of wages to gross domestic product has declined. Coupled to this, the ruling classes around the world have pushed the ideology of individualism and large sections of the working class have inculcated this. The consequences have been that progressive working class struggles have been weakened and it is in this context that authoritarian populism has been arising.

Since 2008, voters in numerous countries have been electing authoritarian populist politicians and have rejected established parties. Social democratic parties across Europe have shrunk; nu-

merous established parties in countries like India have been ousted, and even in South Africa an established party such as the African National Congress (ANC) has lost significant support. Many voters are voting for so-called “anti-establishment” authoritarian parties and politicians to punish the established parties with some hope that such politicians will be messiahs that bring back a mythical golden age, fix the economy or at least keep out immigrants that they see as taking their jobs or encroaching on social benefits.

This has posed a problem for the ruling classes in countries such as France, Italy, Hungary, India, Philippines, Brazil, and to a lesser extent the US. This is because the established parties were the traditional parties of the ruling classes. Through these parties the ruling classes could govern through consent and push through their agenda whilst still getting sizeable sections of the working class to vote for these parties. With established parties collapsing, sections of the ruling classes have now turned to politically and financially supporting authoritarian populist politicians such as Trump, Modi, Bolsonaro, Erdogan and Rodrigo Duterte.

Sections of the ruling classes are now backing these authoritarian parties and politicians precisely because they scapegoat minorities and immigrants; while keeping class rule, capitalism and the state’s coercive power firmly in place. They are now seen by some within the ruling classes as the only means to keep capitalism going under its permanent conditions of crisis. The primary means of this is violence or the threat of violence. As such, they guarantee that they will violently maintain the interests of the ruling classes under the notion of defending tradition and order. It is precisely why authoritarian parties strengthen the repressive arms of the state, shut down debate and it is why sections of the ruling class are funding, backing, joining and founding such parties.

Authoritarianism in South Africa?

South Africa has not been fully spared the rise in the popularity of authoritarianism. A study in 2017 by the University of Stellenbosch found although a minority of people felt some form or another of authoritarian government in South Africa could be a good way to run the country, the data showed that that minority is growing. In fact, it more than doubled from 1995 to 2013 and such sentiments were expressed by 46 percent of the sampled respondents in 2013. The legacy of apartheid has also ensured that racial and ethnic identities – rather than class and non-racialism – remain a dominant lens through which much of South African politics is practiced. The space is, therefore, unfortunately ripening for authoritarian populist politics to grow, and signs are it is already happening.

With capitalism ailing in South Africa, numerous small political parties have arisen on overtly authoritarian populist, xenophobic and/or racist platforms. These include the likes of the African Basic Movement, the People’s Revolutionary Movement, and Black First Land First. There are also a number of far right wing parties that are still based on the notion of white supremacy, including the ludicrous Cape Party that wants independence for the Western Cape in the name of protecting white and “coloured” interests.

While there is need to battle such parties, if an authoritarian populist party or politician ends up gaining very wide popularity or even power, their rise will probably not come from the quarters of these fringe parties (although this should not be ruled out). Rather it would most likely come from one or the other of the two competing sections of the ruling class – one section being

an aspirant black elite tied to the Jacob Zuma [former president] faction in the ANC and leaders of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF); the other section being white capitalists, their allies in the Democratic Alliance (DA) and a section of the ANC leadership opposed to Zuma and his cohorts. If it does, neither one of these broad factions would in the end claim to be far-right (to do so would be their political death knell in South Africa), but authoritarian populist they could most certainly be.

Part of the reason why the possibility exists of an authoritarian form of politics gaining dominance in South Africa lies in the deal that led to the 1994 elections. This deal saw the established capitalist class (a small section of the white population) dump the National Party and enter into an alliance with sections of the ANC leadership. In exchange for gaining state power, the capital of the largest corporations was left untouched and a few of the [black] elite in the ANC were incorporated through Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and heading the state. Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, the ANC then drove through policies that favoured corporations and the wealthiest individuals (i.e., neoliberalism), all whilst maintaining the majority of the working class' vote. That began to change gradually with the rise of the global capitalist crisis and the emergence of the Zuma faction (which included the likes of Julius Malema of the EFF), who were a part of the ANC leadership that had not benefitted from the BEE of the 1990s and early 2000s.

The rise of the Zuma faction, therefore, represented an aspirant black section of the ruling class that intended, and did, use its rise to power within the state to accumulate wealth. In the process it began stepping on the toes of the white section of the ruling class and their business interests. As a consequence, two sides of the ruling class have been engaged in a battle over the wealth and the future of the country. One of the results of the fallout however, was a decline in the ANC's popularity at the polls.

This posed a major threat to established white capital and their allies – now spearheaded by Cyril Ramaphosa – in the ANC leadership. In the process, they chose to back Ramaphosa's rise to the top of the ANC and the state, in the hope that this would revive the ANC's fortunes and deal a deathblow to the rival faction of the ruling class that backed Zuma. White capital, however, was and is not opposed to the Zuma faction because of corruption; white capitalists have a very long history of corruption, as it was key to colonialism and apartheid. Rather, white capital found Zuma's corruption too blatant and it was leading to the decline of the ANC's popularity. The Zuma faction – while not fundamentally opposing white capital – did to a degree also favour handing out contracts to black capitalists. This was beginning to impact on white capital's business interests with the state.

These are the reasons white capitalists generally backed Ramaphosa's faction to oust the Zuma and return to a status in which established companies were favoured when tenders were handed out. Along with this, it was a ploy to try and revive the ANC's popularity at the polls under a new leadership that would supposedly deal with blatant corruption. If this fails, however, white capital in alliance with sections of the ANC could turn to more overt authoritarian means to maintain power – in fact, signs of how this could happen have already been seen in events such as Marikana.

The scapegoating of immigrants frighteningly already forms part of the politics of this faction of the ruling class (it also forms part the politics of Zuma's faction too). Indeed, the largest parties in South Africa in the form of the ANC and DA already have significant numbers of members who have targeted immigrants, and both parties have leaders that have made overtly xenophobic statements blaming “foreigners” for unemployment and calling for greater control. In late March

2019 such forms of xenophobic electioneering by politicians in KwaZulu-Natal saw immigrants being attacked and their shops and houses looted. In parties such as the ANC, violent forms of authoritarianism already are a problem at the lower levels of the organisation, with rivals for positions being assassinated rather than engaged in debate.

The possible threat of full-blown authoritarianism does not just come from that section of the ruling class based around established capitalists, but also from remnants of the original Zuma faction within and outside the ANC. The faction fights within the ANC are far from over. Those backed by white capital currently have the upper hand; but this could easily change. When the Zuma faction gained control of the ANC there was already a creeping authoritarianism; should they (re)gain state power there is no reason to believe that their authoritarian politics would not continue. If challenged electorally and faced with the prospect of again losing their grip on power, this faction could easily turn to a renewed and even more virulent form of authoritarianism.

There are also the remnants of the Zuma faction that are outside of the ANC, most notably in the form of the EFF. While the EFF likes to claim economic freedom for the majority as its key objective, despite what many people believe it is not anti-capitalist nor opposed to rule by an elite – even according to its own documents. It rather favours a combination of private and state capitalism.

The reason for this is that the group of aspirant black elites that head the EFF wish to use state power to free up economic opportunities for themselves to accumulate wealth. As was clear from the conduct of EFF leader Julius Malema before the EFF was formed, this group were already engaged in this approach at the provincial and local levels within the ANC before their expulsion.

What the EFF does, however, do is that they opportunistically tap into the very justified frustration of the black working class (defined here as workers and the unemployed) – including their on-going experiences of racism and exploitation – to gain votes and a following. The fact that in South Africa the full liberation of the black working class was not achieved in 1994 as a result of the institutional (state) and economic (ownership) status quo being kept intact, meant the continuation of their impoverishment. The reality is that if the EFF came to state power, it would probably throw some crumbs to the black working class as its own form of populism, but it won't mean liberation.

At the heart of this is the fact that the EFF does not seek to genuinely end capitalism or expand democracy – it only wants another form of capitalism in which its leadership has power. This can be seen in the plans, contained in its 2019 election manifesto, to provide billions in support to black industrialists/capitalists and to make R2 trillion (about US\$143 billion) available for black asset managers to gain shares within companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.

Indeed, authoritarianism already defines the politics of the party; it fetishes millenarianism and a militarised and male dominated hierarchy, all summed up by the title of Commander in Chief. In other words the EFF is defined by a personality cult. In state power, those authoritarian tendencies and the tendencies to violently silence any opponents would be amplified. Their overt nationalism and race baiting of all Indians and all whites – often defined by crass stereotypes – is South Africa's own version of authoritarian populism; it is dangerous and needs to be combatted.

Given all of the above it is not beyond the realms of possibility that in some form or another, South Africa too could easily drift towards a fully-fledged authoritarianism; the warning signs are there. This would be especially the case if the capitalist crisis continues to deepen, since ruling

classes and factions therein, have a history of turning towards authoritarian populist politicians during such crises.

The question though is how to combat it.

Resistance to authoritarianism

In most countries resistance to the rise of authoritarian populism has occurred. For example, Antifa (*Antifaschistische Aktion*) in Europe and North America has resisted the rise of the far right and fascism. In Brazil, formations such as the Landless People's Movement have protested and mobilised against Bolsonaro. These, however, have mostly been defensive; a reality that is directly related to the weakness of progressive working class struggles as a result of the onslaught of neoliberalism. One area in the world where there has been an offensive struggle against authoritarian politics has been in the north of Syria. There activists – mainly, but not exclusively Kurdish people – have successfully fought against the authoritarian Assad regime and the fascist ISIS. These struggles though have not been to defend a parliamentary system, but rather to create a new and more directly democratic, egalitarian and feminist society under the name of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.

Through this, a new system of direct democracy based around federated communes and councils has been created to run society from the bottom up – in other words to expand democracy into all spheres of life to combat the threat of authoritarianism. Much of the economy too has been socialised and democratised and is now largely based around democratic workers' co-operatives that produce to meet people's needs.

If we are going to successfully fight and defeat the rise of authoritarian populist politics, we are going to need a vision of creating a new society beyond the state, class rule and capitalism. It is these systems that authoritarian populism ultimately defends. The struggle in the north of Syria, while not without its own contradictions, is important as it give us a glimpse of what can be done. It also shows that South Africa too could follow another path beyond the state and capitalist systems; a path that holds the promise of an egalitarian future as opposed to the current situation, or even worse a future of authoritarian populism.

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