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Populism, a case-by-case study

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The talks feature leading thinkers on pressing issues in the world of international relations and US foreign policy.

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The featured scholars in this series are available to the press and policy community.

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Never before have discussions about populism been more central in the debates in our societies, and never before have they drawn more interest from academics and brought attention to those who have studied the phenomenon over the years.

While many will associate the “populist wave” with the current US president, the present manifestation of it has roots in movements, beliefs and deficiencies in the liberal democratic order that predate Donald Trump’s 2016 win.

For many countries experiencing an increase in support for populist ideas—or in the more extreme cases, whose current leader or leading party is of the populist mold—it represents a very acute risk, one that has endangered basic civil liberties, societal harmony and seen hateful and intolerant rhetoric permeate the public sphere.

At its latest Starr Forum, MIT’s Center for International Studies brought together a panel of academics whose work has focused on some of the most extreme forms of populism seen in the past years, whose leaders have become synonymous on a global level with the “state capture” that is part and parcel of governments led by populists.

The three countries—Brazil, India and Turkey—share certain characteristics. All of them are very influential in their part of the world, both in size and political clout. They are all emerging economic powerhouses, and they all boast ethnically diverse populations. In their presentations in front of the MIT public, the speakers—academics who are either from these countries or covered them over a long period of time—highlighted the way in which the current populist governments slowly accumulated power, and made use of the deficiencies in their societies to amass wide voter support.

General Overview

Pippa Norris, the Paul F McGuire Lecturer in Comparative Politics at the Harvard Kennedy School, explains the rise in support for populist parties as a result of “cultural backlash” leveled at the mainstreaming of progressive and liberal values. According to Norris’ research with Ronald



Inglehart, to be published soon in a book titled *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, this wave of populist support is buttressed by social conservatives who are uncomfortable with cosmopolitan lifestyles that encourage diverse sexual and gender identities, as well as other markers of progressive thinking.

This group supports authoritarian populists and strongmen because they offer them forms of “tribal protection” against “perceived risks of instability and disorder,” and feed into their insecurities by promoting a hostile approach towards “outsiders” such as immigrants, people of religious or ethnic backgrounds different from their own. These parties and leaders react to perceptions of cultural threat, and they in turn offer the leaders their loyalty in the voting booths. Norris explains that this is the main reason for an increase in populist support for leaders like Trump and Nigel Farage in the UK, and Marine le Pen in France.

Brazil—a sharp turn to the far right

Elizabeth Leeds, a research affiliate of the MIT Center for International Studies and a senior fellow at WOLA (an organization that helps advance human rights in the Americas), is a leading expert on police reform and issues of citizen security in Brazil. Leeds has conducted research on these topics over the last four decades.

“Brazil’s perfect storm of negative trends began in the late 2000s, which led to the ascension of the radical right,” explained Leeds. “The economic downturn and the subsequent recession starting around 2013 due in part to the worldwide drop in petroleum prices—petroleum is one of the engines of the Brazilian economy—and China’s economic re-trenchment which caused drops in Brazilian exports to China led to a sense of hopelessness and unemployment, especially amongst the Brazilian youth that had recently graduated from college.”

In the mid-20th century, Brazil emerged from a military coup and subsequent military dictatorship as a country that largely voted for left-wing or left-leaning parties. The progressive spirit of these parties embraced its rich cultural composition and included many welfare programs to pull its most disenfranchised segments of society out of poverty. The deficiencies of these policies—lack of equal distribution of resources—proved to be its undoing.

“The Workers Party, what it had become famous for and praised in its first 8 years, its redistributor policies, its poverty alleviation programs, the Bolsa Familia (a social welfare program), racial justice, gender equality, LGBT rights, gay marriage—all of these policies became fodder for those who were not benefitting from economic redistribution and were resentful at the attempt for racial justice.”

The founder of Brazil’s previous ruling party, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva or “Lula”, and the creator of its landmark social welfare programs, was found to have been part of a massive corruption scandal and initially wanted to run his campaign from prison, where he is currently serving a sentence. “The massive corruption scandal that occurred on the Worker Party’s watch and involved all parties [severely damaged their electoral success]. This provided further pretext for attacking the Worker’s Party and its redistributor policies.”

“The increase in violent crime, prison rebellions and the spread of organized criminal activity in the country, led people to search for a savior,” Leeds explains.

In this chaos, Jair Bolsonaro, the head of the Social Liberal party and a former military officer, provided an appealing contrast to everything the Worker’s Party represented. Fernando Haddad was put forward as the candidate of the Worker’s Party. While having a clean slate, he did not offer the appeal of “Lulism” and did not offer strong opposition to Bolsonaro.



Una Hajdari is a journalist covering the Balkans. She is the 2018 Elizabeth Neuffer Fellow at the International Women’s Media Foundation and a research fellow at MIT’s Center for International Studies.

The news that Bolsonaro won the October presidential elections with 55% percent of the vote was met with shock in intellectual and political circles around the world and led to headlines claiming that Brazil had “elected a fascist to office.” He has openly praised Donald Trump’s foreign policies, has said that women and men should not be paid the same salaries, and is thought to be against progressive policies towards the LGBT community in the country.

Of the things he is expected to reverse, Leeds explains that his lack of commitment to the Amazon and wildlife reserves in the country is causing the most outrage. “The most acute issue that people are aware of and afraid of are reversal in economic regulations especially in the Amazon. He is planning to reverse many of the indigenous reserves to expand agricultural development and mining,”

He also wants to quash dissent, by “criminalizing social movements. The well-known MST or Landless Workers Movement may be prosecuted under the anti-terrorism laws.” Bolsonaro also wants to quash the liberal ideas that seem as if they support his predecessor’s beliefs. “He has attempted to constrain academic expression or ideological expression labelled communist, and he has asked students to report professors for spreading objectionable or ideological speech. The protection of minority rights, gender rights, is in jeopardy.”

India—a reversal of diversity

Sana Aiyar, an associate professor of history at MIT, explored the ways in which populist nationalism has reversed the progressive and inclusive policies of post-independence India, and the way it clashes with the beliefs of the post-colonial secular and supra-ethnic state.

India’s current prime minister, Narendra Modi, of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is a proponent of the belief that India should be ruled by its Hindu-centered party and that ethnic and religious minorities, such as the Muslim population, should not have a central role in the government.

“Modi turned his back on India’s spirit of tolerance, its inclusive pluralism,” says Aiyar of Modi’s beliefs. “When India declared independence in 1947...the nationhood of India was defined by its equality and diversity.”

India’s first post-independence prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru of the Indian National Congress, insisted on an Indian identity that was secular—thus eradicating, at least in the political sphere, the ethnic differences between the various religious groups in the country. However, in a large country with many states composed of different groups, this status quo was difficult to maintain.

“The Indian National Congress (INC), the party that ruled India in its post-independence period began to decline in the

1960s and 1970s as regional populist parties began to form. Through the 1990s and 2000s two major changes took place. First the Congress itself began to decline, primarily in the states where regional parties began emerging at the state level and eventually at the national level,” explains Aiyar.

From the late 1990s onwards, there was a change and a shift towards coalition governments. The INC and the BJP would form alliances with these regional parties that had been emerging over the years. In 1991 India shifts from a socialist to a neoliberal country through economic reforms, and the Indian middle class expands.

One of the promises of these reforms is “that the economy will be depoliticized and the institutions will be the mediators between the public and the state. As this unravels in the 2000s, growth falls from around 7 percent at the turn of the century, there is rising inequality and there is a sense that aspirations were not fulfilled. The institutions begin being seen, at best, as ineffective and at worst as incredibly corrupt,” says Aiyar, explaining the spread of disenchantment across the country. “The INC blames this on coalition politics and regional parties.”

“The one state that began defying this all-India trend of inefficiency, corruption and lack of development is Gujarat, where Narendra Modi had been the chief minister since 2001. He builds up a reputation as being pro-business, as being an extremely effective leader, attracting huge foreign investments,” Aiyar continues.

“Modi, with his strong record, transforms his anti-corruption movement into an anti-Congress one. He cast the Congress leaders as being very out of touch with the nation. The Congress was cast as corrupt, out of touch with the pulse of the nation, its leaders as elites. Congress beliefs, such as socialism, the secularism and the focus on diversity were depicted as being “western” or “English” notions of the nation.”

Modi was part of a group of politicians in India at the time who were offering various definitions of populism. The approaches attempted to define Indian nationhood, and his belief centred around the fact that India should be dominated by its majority ethnic and religious group.

Modi supported “the idea that a nation’s political destiny is [should] be determined by its religious and ethnic majority. Majoritarianism has two components that one should keep in mind. It differentiates between citizens—those who are seen as having the majority faith are seen as being true citizens, the sons of the soil. The rest are minorities or courtesy citizens. For the first years after independence, by defining India as secular rather than Hindu, Nehru manages not to commit India to the decolonization’s original sin. India defines herself not as majoritarian—not because these tendencies didn’t exist but precisely because there were these notions that had existed from the 1920s onwards.”

In many countries around the world, populist politicians attempt to instill the fear amongst the majority populations or ethnic groups—those they rely on for electoral victories—that they are being threatened by a minority or that they have to “appease” to them rather than assert their dominance. In many of these countries, the minority populations can be first-generation immigrants; religious, ethnic or linguistic minorities that have always been present in the country or those who plan to move there in larger numbers for academic or work opportunities. For Modi, promoting the idea that only Hindus were truly autochthonous in India since it was the birthplace of Hinduism helped him secure a win in 2014 and continues to be a hallmark of his mandate as prime minister.

Aiyar describes the ideology as emphasizing “a common fatherland, and a common holy land. This meant that all Hindus are Indians and that minorities, for whom the holy land lays in the west, are seen as somewhat suspect.”

Turkey—a blueprint for populism

Turkey’s president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been making headlines in the past couple of years as his authoritarian grasp on the country grows stronger. His Justice and Development Party (AKP in Turkish) has become the largest party in the country and promotes a conservative platform that insists on an Islamic identity for Turkey and fondly looks back at the Ottoman Empire, the predecessor of modern Turkey that controlled vast territories in the Balkans and the Middle East.

Initially seen as a reformer when he started making gains on the political scene in the early 2000s, Erdogan has asserted his dominance by weakening Turkey’s strong military that asserted the country’s secularism in the 20th century and by expanding the powers and mandate of the president in a referendum held last year. His mandate has seen a crackdown on critical journalists, NGOs and academics and he has persecuted opponents both in the country and abroad. Aysen Candas, an associate professor at Bogazici University and a visiting associate professor at Yale, explain the core components of “a successful populist takeover.”

According to Candas, the populist checklist includes certain key components. “Secularization, no matter what religion the country is based on, is detrimental for the constitutional order of the country.” For populists, constitutions are not binding. “When movements that rely on a majority’s identitarian claims monopolize power, they acquire the ability to reverse the accomplishments of constitutional democracies, no matter how weak or strong these accomplishments may be.”

Another component is that populism is only a transitional phase. “Turkey’s experience with unhinged advanced populism proves that populism is a temporary phase, a snapshot, within the [counter]revolutionary transformation process of constitution-

al states, into right-leaning totalitarianisms. The only remedy against it is forging a common front.”

Candas explains that populism comes from a feeling of insecurity, where people feel that opportunities they are given in life are becoming constrained. “They respond to the shrinking or uncertainty of the economic pie, and the associated crisis of solidarity in the most regressive manner. Populism’s political proposal consists of a counterrevolution, against egalitarian, liberal democratic sources of political legitimacy to reinstall status hierarchies.”

According to her, populist ideologies and influences should not be taken lightly. “The ideology of populists must be taken very seriously, as they do fulfil their campaign promises and they are not short-termers but marathon runners.”

20th century Turkey was a modern, secular country that consciously split from its Islamic identity following the fall of the Ottoman Empire. “A Pew Research study, repeated every year, shows that only 12% of the people in Turkey want to live under Islamic rule. The rest, the majority, want to live in a secular society. How could it then be that political Islamists monopolized power in Turkey? The short answer to that question is that the majority failed to forge a common front.”

The two main fault lines along which the country is divided include the religion issue, but also the question of the large Kurdish minority, consisting of 20% of the population. “Since the 1980s there is an ongoing kulturkampf on two major fault lines in Turkey. The first one is the Kurdish issue: recognition of Kurdish identity, some form of regional autonomy, equal representation, and the unsurmountable 10% threshold that was put into practice in 1983 to prevent Kurdish parties from entering the parliament.”

“This threshold grossly skewed every election result, so much so that in 2002 AKP came to power with 34% percent of the vote which translated into 66 seats in the parliament. The electoral threshold designed by the military coup in the 1990s that was designed to keep Kurds out let Islamists in,” Candas explains.

“The second question is that of the secular republic or Shari’a-based monarchy. These two fault lines cross-cut each other, in the sense that many Turkish secularists, who are for example gender and LGBTQ egalitarians turn into illiberal authoritarians on the Kurdish issue because they suspect that granting Kurds cultural rights and autonomy will lead to the partition of the country. Similarly, the intensely religious portion of the Kurds supported and still support the Islamist party even when repressive policies remain in place.” ■



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