

Editorial

The Rise of “Authoritarian Populism” in the 21st Century: From Erdoğan’s Turkey to Trump’s America

It would be a serious error to interpret the recent authoritarian drive in Turkey as an exception, an extreme move by a power-crazy dictator, or less still as the finally unveiled predictable outcome of the strategy of political Islam.¹ It would also be a gross simplification to interpret the current situation in Turkey through a cultural/civilizational lens. It is not the result of a clash of civilizations between Islam and the secular West, in the sense of Samuel Huntington’s apocalyptic prophecy.² The current conflict in Turkey is not a battle between secularism and religion, but one between dictatorship and democracy. The counter-coup by Erdoğan is disastrous news for everyone that is struggling for freedom, democracy, and social justice whether they are atheists, Muslims, or Christians. It is against democracy more than anything else.

Erdoğan’s right-wing authoritarian move, allegedly as a response to the 2016 July coup attempt, is not an isolated event, but part of a surge to the right in world politics. Similar developments include, for example, the rise of the far right across Europe, razor fences covering Eastern Europe’s borders reflecting growing xenophobia and fear of the other(s), militant Hindi nationalism in Modi’s India, Shinzo Abe’s energetic campaign for “national revival” in Japan, and the militaristic tactics of Duterte in the Philippines. Erdoğan’s authoritarianism fits within the current counter-revolutionary wave that has spread everywhere and does not exclude any continent or country. Erdoğan’s counter-coup closed the rightward authoritarian cycle which opened in 2011, and can be considered in the same category together with the wars, interventions, and civil wars in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and rightward populist shifts in Europe and America, Asia, and Latin America. With Sisi’s military dictatorship in Egypt, Le Pen in France, a strong appeal to anti-migrant nationalism in the Brexit referendum in the UK, Macri in Argentina, Temer in Brazil, Trump in the US, and similar developments in many other places, right-wing authoritarian populism spread to every corner of the globe. All this right-wing authoritarian populist turn is not rooted in the personalities or psychology of Trump, Le Pen, Erdoğan, or any other similar political leaders. Nor is it simply a device by various populist politicians to exploit simmering popular dissatisfaction with the existing economic and political order and use it for their own political benefit. Such calculations are of course present, but underneath the political maneuvers and propaganda, deep objective forces are at work, forces affecting the changing power balance in the world. Therefore, it would be wise to consider all such moves to populist authoritarianism by Trump, Erdoğan, and other “ring of autocrats” within the same global context – a structural breakdown in the functioning of world capitalist system.

Western right-wing authoritarianism has adopted sometimes a Christian and sometimes a secular form, but both equally anti-migrant and anti-Islamic; Turkish right-wing authoritarianism has adopted anti-Kurdish and Islamic form. But this should not fool us about what is really at stake. In both cases, the right-wing authoritarian drive is based on mainstream social conservatism and/or the fantasmatic reactionary politics of “making our country great again” that legitimize dangerous paths against democracy, workers’ rights, and individual freedoms. All such right-wing shifts and reactionary conservative populism(s) are the results of increasingly more volatile and chaotic international situation, which is the direct consequence of what we call a major global power shift. So, the core logic of this

right-wing move can be analyzed properly within the context of major global structural changes which are affecting the world system for the past 20 to 25 years, more or less since the end of the Cold War.

The collapse of the Soviet bloc produced a paradox: on the one hand, it gave the US a military dominance over all other states, but on the other hand, it caused serious problems by reducing the dependency of the West Europeans on the US, and by destroying the free-world versus communist totalitarianism cleavage, both of which were being used by US leadership to conceal the decline of US economic power. The post-Cold War era, hence, started with geopolitical uncertainty across the whole of Eurasia, which was soon followed by serious competition and later chaos.

The rise and decline of powers has always played a significant role in the more historically minded considerations of international relations. When the hegemony of a major power or global super power is on the wane, the entire world order becomes unstable. The decline of the Roman Empire, the Spanish Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the British Empire are clear examples to this. According to many experts, the US is facing such a decline, which is more noticeable since the end of the Cold War. Even though the US clearly represents the largest economic and strongest military power, it is nevertheless struggling with severe weaknesses resulting from low economic growth and the protracted decline of the processing industry, predominantly in the field of innovative technological products. The US's loss of momentum has been going on for decades leading to a complete decline in driving economic strength.

In parallel to this decline in overall weight and influence of the US in world economics and politics, the past two decades witnessed the emergence of other powers to push themselves to the top position, and as a result, the global power balance has been altered significantly with a fundamental shift toward a multi-polar world system. New centers with global influence have emerged in Southeast Asia, in particular China and India. Other states of medium-size, regional powers have also increased their power and influence in the same period, such as South Africa, Mexico, Turkey, South Korea, and Indonesia, all of which as a group came to be called as Emerging Powers.

The Emerging Power is an economic power in a region of the world, which has increased power and control beyond the borders of the state, and enjoys the capacity for regional and global weight. It has a relatively large population and covers a relatively large area. The Emerging Power achieves, on average, a relatively high level of economic growth above regional and global levels, over a longer period.

The inadvertent economic rise of various Emerging Powers is the result of a long-term process starting in the 1970s and 1980s. China and India had set the course thirty years ago by modernizing agricultural industry, expanding research, and achieving market reforms. So, the world economy is no longer led by the Western developed economies. The center and the variety of activities have clearly shifted in a way favorable to Emerging Powers, especially to leading Asian countries, China, India, South Korea, and Indonesia, but also to Brazil in Latin America, and Mexico in the north.

The rise of the new emerging powers was not, and certainly will not be linear, mainly due to the major differences between countries and due to exceedingly inconsistent internal situations in many of these countries. Economic growth, the size of the population, and the size of the country do not automatically necessitate regional, let alone global, leadership. The criteria are far higher: reliability, trust of the neighbors, soft power capability, and provision of public goods for the region and worldwide. In addition, power is relational, which means there are not just two but a number of actors, all aspiring for hegemony and some do not always comply. In short, the relative rise of China, India, and Brazil, and recovery of Russia, and the simultaneous relative decline of the West mean a clear shift in global politics of economics.

The current hegemon, the US, and its close allies, faced with economic decline and political passivity are retreating from their economic and political obligations. After decades of protracted decline, US hegemony is becoming a thing of the past in the face of the growth of emerging economies, above all China. The Western world we have known is fast losing its superiority to be substituted by a new international system formed by the arrival of new Emerging Powers. This is basically what causes the breakdown of the global economic order and the turn of the ruling elite in many countries to unconstrained economic and political nationalism. The West, collectively, noticeably does not have the means to back up its policies in the Middle East, in Africa, in Ukraine, in Southeast Asia. The new emerging powers, on the other hand, are aspiring to a new order of global politics, but they are not yet in a position of imposing their will upon various regional and global conflicts in the world. China, India, Brazil, and perhaps Russia as a group could guarantee global security, energy supply, and so forth. However, the continuous global shift has not yet reached this equilibrium with a level of concentration and coordination, nor have the emerging powers demonstrated a strong will to replace the US as the world leader. So far, the emerging powers have emerged as the new poles in the multi-polar global system, and in various regions, they are hubs, but for the most part they lack real hegemonic power, leadership capacity.

Therefore, the world is currently in a fragile imbalance. This is what Martin Wolf of the *Financial Times* called “the long and painful journey to world disorder.” The cause thereof is not only the relative weakness of the US and its Western allies, but also the fact that the transforming Emerging Powers have only partly been able to consistently operate globally and regionally. China and the other leading Emerging Powers are clearly warming up for the foreseeable transition from their world fabric status to the full-fledged economic and political global powers. Russia, already recovered from the collapse of the Soviet empire, has placed itself as a geopolitical counter power. The US, on the other hand, withdrew from many places in the world, or diminished its commitments drastically. There are regional leadership gaps and global and regional governance gaps that are fueling many ongoing conflicts from Syria to Ukraine and from a range of Latin American countries to Eurozone. The club of the West is more and more losing its ability to take the lead and govern, and the new poles of emerging countries have serious intentions to fill the vacuum, but not yet ready, not powerful and experienced enough to lead. Therefore, leadership, order, and regional and global governance are no longer assured. In other words, without common interests binding them, the global system’s “big players” are no longer operating harmoniously. The world is drifting apart. These sources of conflict and competition are creating power vacuum and regional and global conflicts, even hostilities today.

This is a crisis on a planetary scale, symptomatic of the deep changes to our world’s economic, financial, and geopolitical existence. It accelerates and intensifies the fundamental trends and regional conflicts, many of which have been at work for many years, if not decades. The year 2016 will be remembered with the sharp rise of economic nationalism and the expansion of right-wing nationalist and populist movements.

Why are right-wing authoritarian movements gaining from this uncertainty and chaos? The simple answer to this is what David Harvey recently described as “universal alienation.” People all over the world have been alienated from political processes, from their jobs, and the way the state apparatus is working, all that oppressive bureaucracy. One can see this extremely high level of alienation everywhere. What is happening in the economy for the past 30 years, in simple terms neoliberalism, gives us an answer in terms of what is causing this widespread alienation. Since the late 1970s, the living standards of the working people did not improve, and in many places real wages dropped. Various responses introduced by the governments, under the neoliberal restructuring policies, made the situation much worse by opening the door to upward re-distribution of wealth by various tax reductions and all aspects of financialization. The crushing effects of neoliberal austerity,

combined with the decades-long decline of manufacturing industry, have created a new audience for the far right. Mainly disaffected, alienated working classes have experienced increasingly harsh economic and social conditions. The impact of the 2008 financial crisis has been brutally asymmetrical with the poor and working classes paying the overwhelming burden. Since 2008, almost all recovery has benefited the pockets of the top 1%.

Within such harsh conditions, nationalism and xenophobia have been on the rise; militant and intolerant discourses have spread like wildfire, and authoritarian populism has emerged across many parts of the world. All this discontent and uncertainty among the working classes has been most successfully co-opted by the right. The right has worked out the magnitude of the anger, the anxiety of loss of standing, the fear about "others," and the impulse to blame something or someone else. While the liberal center-left establishment has been fixated with aspects of governance and the specifics of policy, the right has adopted protest-politics too often void of substantive policy, railing against the "establishment" at every turn. Indeed, the current wave of reactionary nationalistic politics is one that appeals affectively, claiming to reinstate their lost grandeur, their stolen golden era. This is, for instance, the rhetoric of Trump in the US who invokes the heyday of US power while blaming immigration and Islam, or Theresa May in the UK who is claiming to be the only one representing the UK's national interest vis-à-vis the "encroaching" EU. Sanders and Corbyn are of course the noteworthy exceptions, but see how they were ridiculed by so-called established left and media. People are not stupid. But they are misinformed and misled. Simplistic, and for most part unrealistic, opinions are introduced by the right-wing populists, and people are affected.

No doubt, there are many local conditions that have given rise to these right-wing authoritarian characters. Whether it is in the creeping electoral gains of the far right, including Donald Trump's recent victory in the US presidential elections, President Duterte's explicitly strongman persona, Sisi's heavy-handed dictatorship in Egypt, or Erdoğan's strong grip of all institutions in Turkey, withdrawal from democracy and openness, and a defiant illiberalism is proving to be a winning formula in many states today. A strong hostility and intolerance projected by such politicians to universal principles of social and legal justice, freedom of movement, or refugee status are capturing the attention of voters, many of whom are desperately looking for scapegoats for their economic and social problems, and therefore adopting a simplistic language of "urgent" solutions and immoderate sentiments. And a xenophobic nationalism is the critical cement holding up all these authoritarian regimes and movements, both in the global West and global East.

Twenty-five years have passed since Fukuyama declared the "End of History," "unipolar moment" for the "New American Century." Rather than achieving an era of harmonious growth and prosperity, global capitalist system is struggling in the midst of a serious structural crisis. All the unresolved tensions of the past century are re-emerging with volatile vigor on the surface of the global system. Every major crisis of capitalism has a tendency to produce a political polarization, with the strengthening of the militant left and the far right, and a squeezing of the discredited "center." In this phase of global geopolitical dislocation, there is a profound intersection and interaction between contemporary politics and historical experience. Right-wing populist movements blend together a dangerous cocktail of anti-liberal establishment, nativism, and xenophobic scare-mongering, along with a huge dose of racial prejudice and a racialized national identity.

Notes

¹ Tony Iltis, "Turkey: After Failed Coup, Erdoğan Cracks Down," *The Bullet*, 1 August 2016, <http://socialistproject.ca/bullet/1287.php> (accessed in April 2017).

² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).