

Bio-Note



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POPULISM IN THE SHAPING OF POLITICS IN SOUTH ASIA

--- Syed Badrul Ahsan

Populism is certainly not a positive term when one observes it being applied to politics geared to a denial of such critical issues as climate change. Neither does it hold on to its traditional meaning when it brings into focus the rise of the right-wing, in terms of an advocacy of ideas generating a growth of extremist and divisive ideology across the globe. And, of course, there is that rather queer condition when in these times we inhabit, it becomes hard to prevent a blurring of populism and nationalism as a consequence of the rise of politics which threatens to upend our view of political values and principles, indeed of statecraft --- as we have known it till now.

And the view we have held on to where the role of populist politics in South Asia, or to use the old term the Indian subcontinent, is concerned, is simple and unadulterated. We hold that the history of politics in the region has essentially been underpinned by populism, to a point where such an approach has both been beneficial to the populace and detrimental to their future. The instances to support our statement are all out there.

Clearly a most pernicious aspect of populist politics playing out in South Asia has been the growth of Muslim nationalism in the 1940s through the adoption of the so-called Pakistan Resolution in Lahore in March 1940. The damage done to the concept of Indian unity and eventual freedom from British colonial rule has been incalculable, to the extent that the demand for the creation of Pakistan left no fewer than two million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs dead and as many as fourteen million people compelled to leave their ancestral towns and villages in search of homes in uncharted territory all across the subcontinent.

The populist politics inaugurated by the All-India Muslim League has had its consequences, with two wars --- three if you count Kargil --- effectively preventing the development of peaceful, if not exactly friendly, ties between India and Pakistan. Populist rhetoric is more often than not a recipe for long-term mutual hostility. We observe it today in the eerie conditions pulling South Asia into directions it could have done without.

For us in Bangladesh, however, the turn away from 1940s' Muslim nationalist politics to Bengali demands for political rights in the 1960s remains a bright instance of populism acting as a vehicle of positive change. The story of the Awami League, indeed its graduation to a stage where it felt the necessity of articulating fundamentally Bengali nationalist sentiments through its Six Point programme of regional autonomy within the concept of a united Pakistan in the 1960s, is key to an understanding of history in our part of the world. If the concept of the two-nation theory turned out, and predictably too, destructive for South Asia, the Six Points, based on populism, was to be presented as a charter of demands that would eventually lead to a new configuration of politics in the region. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangabandhu to his people, was never in any doubt as to where his brand of politics would lead him and the Bengalis of East Bengal --- to sovereign status as a nation.

Populism for us in South Asia has also been, if history is any guide, a tale of eccentric behaviour on the part of politicians from whom better had been expected. Abul Kashem Fazlul Huq, known as Sher-e-Bangla for his stewardship of the Pakistan Resolution in 1940, was soon disappointed at the way politics was beginning to decline in the new country. As chief minister of East Pakistan/East Bengal following the provincial elections which routed the Muslim League in 1954, he waxed eloquent about the indivisibility of Bengali culture and the Bengali people on a visit to Calcutta. That was certainly populism and certainly carried huge significance for the partitioned land that was Bengal at the time. But it was also a demonstration of the contradictions which underlined Huq's politics at that point of time. The sentiments he expressed in Calcutta were to be cited as a major excuse for the unconstitutional dismissal of his popularly elected government in May 1954 by the West Pakistan-based central government.

But Fazlul Huq's populism, in large measure, was guided by a deep affinity with the masses of Bengal. His measures toward putting an end to the zamindari system in the early 1950s in East Bengal remain his signal contribution to social change in our part of the world. Unfortunately, the positive aspects populism epitomized by his politics could not be emulated by those who followed him. Much of faux populism underscored the politics of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who despite his flirtation with socialism in his post-Ayub Khan days, was unable to bring about any fundamental changes in Pakistani society. His slogan of 'Islam, democracy and socialism' during the election campaign of 1970 certainly stirred popular sentiments in West Pakistan, enough to give him a majority of seats in the province in the eventually-aborted national assembly. Bhutto's slogan was certainly populist, but he was unable to shed the elitist skin which had always characterised his politics. Raised by the army to the heights of politics, he was eventually destroyed by the army. Democracy never had a chance --- it still doesn't --- in Pakistan; and socialism is a forgotten term.

Bhutto's populism was in stark contrast to Indira Gandhi's 'garibi hatao' politics in India, to the extent that Indians welcomed her programme as an addition to the democratic structure of politics that had, pre-Emergency, defined India. In subsequent times, populism was to play a significant part in the politics of the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, giving a tired CPI(M) a final push into the sidelines. To what extent Mamata Banerji's populist politics will be able to ward off the growing incursion of the right-wing populism of the Bharatiya Janata Party --- the recent general elections and the gains made by the BJP in West Bengal are a point to ponder --- remains to be seen.

Populism, let us remind ourselves, has historically been the mainstay of the movement which was to lead to the departure of the British colonial power from India in 1947. There is, of course, the issue of where nationalism loses itself in populism, or vice versa. In most instances, the distinctions are blurred and the differences are indistinguishable one from the other. How then would one consider Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's dependence on Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan to help him dislodge the British from suzerainty over India? To what extent must we acknowledge his 'give me blood and I shall give you freedom' call as a credible populist slogan that would or could push India into a state of freedom? Travel down to the mid-1970s. Jayaprakash Narayan's increasingly strident campaign against the Indira Gandhi-government was an instance of assertive populism. Had the Emergency not been imposed in June 1975, how damaging would JP's movement have turned out for India? Or would it have

consolidated Indian democracy in diverse ways we cannot conceive of today? History, after all, is never a matter of what might have been.

Speaking of damaging populism, Bangladesh has had a surfeit of it in post-liberation times. Beginning in 1972 with the formation of the Jatiya Samjatantrik Dal (JSD) by young student leaders who had been part of the movement against Pakistan, assaults were systematically made on an already beleaguered government led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The JSD, which quickly gained a following among students and oversaw the entry of radical former military officers like Colonel Abu Taher into it, went for a Bhutto-like approach to its anti-Mujib politics through employing its slogan of Scientific Socialism, though without quite explaining the meaning and tenor of it. The JSD was to pay a heavy price for its misdirected violent politics, first during the period of the Mujib government but more badly during the regime of General Ziaur Rahman. Its chief ideologue, Col. Taher, was tried by a military court and hanged in what has been considered a sham of a trial. Other leaders were sentenced to various terms in prison and in course of time freed, to re-enter politics, though minus the old radicalism.

In Bangladesh, Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, whose role in the creation of Pakistan is a matter of record, reinvented himself as a secular politician in the 1950s when, in association with Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, he gave shape to the Awami Muslim League (subsequently Awami League). A participant of in the War of Liberation in 1971 as an advisor to the government-in-exile, Bhashani was uncompromising in his view even prior to the launch of the war that East Pakistan needed to be an independent state.

Bhashani's secular credentials changed drastically, however, in the early 1970s when he went for populist politics that was distinctly negative in nature. He undertook a campaign for the establishment of what he called Muslim Bengal, an idea which ran counter to the secular principles upon which the state of Bangladesh had been founded in 1971. As if that were not enough, Bhashani envisaged his Muslim Bengal to include areas to be lopped off from the neighbouring Indian states of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura, a stand which certainly had the support of elements who had either opposed the struggle for Bangladesh or were only too willing to see Bangladesh dwindle into being a communal state.

It was damaging populism Bhashani employed in the pursuit of his politics, reinforced following the coup d'état of August 1975, indeed in 1976 when he decided to lead a march to Farakka, to force the Indian government to abandon the construction of a barrage there, in what he perceived to be Bangladesh's national interest. It was music to the ears of the Zia military regime, which had already begun to play around with its own populist political brand by attempting to replace Bengali nationalism with 'Bangladeshi nationalism.' Such enervating populism was carried further along by the regime of Bangladesh's second military ruler, General Hussein Muhammad Ershad, when it chose to push the country deeper into a communal quagmire by imposing Islam as the religion of the state. At one blow, the secular edifice of the country was struck a massive blow.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Populism has been a mainstay of politics in South Asia in our times and in the times of our parents. Yes, all politics is local. Yes, all politics graduates to being national. Deep down, though, all politics springs

from an urge for populism, for populism is a weapon which political classes feel are a fundamental necessity in order for larger national goals to be attained. That said, however, there have been the many darker aspects of an employment of populist politics in the region.

In Pakistan, in most instances, hollow populism has put paid to efforts for the establishment of an unadulterated political order. In India, populism based on a reassertion of majoritarian faith and a revision of history, is causing grave concerns in the region. In Bangladesh, an entire nation remains engaged in the struggle to step out of the narrow populism the rightwing pushed it into and re-emerge on the highway of secular democracy.

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