

AUTHORITARIAN POWER AND POPULIST RESISTANCE

The Indian elections of 2019 have worked to transform the mode of authoritarian power held by the central government through methods of state violence. Through the example of the electoral process in West Bengal, restricted by state intervention and plagued by violence and repression, this article will attempt to critique various stances taken against authoritarianism in postcolonial democratic contexts. It finds that the traditional left has become ineffectual, and that populists lack sufficiently complex critiques to mount a systematic opposition. Hope, however, lies in the potential evolutions of the latter.

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It is widely agreed that the Indian general elections held in Spring 2019 gave birth to an authoritarian mode of power. How has this been possible? How could democracy be the route to a new model of power in India? How could democratic institutions be used to destroy democratic aspirations? What was the role of the discourse of violence in this democratic process of authoritarian formation, which may be termed as a new model of power? This commentary aims to elucidate some of the dynamics of postcolonial democracy marked by violence and the emergence of a new model of power.

The Democratic Route to Authoritarianism

Take the case of so-called “electoral violence” in West Bengal in the recently concluded general elections in India, which passed through seven phases of voting (11 April – 19 May, counting on 23 May). West Bengal had to slug it out through the highest number of voting phases (along with Uttar Pradesh and Bihar). For the first five phases, the verdict of the special police observer Vivek Dubey and the special election observer Ajay Nayek was that the election had been by and large peaceful. The Election Commission of India sought re-polling in only eight booths out of more than 60,000 in the state. Except on sporadic occasions in the third and sixth phases, people had casted their votes freely and were able to continue to do so. The same assessment was given by the chief state electoral officer Arif Aftab. Loss of life was minimal, although there were three unfortunate deaths.¹ In 2014, according to police reports, West Bengal had witnessed at least 14 deaths during the Lok Sabha elections, with around 1,166 recorded incidents of violence.² After the six phases of the election in Spring 2019, the number of incidents, major and minor all together, was 337. With the elections spanning more than a month with seven phases involving 42 Lok Sabha constituencies, readers can make their own assessments regarding the so-called intensity of violence. During this assessment, it is critical to bear in mind that West Bengal had consistently recorded higher voter turnout rates compared to the rest of the country. Peaceful election processes elsewhere in the country had not ensured greater electoral participation. Cynics may investigate the correlation between voting percentage and violence, bearing this in mind.

Before the elections had started, the ruling party at the Center had demanded that all state police forces must be removed from the electoral process in West Bengal and that elections must be conducted with solely paramilitary soldiers, who were

¹ “3 deaths reported in West Bengal; TMC, BJP blamed each other for killings,” *India Times*, 11 June 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/3-deaths-reported-in-west-bengal-tmc-bjp-blamed-each-other-for-killings/article-show/69744963.cms>

² Maphudarna Das, “Election-related violence continues in West Bengal,” *India Times*, 16 May 2019, <https://economic-times.indiatimes.com/news/elections/lok-sabha/west-bengal/election-related-violence-continues-in-west-bengal/article-show/69350981.cms?from=mdr>

“central soldiers”, and hence presumably impartial. The Left joined the chorus. In the last phase an unprecedented number of over 800 companies of paramilitary forces were deployed to conduct elections, thus on a rough estimate 70,000 soldiers were pressed into duty to lead people into voting in nine constituencies.³ Ultimately the right wing party ruling at the Center and the Left were not pleased with the outcome, since the Kashmir model of holding elections through a military mode appeared to them as the recipe for a recalcitrant state like West Bengal. The media and a churlish opposition in the state like the Left only contributed to electoral militarization. In order to legitimize the overall militarization of elections, violence had to be produced.

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Yet, this militarization was selective and will remain so. In the model that is emerging, states like Gujarat, temporarily browbeaten into submission, did not need the induction of paramilitary forces, and elections were held in one phase. The Supreme Court did not intervene in the process even in cases of gross arbitrariness. Numerous voter suppression methods were employed in West Bengal, including the iron shackle of seven phases of voting, hundreds and thousands from the armed forces guarding the iron cage, the paramilitary forces entering the election booths and severely beating up people including a sitting candidate, quarantining of political activists, and opening fire on unarmed people twice. An official protested and consequently was immediately relieved of duty. Meanwhile several state police officers and administrative officials had been changed on the instructions of the ruling party at the Center.

On the ground that the Election Commission is a constitutional body, its powers were interpreted in the broadest possible way — often at the cost of the powers of other constitutional bodies, such as state governments. For instance, it was argued that since Article 324 vests in an Election Commission the function of superintendence, direction, and control of elections, this Article, as the Supreme Court held in 1977, “operates in areas left unoccupied by legislation” and the words “superintendence, direction and control” operate summarily in the “conduct of all elections.”⁴ According

³ Rahul Tripathi, “EC deploys over 800 companies of paramilitary forces for 9 West Bengal seats,” *India Times*, 17 May 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/lok-sabha/west-bengal/ec-deploys-over-800-companies-for-9-west-bengal-seats/articleshow/69367044.cms>

⁴ Supreme Court of India v Subhash Chandra Agarwal, W.P. (C) 288/2009, (2009), available at: <https://cic.gov.in/sites/default/files/court%20orders/SupremeCourt-Vs-SubhashAndAnr.pdf>

to the Court, Article 324 was thus intended to be comprehensive so that it could take care of “surprise situations”. Yet the Constitution had not defined these powers now interpreted in the broadest terms. The Court had however cautioned that this power had to be exercised, not mindlessly or *mala fide*, neither arbitrarily nor with partiality. The recalcitrant government of West Bengal asked, in the absence of any constitutional elaboration of the powers of the Election Commission, who would check if the conduct of the Commission had been mindless and *mala fide* or not?

The fact was overlooked that the Election Commission was not a representative body, or a judicial body, nor a democratically constituted body, but an administrative body appointed by the central government with summary powers and hence could act arbitrarily. In such a closed situation, expectedly, violence was one of the ways out. The idea behind this emerging model of power was a combination of selective use of threat and force, ruthless application of law unmediated and unrestrained, and at times aided by the judicial process, a complete centralization of the process of elections. This model bypassed the federal polity and the legitimization of all these steps through mobilization of media for an overwhelming campaign of “mob violence”, so that the media-orchestrated campaign could act as a template of application of power. Who could then later deny that imposition of central rule through Article 356 was the only way out for the central government to end lawlessness and rein in a disobedient state? Politics in this contentious milieu could not but be conducted in war mode. Beneath the speeches of campaigners and deployment of soldiers, officers, poll panels, money, media personnel, and countless foot soldiers, as well as the meetings of villagers in the burning countryside of West Bengal, the rural poor, minority groups, and informal discussions among endless bands of informal workers—one could hear the muffled sounds of a social war.

The parliamentary leftists said that society was being polarized in this way, and that it was undesirable. Thus they refused to take sides even when classes were polarized, arraigned against each other, and the Right was advancing. The Left was thus conducting itself like a small town guardian of morality. The parliamentary leftists refused to acknowledge that authoritarianism could draw legitimacy from democratic sources, and in a situation of what we may call “soft authoritarianism”, illegitimate actions of the lower classes acted as the locomotive of social war.

This election showed that one fundamental feature of this emerging model of power is a process that will aim to govern the entire organization and functioning of the penal system towards disciplining the recalcitrant components of society. Illegality will be the target of the institutions such as the Election Commission and the paramilitary forces. Yet coercing the opponent during voting time is a time old feature

of postcolonial democracies, practiced by all political forces, and in particular by the legal institutions. So while the opposition states today can be branded as the social enemy, illegalism in election time cannot be rooted out by the authorities of law, who themselves practice it in abundant measure. As witnessed in Bengal, there will be illegal groupings and mobilizations, which rulers will attempt to break up. A supplementary code will be put in place. Think of the model code of conduct put in place during the election (from the time of the announcement of elections to its formal conclusion). Its task will be to complement law to browbeat the opposition. The demoralization of the enemy is the goal.

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The real violence broke out in the aftermath of elections. There were unannounced wars between Hindus and Muslims, Bengalis and non-Bengalis, also between groups locked in battle over control of local resources, villages, and territories. It was apparent from the beginning, as soon as the elections had been announced, that there was a great desire for violence to clear the ground for the new model of power to materialize. In the words of the philosopher, it was as if the society had become a “desiring machine” to produce violence, but more importantly, to produce the desire for violence.⁵ There was a desire to smash the “impudent” Muslims, Bangladeshis, “foreigners”, vagabonds, and the rootless “scum” elements of earth who were sullyng Bengal. The machine was thus producing not only violence but also a desire for violence to teach “them” a lesson. The unannounced social war that had been already going on had to be now announced, fought in real earnest, and brought to the desired end.

There is of course repulsion against this violence. Yet we often forget that such repulsion contributes to a greater desire for order and a hegemonic power. It is a desire for the sovereign to resume its task of disciplining society. Leftists think that such repulsion against violence will bring back people to their fold. They are, as usual, victims of hallucination.

The Emerging Model of Power

We must pay great attention to the emerging model of power. The methods of the general election and the role of the institutions along with the promise of speeding up neoliberal reforms and cleaning the polity of undesirable elements (like immigrants)

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 1-9

if the ruling party at the Center returned to power, all point to some of the features of the new model of power. We now have to discuss these features in detail.

In order to clean the nation of undesirable elements and “roadblocks” (the word used by the Prime Minister to describe the populist chief minister of the state) on the road to prosperity, the populists whose class basis is in the hundreds and thousands of informal workers and petty producers had to be branded as the social enemy. The entire election campaign made out that the social enemy was a criminal. Not only were all available forces brought to bear upon the so-called social enemy, the model was also based on the declaration that a war had to be waged upon the social enemy. What kind of war was this? Partly a social war, meaning war between two social sections, partly a civil war, meaning that a political life and death battle was being waged, which meant the reassertion of sovereignty challenged by populists who were embedded locally and secured by local apparatuses of power. Hence the war was not only between the center and the states, the corporate class and the populists, but also between the law of democracy institutionalized through centralization and the illegalisms of the smaller classes. The elections showed how the society of neoliberal consensus was producing its enemies, how petty crimes would be straightened out, and the criminals belonging to popular classes would be punished. The elections showed that the society supported appropriate measures to punish the social enemy. Also punished were the recalcitrant states run by populists if they patronized and protected the latter. Behind the forms of punishment ranging from alien detection tribunals to deployment of paramilitary forces, special observers, and judicial concurrence with the punitive mode of government, militarization of democracy; to hiking up of prices, demonetization, and other economic steps, there was this overwhelming idea that the gravity of the offence was in measure with the degree of illegality, which the society morally disapproved. The moral tone became strident. Evil exists, this is why the country remains backward. Populism is evil because it shelters illegalism.

With this strident moral tone, the new order of power has assumed the nature of a religious community such that moral injunctions can be brought against social enemies who are involved in various illegalisms. They are the “enemy of the people”. The new order will also devise different forms of judicial, legal, and administrative punishments on individuals as a mark of collective social control. Thus selective targeting of individuals suspected of sympathizing with the Maoists and their violent methods and putting them behind bars became frequent. It is interesting to see how capitalism in each stage of its development needs a moral order, a kind of moral society, which will control populations, prevent the transfer of property to various unknown sections, and reduce the risks to bourgeois wealth. These three functions together facilitate the organization of a new system of production,

which will combine the severity of the primitive mode of accumulation and the serenity of the neoliberal virtual mode.

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We may of course wonder as to how or why the Left lined up with the new regime in upholding the emerging moral code about illegalisms and was silent about the punishments brought upon the immigrants, minorities, small producers, small traders (through the Goods and Services Tax and demonetization), local unemployed youth, and other sections of the lower classes. With the middle classes going over to the Right, we could see that punishment too had been moralized. As one watches the incessant declarations from the highest bench, law is now especially infatuated with morality.

What kind of threat could migrants pose to society? The migrant symbolizes illegal existence, immoral ways of living based on flexible use of the body, flexible needs, will, and presence, and therefore needs to be disciplined and, if possible, expelled. But more important is the question, who is a migrant? Here the answer actually supplies the question. The migrant is whom the society thinks undesirable, alien. So, while the illegal existence can be utilized and is necessary for production, this utilization must be streamlined and regulated. Conditions of accumulation will be primitive, but the regulation of labor will not be anarchic. Who is then the social enemy? Not the worker of industrial capitalism, who has been brought under control through a standardized wage regime (though there too new problems of precarious work conditions have emerged), but the migrant, the jobless, the footloose, the petty proprietors, and the vast masses of wandering peasants who appear as a threat to bourgeois wealth.

The point to note here is that this regime of severe power emerges from democracy. There is no coup d'état, no takeover of power by a palace coterie, no apparent subversion of judiciary and other constitutional bodies, no usurpation of power; yet order marches ahead ruthlessly. Following from this, the other interesting aspect is the fact that in this march of politics, economy could be sidelined.

We already noted the economic goal of this new model of power, namely to steamroll economic reforms, deregulate existing labor, create a large mass of disenfranchised labor force and a unified market of goods and services, remove all bottlenecks from the path of infrastructural and logistical expansion, cut out banking losses, ensure free entry and mobility of capital, manage the vast army of informal labor, marginalize the agrarian sector, and in this way combine the two modes of accumulation: primitive and the financial-virtual. Yet the noticeable point is that the economic goal can be achieved only by silencing the economic in politics. But how will this paradoxical goal be achieved? Why would society agree to such a maneuver? Society indeed agreed to keep aside the economic issues during the past few stormy years of politics culminating in the elections. Herein is the importance of the democratic ritual. In the elections preceded and accompanied by punishments and overwhelming messages of progress and a prosperous life, people voted with their dreams, desires, and the “acts of truth” of their long entrenched identity made up of hatred of minorities, insecurity about the migrants, and their long held but suppressed fears, desires, and fantasies. They had to do their bit to finish the social enemy.

The electoral rite was the act of exchanging the soul with the security of the body the citizen received in return. Through these “truth acts”, the citizens volunteered to become subjects of the new regime of power. The subject had been the sinner who had not appreciated, till the democratic moment arrived, the enormous efforts the rulers were putting in to keep the nation secure. The subject had been lazy. Now was the time for penance by giving away the soul. The birth of authority was through the democratic procedure — the soft passage to severity. It was within the framework of political rationality that the new model of power, at the core of which was authoritarianism of a new type, was born. The new model became a reality.

Populism as the Social Enemy, the Enemy of Order

The liberals have collapsed. The Left has surrendered. Only the populists who orient their politics along mass welfare, mass mobilization, and a relaxed and flexible organizational mode oppose the new model of power. But how long they can resist? They have structural weaknesses which will be ruthlessly exploited by the hegemonic power.

The first thing to note is that populism cannot but leave open the possibility for the hegemonic power to use the people against the populists. Take the instance of this general election in West Bengal. Divisions in the lower classes and groups were turned into a fight of the people against a divisive and corrupt government, which does nothing for the people and disobeys the state. Populists are not holistic; the

party in power at the Center representing the entire nation is. The nation is the people. The nation that is the people, is holistic. It defies caste divisions, language divisions, and by allowing select sections of the lower classes to voice their demands as “demands of the people”, the authoritarians can show that people are on their side and the populists are the enemy — of progress, development, society, and the people. The populists do not as yet have any answer to this strategy. Like other features of a crisis-ridden time, the link between people and populism has been turned upside down by the neoliberal model of politics, which now sets the “people” against the “populists”. Thus Trump representing the American people is against Bernie Sanders, the populist; Tories representing the nation are against Corbyn, the populist, who only wants power and refuses to provide rational answers to political issues, etc., and now in this country Modi representing the Indian people against Mamata Banerjee, the rabble-rouser, the populist. Populists in the states like Mamata-led Trinamool Congress (TMC) are still to devise any effective strategy as an answer to the neoliberal politics in the time of primitive accumulation.

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Second, how will populists respond to the charge of illegalism and the surge in the punishing actions of power? Given the way the issue of illegalism has been moralized, populists often back down. They lack the intellectual, legal, spiritual, and social resources to persist with various small and medium scale illegal activities and existences (such as raising money, mobilizing capital, providing jobs, tolerating illegal migrants, permitting, tolerating, and encouraging illegal utilization of “common” resources such as electricity or water, maintaining social domination at the grassroots level by illegal and semi-legal means, etc.) and often find themselves on the wrong side of the law. They become easily identifiable targets of punitive action. This is possible because populists appear to society as immoral people, as if they care about nothing regarding social ethics and probity. Yet all the while they appear as threats to bourgeois wealth and order, the bourgeoisie keeps on committing illegal activities, and a significant part of their wealth is ill-begotten, illegally acquired, and depends on extra-legal resources and networks. From the Radia Tapes (concerning the Tatas in dealings with the central government over allocation of coal

blocks) to Adani (Gujarat based corporate group), from the birth of Reliance (the biggest corporate group in India) to defrauding the nationalized banks of thousands of crores of rupees, and from running iron ore mines completely illegally (Bellary mines in Karnataka) and amassing unheard of wealth to keeping workers at sub-legal level – the entire story of capitalist wealth is a mix of legality and illegality. Yet, nothing sticks on its skin. Governments vie with one another to invite the corporate groups to invest, and throw law and caution to winds to offer them concessions. Yet this is a known story. The point is: how will the populists combat the charge of harboring illegalism and avoid inviting punishment?

Third, the attitude of populists towards wealth and celebration makes it vulnerable to further moral attacks. Rafael Sanchez's *Dancing Jacobins: A Venezuelan Genealogy of Latin American Populism* has given us a fascinating account of the obsession of the Venezuelan populists with dances, carnivals, erecting statues — all to celebrate the ties between the army and the people. In West Bengal, the populists gave importance to festivals and fairs— declaring holidays, allocating money, and inventing new festivals — again the idea being that that these cements ties between the people and keeps them away from the ugliness of life. In the face of the puritanical thrust of capital accumulation, the populists involuntarily open up another front of attack on them. They are the “social enemy”, for they squander money, they do not practice thrift, they are the enemies of development.

Finally, with their naive and simple ideas of democracy and economy, populists themselves are less aware of the reality of social war. They charge head on, they do not practice dialogic politics; they seem to be unaware that dialogues (in Charles Tilly's words, “contested conversations”) can be part of a long drawn out war. For lacking strategic vision, they have no sense of the variety of tools that they may require in a protracted war. This incapacity leads to their loss of strength and lack of alliances. They are driven into a corner.

In short, faced with the great mechanisms of the new regime of power, the populists, with their daily tactics as the only resource, may find themselves weak and helpless. Yet, this is the moment when the lower classes who find their political expression only through populist articulations and formations may want to press on further. Dangers are on the way everywhere, and the populists may end in gallows or graveyards—or at least in jails. Let us not underestimate the dangers.

Nevertheless, I for one still think that the possibilities of populism further evolving are not exhausted.