

Strongman Geopolitics

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Nationalism is coming back and with a strength that has rarely been seen since the 1930s. And with the return of nationalism, as if often the case, come the strongmen. If there were any doubts about the return of a political ideology that was responsible for the most devastating event of the 20th century, these were washed away with Donald Trump's election in November 2017. The new President of the United States came to power under an unquestionably nationalist and populist banner, with "America First" written all over it.

America First was the name of a non-interventionist association steeped in antisemitism created in Chicago in 1940 in opposition to the United States' participation in World War II. Its leaders included the aviator Charles Lindbergh, a sympathizer of the Nazi regime. The name of this far-right anti-war lobby was an echo from the verses "*Deutschland über alles/ über alles in der Welt*" (Germany above all, above all in the world), lines from the German national anthem that were subsequently removed from the official version adopted by post-war Germany.

A full cycle has just come to completion with the arrival of Trump in the White House. The United States had led 70 years of liberal globalization through a system of multilateral institutions set up under the country's own initiative following victory over Germany and Japan in World War II. That undertaking, headed by President Roosevelt and brought to fruition by Truman, changed the isolationist and unilateralist tradi-

tion that the great American nation had been known for since its foundation. So, the current President's slogan does not only connect with the nationalism apparent during the rise of fascism, but also revitalizes a line of foreign policy in Washington which, until now, was thought to have been definitively thrown on the scrap heap.

Nationalisms and Populisms

The return of nationalism also marks the return of populisms, a controversial but useful term to describe numerous movements and parties that have emerged from the right and left in reaction to the economic and political crises. They are the result of newly impoverished populations, the declassing of the middle classes and a divorce between citizens and the elite, which quickly translates into a defamation of institutions, traditional parties and representative democracy.

The syncretism of nationalism – the nation before all else – and populism – the people against the elite – inevitably requires a leader who embodies the nation and becomes the voice and expression of the people. This is an evanescent figure of political action, who only acquires a voice and face if the people identifies with and places its trust in a single and singular leadership. Let's call him a "strongman," although in reality he is a commander, a boss or a Führer, words still reviled in common parlance.

This apparent return to the past contains something new that openly differentiates it from previous populist incarnations. The strength and breadth of the current national populisms would not be possible without

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two intertwined singularities that did not exist during the time of Hitler, Mussolini and Franco: economic globalization and technology. The crisis that hit the former is at the root of the populist wave sweeping across the globe, triggered by the collapse of Wall Street in 2008, the Great Recession and its subsequent monetary, social and political shockwaves. These have reached all around the world not just affecting the West, as would have been the case before the decolonization that took place 80 years ago. The latter, particularly social media and mobile telephony, provides populist movements with new, exceptional instruments for peaceful mobilization. These have transformed party systems and the very idea of democracy, by bringing into question interventions in the economy, trade, journalism and politics.

There is a dual nature to the impact new technologies have on politics. They were instrumental in the 2011 Arab Springs, weapons of liberation against the strongmen of a fading era. Yet, they are also weapons of action and even control for the strongmen of the new, emerging times. They served to topple Mubarak, but were used by Trump in his rise to power, in the referendum-winning Brexit campaign and by Putin in his hybrid wars in Ukraine or his electoral interference in Western countries. They are part of the fourth industrial revolution, which revolves around big data and Artificial Intelligence, but are also key factors behind the latest wave of totalitarian population control, implemented by autocratic states like Russia, China or Saudi Arabia.

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Nobody better embodies the new technological strongman than Donald Trump, directing the political world from his unpredictable Twitter account. His is a mod-

el example of populist nationalism, as indeed he is of the strongman. Individualist, erratic and out of control, yet with his eyes firmly fixed on his grip on power, Trump is admired and invoked by populist leaders throughout the world on his march towards personal power through the ballot box. Trump, in turn, admires those who imitate him, but perhaps more still the strongmen whose paths have not included the ballot box, such as, Xi Jinping in China, Kim Jong-un in North Korea, Vladimir Putin in Russia and Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia.

Masculinization of Power

One after the other, nationalist and populist leaders are democratically elected to govern as institutionalized and recognized autocrats in authoritarian regimes. Their strongman geopolitics gathers strength in the alliances and relations they weave with one another. And, we say men because, if there is something that typifies this new era of personalized power, it is the heavy masculinization of power and ideology, which is, at times, openly anti-feminist and hostile toward "gender ideology" and the rights of minorities and sexual identities. Absolute personal power has always been masculine, but in its more contemporary incarnation, male-chauvinism, anti-feminism and an aversion toward homosexuality have become the programmes and banners flaunted at the ballot boxes for obtaining democratic consensus.

The rise of populist leaders could also be associated with today's geopolitics of hate, their success stories at the polls clearly owing to the effectiveness of a discourse of resentment and loathing towards the other, whether this be foreigners, immigrants, muslims, sexual minorities or even underprivileged social groups. Duterte wins elections in the Philippines under a banner of physical and extrajudicial extermination of drug dealers. Narendra Modi has won a landslide victory in India with a programme that is anti-Muslim and based on Hindu supremacy. Bolsonaro has risen to power in Brazil on another programme of exclusion: of leftists, the poor, indigenous peoples and sexual minorities. The same can be said of Viktor Orban in Hungary, Matteo Salvini in Italy, the Law and Justice Party of Jaroslav Kaczynski in Poland and Marine le Pen in France, all of whom peddle an agenda that exploits fear and the continent's wave of immigration.

The strongmen are coming back. Although, strictly speaking, they have not really ever left, despite the relative democratic progress made since 1989 with the breakup of the communist bloc and disappearance of the Soviet Union. A substantial cohort of strongmen, prior to the current generation, arose from the frustrated or false transitions in the old socialist camp, a direct result of leadership succession in the communist parties: this was the case of Milosevic in Serbia, and his Croat counterfigure, Franjo Tudjman; it is also the case of a good number of ex-communist dictators who emerged from the defunct Soviet Union: Alexander Lukashenko in Belorussia, Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan (who died in 2016), Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, until his apparent resignation in 2019, or Ilham Aliyev, the second President from the same family clan, in Azerbaijan.

It was the same after decolonization, especially in Africa where authoritarian regimes sprang up everywhere and mostly around a figure that people considered charismatic and the personification of the newly-liberated nation. The sole exception was Algeria's single-party regime, although in its last phase it also came to identify with the personal power and false charisma of a figure like Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Brought down by the popular revolts which began last February in protest over his fraudulent perpetuation in power, Bouteflika even went so far as to organize a new presidential election for this year, despite his age and ailing health rendering him unfit for any kind of public activity.

Presidencies for Life

The post-colonial world produced a model of personal dictatorship under the guise of presidencies for life, which was repeated in numerous African countries. This imitation of the monarchical system included copying the model of family succession; something that arose in the dying moments of these regimes. It is not by chance that the fall of Ben Ali, Mubarak and Gaddafi in 2011 came about just when the dictators began to envisage hereditary solutions. Neither is it a coincidence that the highest levels of stability and repressive control during the Arab Springs was to be seen in monarchical regimes such as Morocco and Saudi Arabia. In these countries the succession debate, assuming there is one, is encapsulated within

the ruling families, even when no succession regulations are in place, as is very often the case.

The strongmen in what used to be called Third World countries have based themselves on a solid structure of military and police power, the underpinning governance of post-colonial countries. The most successful model, however, sees the army and party fused as one, as is the case in the People's Republic of China. Until the arrival of Xi Jinping, this was the most explicit example of a depersonalized, collegial dictatorship, although it has now returned to its old ways of accumulating personal power, even bordering on a Maoist-style personality cult.

The Russian case is an odd one, as the root of power there does not lie in the army, but instead the intelligence services, following the end of the party-state structure. However, a new oligarchical class, largely arising from former communist cadres preying on public resources in the privatization era, has been built on the new electoral base or "constituency." The case of Vladimir Putin, although not corresponding to the nationalist-populist model, serves as direct inspiration for many of its leaders, from Trump to Orban, and corresponds with many of its ideological traits – nationalism, conservatism, anti-feminism – in its case embellished by the ideas of Russian neo-imperialism and a Euro-Asianist pseudophilosophy.

Decline of the Military Dictator

One of the defining traits of the era is the decline of the explicit figure of the military dictator, although it has not entirely disappeared, particularly thanks to Egypt, once a key player in Arab politics. After the failure of the Arab uprisings and especially of political Islam in power, with the exception of Tunisia, the military can continue to proclaim the advantages of dictatorship for the sake of political stability, maintaining the economic order (with its geostrategically invaluable byproduct the energy supply), containing migratory movements and the fight against terrorism.

The dictatorship of the field marshal Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, transformed into the President elect and near enough President for life, is a fine example, as it directly opposes the Islamic democracy of Mohamed Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood government, violently defeated a year after his presidential victory. It also serves as a model for Libya, where Sisi's replica, the

Benghazi-based warlord general Khalifa Haftar, aspires to take power with the backing of the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, France and the United States, in the name of the fight against Islamic terrorism.

The fall of Bouteflika, a young and populist Foreign Minister in the first years of independence, is highly significant for the post-colonial world. His figure brings together the symbology of the third-worldism that triumphed in the 60s, following the Cuban and Algerian revolutions, with a standard of decadence and corruption in the twenty years of his opaque, conspiratorial and nepotistic presidency, compounded by high energy prices and an Algerian population exhausted by almost an entire decade of civil war. Bouteflika's defeat comes alongside that of Omar al-Bashir, the Sudanese dictator, and shortly after the fall of two historic decolonization leaders-turned-dictators, namely, Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe and Jose Eduardo dos Santos in Angola.

The era of all-powerful presidencies for life seems to be coming to an end. However, the model retained by the conservatism of the Gulf Arab monarchies and their Western allies, especially the US oil oligarchy and now, more specifically, Donald Trump and his family, is one of regimes removed from any kind of democratic inclination, which is actually considered as a danger to stability, a concession to political Islam and an open door to disorder and, eventually, terrorism. The same model applies to general Ahmed Gaid Salah in Algeria, an effective repressor from the ousted corrupt ruling elite who has become a self-designated guarantor of an ordered transition. A similar story is unfolding in Sudan, where a military junta has taken power after the fall of the dictator el-Bashir, as a result of popular protests.

A Democratic Path

The strongmen that are most worthy of our attention, because they are part of the current populist movement, are those that rise to power through the ballot box, thanks to electoral victories within democratic and even liberal systems, a circumstance that is neither a guarantee of anything, nor exceptional in history: Adolph Hitler was also voted into power. And the centre of gravity of these democratic geopolitics can be found in the White House, the official residence of Donald Trump since 20 January 2017.

The arrival of a media and real estate magnate as the supreme authority of the US, after beating all republican candidates in the primaries and defeating the former State Secretary and first lady Hillary Clinton in electoral colleges, although not in the popular vote, was an earthquake whose tremors were felt all around the globe. Imitating US voters and imitating Trump are now issues at the top of every far-right agenda.

Not only is Trump a model, but also a promoter. He likes strongmen, dictators, authoritarians and despots, or at least those with special or excessive powers. Even before his election, there was a close connection with autocrats already in power, especially those at the head of past or future superpowers. Vladimir Putin is one example, the real winner of elections in which he not only gave Trump his backing, but in which he also invested efforts, energy and espionage to avoid Clinton's victory. And then there is Xi Jinping, China's paramount leader since 2012, who Trump has lavishly flattered since the first day of his Presidency, aware of the collision course both countries are on.

The only countries outside the radius of his sympathies are those designated as part of his Axis of Evil. These, naturally, include Maduro's Venezuela, for strictly geopolitical reasons that were justified with candid shamelessness by Trump's National Security Advisor, John Bolton. He made reference to the old Monroe Doctrine, under which the United States, in the early 19th century, claimed its right to intervene in all of the territory of the American continent without any European power having any right to interfere. There is also Iran, under Ayatollah Khomeini, despite this country still being in the hands of a reformist president such as Hassan Rouhani. His power in the face of the country's revolutionary militarism is slowly weakening thanks to Trump's dramatic withdrawal from the multilateral nuclear agreement and the tightening of the siege on the Iranian economy.

The Turkish Case

But the most remarkable case on the contemporary panorama is that of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in power thanks to the impeccable democratic rise of his moderate Islamist AKP party (Justice and Development). From 2003 to 2014 he served as the Prime Minister of a parliamentary republic, and has since become the all-powerful President of a presidentialist Turkey. The

war in neighbouring Syria, arrival of refugees, Islamic State actions and military coup in July 2016 have given the Turkish strongman the occasion to harden his regime, accumulate power, purge the army, police, judiciary and media of any opposition and fill the country's prisons with suspects.

Unlike Putin, who rose to power following Yeltsin's appointment, and with the acquiescence of the new Russian oligarchs, Erdogan did so democratically, thanks to his popularity and a well-rooted Islamism, especially among the working classes. The final result is a convergence in a kind of presidency that enjoys dictatorial powers and holds all the strings of economic power.

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Despite his authoritarianism, Erdogan is still a model for political Islam to counterpoint Saudi Arabia's feudal and theocratic version. In the latter, the drift towards consolidating personal power has materialized with the appointment of Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) as crown prince. MbS is the young son of King Salman bin Abdelaziz and the first of the royal princes in line to take over from the second generation since the founding of the kingdom in 1932 by Abdelaziz bin Saud, father of the current King and grandfather of the Prince. The consolidation of MbS' power in Riyadh, with a modernizing, yet no less authoritarian, programme, has required the full support of a Trumpist White House. It has also entailed changes in the line of succession established at the death of King Abdullah, as well as a far-reaching purge inside the royal family and among the ruling class. The alliance between Washington and Riyadh is a central element of Trump's foreign policy in the Middle East. Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal is consistent with his alignment with Netanyahu and MbS, both openly against the uranium enrichment programme being halted in exchange for the unfreezing of Iranian assets in the West and authorization for a civilian nuclear plant, monitored and inspected by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Riyadh and Tehran are vying for regional hegemony, especially through their involvement in the wars in Syr-

ia and Yemen. But their confrontation also forms part of a cold war with greater geopolitical repercussions between the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia, unleashed with particular virulence following the Arab Springs in 2011. Participating on the Saudi front are the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, while Turkey and Qatar are firmly on the side of the Brotherhood.

Orban, an Apostle of Non-liberalism

The return to the extreme personalization of politics is not following the same well-trodden paths of the past, but rather adopts new forms, closely linked to the use of social media and changes in systems of political identification and militancy. These are now more determined by a personal and sentimental bond with a leader than any kind of knowledge of party programmes and ideas. Or, to put it another way, the programme consists of a leader's personality, and support for that programme is attained through identification with the personality.

Strongmen geopolitics can also be interpreted as the expression of the crisis in liberal or representative democracies. Its most devout contemporary apostle is the Hungarian Viktor Orban, who has managed to appropriate the idea of illiberal democracy as something new and the best political model for the needs of today's world. Separation of powers, respect for minorities, rule of law, pluralism and democratic representation are apparently obsolete and ineffective concepts for whoever wants to lead the way and compete on a global panorama dominated by powers like Russia, China or a Trumpist United States.

The idea of authoritarian capitalism, which overrides the luxuries of liberalism and democracy and is limited to the market, is nothing new. It should come as no surprise that it finds its mirror in China's current political system, which serves as an alluring model for national populists like Orban. After all, the communist Deng Xiaoping, founder of China's current socio-economic system, was inspired by ideas that were authoritarian and prematurely illiberal – before the term had even been coined – and shaped by another founding father, that of the successful city-state of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew. Now we have ridden out the storm of the economic recession, it is the great democratic recession that is hitting us full in the face.