

Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia

A comparative and historical perspective

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Bhutto or Mujib to assume complete control over their party's populist initiatives. Needing the support of subordinate social groups to stay in power, none of them was minded to go against the grain of state imperatives and opt for a package of redistributive reforms which might conceivably have built them spontaneous but solid bases of support that even in the absence of a coherent political party organization might have kept the dominant social classes and their allies within the non-elected institutions at bay. The contradictions of populism combined with the structural constraints, domestic and international, were clearly beyond the control of the illustrious trio. Yet it may not have been altogether impossible to concentrate energies on widening the scope of redistributive reforms. Here Mrs Gandhi and Bhutto proved more unwilling than Mujib to break with the dominant alliances within state and society and fashion a new style of politics. But then Mujib was presiding over a state where the non-elected institutions were relatively less cohesive than in either India or Pakistan. Moreover, the dominant social groups in the latter two countries were far better entrenched at the level of regional political economies to pose threats to central state authority than was the case with Bangladesh's culturally more homogeneous yet politically more divided ruling middle classes. Unfortunately, the few political advantages Mujib possessed over his opposite numbers in India and Pakistan were more than cancelled by the perilous constraints, both domestic and international, on Bangladesh's economy.

Clearly then, the collapse of populism, though not the rush into the authoritarian embrace, owed more to the structural constraints than the culpability of the individual leaders. But the imperfections of populism cannot be confused with the impossibility of redistributive reforms even in the constrained and constraining circumstances in which states in the subcontinent negotiate terms with domestic society, regional neighbours and the larger international system.

Reclaiming democratic ground in India, 1977-1993

In the sixth general elections India's voters had vented their anger at the suspension of democratic processes with a pounding rejection of overt authoritarianism. The 1977 elections seemed to mark the end of Congress domination in Indian politics. Indira Gandhi, the populist turned autocrat, was given an electoral snub in her own constituency of Rai Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh. But with the benefit of hindsight 1977 appears to have ushered in a new era where Congress's continued claims to the central authority of the Indian state were under more effective challenge from a variety of regionally based political forces, whether of the conservative or the populist ilk. The expanding arena of democratic politics and the accompanying erosion of the

Congress's organizational and electoral bases of support had worked to the advantage of regional political parties and compounded the problem of concentrating political and economic power in the hands of the central state.

Yet the later years of the populist era had given ample warning of how India's centralized state structure was likely to treat the growing assertiveness of regional political forces. Although Mrs Gandhi's invocation of the draconian powers in the Indian constitution failed to strike a sympathetic chord in a political culture in which Nandy has discerned strains of amoral authoritarianism, reclaiming the democratic ground through the ritual of elections was no barrier to the assertion of authoritarianism, more covert than overt, through the non-elected institutions of the state. During the Nehruvian period the Congress's nation-wide organizational machinery was a mitigating influence on the political centre's inclination to resort to overt authoritarianism at the state level. In the aftermath of populism the Congress party and its national alternative, the loosely put together Janata coalition, were effectively reduced to representing specific regions. The result was an increasing tendency for overt authoritarianism projected by the centre at the regional level to co-exist with formal democracy at the all-India level. The more so since the fit between populism and regionalism tended to be tighter and more readily translatable into practice than the inevitable generalities and platitudinous rhetoric of a centrally orchestrated populism. A continued exploration of the unfolding dialectic between the state structure and political processes after 1977 helps in highlighting the dynamics of these developments.

The Janata party was formed in 1977 following the merger of the Congress (Organization) led by Morarji Desai, the Bharatiya Lok Dal led by Charan Singh, the Jan Sangh led by Atal Behari Vajpayee, the Congress for Democracy led by Jagjivan Ram and H. N. Bahuguna and the Socialists. The formation of a single party out of so many disparate groups was facilitated by the moral authority wielded by the aging J. P. Narayan who followed Gandhi's footsteps by refusing to hold any party or government position. The Janata won impressively in Congress's traditional strongholds in northern and central India, including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Orissa and Assam. The Congress emerged from the 1977 elections with a distinctively regional face, winning in the four southern states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh.

A multi-party coalition committed to restoring democracy and decentralizing power, the Janata party better reflected the conflicting interests within and between India's regional political economies. But its main asset was also its biggest liability. Resting on the support of oligarchs as well as the disaffected populist leaders whose support Mrs Gandhi had wilfully

forfeited, Janata could neither pull nor push in the same direction. This, rather than the contending interests of its component parties, was the more important reason why Janata disintegrated with such sweet rapidity. In mid-1979, the octogenarian prime minister Morarji Desai lost his majority in parliament and his place at the helm of the government was taken by Charan Singh, a Jat leader hailing from western UP who had the support of rich farmers and backward castes in northern India. Although Charan Singh never faced the Lok Sabha, he managed during the brief tenure of the Janata party in office to engineer a significant shift in the state's economic policies in favour of the agrarian sector. Charan Singh, however, did not have the necessary parliamentary support to win a vote of confidence as prime minister. He remained merely as caretaker until new general elections in January 1980.

Under the Janata party it was primarily those who dominated the regional political economies of northern India rather than disaffected states outside the Hindi belt which had temporarily occupied a niche in New Delhi. Indira Gandhi made her comeback initially with the support of Devraj Urs, the most successful state level populist of the south. Urs ensured Mrs Gandhi's by-election victory from Chikmagalur in Karnataka in 1978. Earlier in the year the Congress had split for the third time when a segment tried to remove Indira Gandhi from the leadership of the party, holding her responsible for the electoral defeat of 1977. Anti-Indira moves from within the Congress were matched by the Janata's efforts to ensure that popular disaffection with her authoritarian persona was not a fleeting phenomenon but the end of Mrs Gandhi's claims to national power. In what widely came to be perceived a persecution campaign against the former prime minister the Janata government established a judicial commission headed by Justice Shah to investigate the excesses of the emergency. A parliamentary privilege committee went to the extent of unseating her after she had won from Chikmagalur. But state-level elections in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh established Mrs Gandhi's faction now known as the Congress (I) for Indira as the more powerful or real Congress.

With the political tide turning against the Janata, Mrs Gandhi began plotting her return to the national stage. Urs, who had masterminded the Karnataka victory for the Congress (I), was deemed to be expendable once the subordinate castes, classes and religious minorities in the north began showing clear signs of disillusionment with the agrarianism of Janata's predominantly middle to richer caste and class conglomeration, and the urban communalism of its commercial supporters. On the eve of the 1980 elections Indira Gandhi struck a deal with Bahuguna and named him the general secretary of her party. This was designed to win back the support of Harijans and Muslims in the UP. The KHAM strategy was also revitalized

in Gujarat and successfully neutralized Morarji Desai. The Congress won a decisive victory in the 1980 parliamentary elections, successfully overturning the electoral verdict of 1977 in the northern and central states while at the same time holding on to the advantage in the south. Since the Janata party had dismissed the Congress-led state governments in nine northern and central states in the aftermath of their victory in parliamentary elections in 1977, the Congress returned the compliment in 1980 and managed to slot in Congress-led state governments in most of these states. In a slight variation of Mrs Gandhi's tactic in 1971-2 to delink parliamentary and state elections, an attempt was made in 1977 and in 1980 to bring the momentum of a parliamentary victory to bear on the outcome of state-level elections.

The strategy had borne fruit in the short term. But in the long term, far from guaranteeing the alignment of state politics with configurations of power at the centre, it provided the structural basis for a growing divergence between regional and central political imperatives. Electoral success at the regional level called for populist programmes fashioned by the specific concerns at the state and local levels of society. Yet these frequently clashed with the more broadly construed imperatives of the political centre, creating greater dissonance between the forces of regionalism and centralism at a time when nation-wide party organizations seemed to have become relics of the past. To keep the social dynamics underlying political processes at the regional level within the parameters of India's essentially unitary state structure, those occupying the political centre had to lean heavily on the non-elected institutions, the civil bureaucracy, the police and, ultimately, the military. So the delinking of state and parliamentary elections furnished the political system with scenarios where the quantum of democracy at the regional level, even if rendered imperfect by the cupidity of public representatives and institutions, was in inverse proportion to the manifestations of autocracy by the presiding centre.

This is one of the reasons why the restoration of Mrs Gandhi's Congress (I) at the centre could not resurrect the old era of Congress domination. Although memories of populism paved the way for the Congress's return to power, Mrs Gandhi diluted her populist programme on the economic front after 1982 and made tentative moves in the direction of market orientated liberalization. This period was also marked by the central leadership's highhanded interference in the affairs of the states. New Delhi's brazen manipulation of party factions in the different regions was paralleled by a greater confidence in centrally appointed state governors and, of course, members of the IAS and the IPS. Congress chief ministers were changed at the whim of Mrs Gandhi who was both prime minister and president of the party. With the Congress high command abjuring internal party elections, political disaffections at the state, district and local levels could only be

voiced through exit from the party. Unable to square the needs of their constituencies with pressures from above, influential state-level leaders and social groups began veering towards specifically regional parties. The myopia of the central Congress leadership's stratagem was dramatically revealed in the astonishing victory of a newly formed regional party, the Telugu Desam led by N. T. Rama Rao, in the 1983 state elections in Andhra Pradesh. In 1984 in what was an overtly authoritarian measure carried out under constitutional cover the centre toppled elected state governments in Andhra Pradesh and Kashmir, which only served to fan the fires of a deepening populist regionalism in both these states.

Yet the most disastrous handling of regional politics by the centre took place in the strategically vital state of the Punjab. While out of power the Congress (I) had encouraged a Sikh faction led by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale to challenge the mainstream Sikh party, the Akali Dal, which had two ministers in the central cabinet and was the senior partner in a coalition government in the Punjab. In the early 1980s the Akali Dal launched an agitation for more state autonomy on the basis of the Anandpur Sahib resolution first passed in 1973 and amended in 1978. Bhindranwale's more extremist faction turned to violent methods and gained the upper hand as negotiations between the Akali leadership and the central government failed to make any headway. In the face of new and more determined regional challenges to central authority, especially from the Punjab, New Delhi finessed the art of authoritarian governance wearing the velvet glove of democratic constitutionalism. Since the blows administered could not delude an ever-vigilant Indian press corps, the political centre sought legitimacy for its actions by subtly but surely substituting populism and secularism with an implicit ideology of communalism. In June 1984 Indira Gandhi took the fateful decision to deploy the Indian army against Sikh militants occupying the Golden Temple in Amritsar. The military action led to a deep psychological alienation of the Sikh community. On 31 October 1984 Mrs Gandhi was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards.

Using communalism as a counterweight to regionalism was hardly a novelty in Indian politics. Deployed by the colonial state against both Indian nationalist and separatist Muslim politics, it had provided the Congress high command in 1947 with the means to cut Jinnah's and the Muslim League's demands down to size. Yet there was an important new dimension in the centre's evocation of communalism in the 1980s. Encountering implacable opposition from an array of regional forces, the political centre gave Hindu majoritarian communalism its head. Sheer desperation perhaps, but it did seem to do the trick. The 1984 electoral experience persuaded the Congress under Rajiv Gandhi of the efficacy of the explicitly anti-Sikh and implicitly Hindu communal card in maintaining parlia-

mentary majorities as well as central authority. The main refrain of Rajiv Gandhi's speeches during the election campaign was that the country must be united to defeat the Anandpur Sahib resolution which in his view embodied a clear secessionist demand. Riding the sympathy wave following his mother's assassination, the Congress bagged a record 79 per cent of the Lok Sabha seats and 49 per cent of the popular vote in December 1984. But in the context of the delinking of national and state politics the Congress did not perform as well in state elections held in March 1985. In fact, the Congress managed to lose control of the state assemblies in Karnataka and Sikkim and was also defeated in Andhra Pradesh.

Projected as a Mr Clean unspoiled by the corrupt and corrupting influences of power politics, Rajiv was seen as the torch bearer of a new generation poised to take India into the twenty-first century. Unable to shed his Doon schoolboy syndrome, Rajiv's approach to politics and economics was unabashedly elitist. The 1985 budget was a rich man's fantasy and a symptom just how out of touch the prime minister and his inner coterie were with the popular pulse. Liberalization of imports and state controls of the domestic economy offended the bureaucracy without bringing any tangible benefits to significant sections of the Indian populace, particularly in the field of employment. Basking in the glow of his newly won victory Rajiv Gandhi signed accords with the Akali Dal in Punjab and the Asom Gana Parishad in Assam which brought these parties to power in state-level elections. Yet substantive elements of the accords that might have defused the regional time bombs were simply not implemented. The Congress lost to leftist political formations in Kerala and West Bengal in 1987, but it was Congress's defeat at the hands of the Lok Dal led by the irrepressible Jat leader Devi Lal in Haryana which provided the first sign of Rajiv Gandhi's vulnerability in the Hindi-speaking heartland. Corruption scandals surrounding the Bofors arms deal and mismanagement of relations with neighbours, particularly Sri Lanka, eroded the credibility of Rajiv's government. The resignation of his former finance and defence minister, V. P. Singh, provided the political opposition with a focal point in the campaign to pull Rajiv Gandhi down.

While Rajiv shared his mother's knack for making enemies out of allies, he lacked her agility in keeping one step ahead of political rivals. The Rajiv Gandhi regime had presided over a clear sliding back from both populism and secularism as the main props of central authority in India. As the 1989 elections made clear, Congress's would-be poker player had, unbeknown to himself, allowed those more ideologically committed to a Hindu Rashtra to turn the tables on him. The Bharatiya Janata Party, the old Jan Sangh in a more populist guise, scored the most points on the communal card while the Congress's hesitance to play the populist card provided rich electoral divi-

dends to the Janata Dal. The Dal in any case had a heavy stack of agrarian cards, including the King of Manda, and managed to form a minority government with support from both communalists and communists. V. P. Singh's much publicized centralist credentials, established during his tenure as finance and defence minister and then as Rajiv's most high-profiled political opponent, made him an acceptable national alternative. The 1989 electoral verdict should be considered as a watershed in India's political development not only because of its implications for the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty and the Congress but, more precisely, because it registered the most decisive success of regional political forces in exercising state power directly from the centre.

As in 1977 this was a victory for the dominant among north India's regional political formations, though a better coordinated and more broadly based one. But here was the rub. Regional parties outside the Hindi belt whose electoral gains and agitations appeared to have laid siege to the centre during the eighties paid heavily for their local sins; they were routed by the Congress in the southern states. The uneven successes of regionalism left central political authority with the irresistible temptation of relying more and more on the ideological starch provided by the BJP's brand of communalism.

On the face of it, the new configuration of political forces at the centre might have had a better chance of reordering the priorities, if not the direction, of India's political economy of development. But any economic reorientation privileging the agrarian sector and the big farmers and the middle to richer peasants within it had to contend with the non-elective institutions of the Indian state, the bureaucracy in particular, and the counterweight of powerful industrial capitalist interests. The difficulties in squaring an agrarian regional economic orientation with the centre's broader based sectoral imperatives brought the contradictions between formal democracy and covert authoritarianism within the Indian state to the surface in a subtle but sure manner. Even the kingmaker Devi Lal could not steal a leaf out of Charan Singh's book in trying to deliver on the Dal's electoral promises. Indeed the Janata Dal had little option but to abandon the fire and fury of its agrarianism and settle down to working within the established parameters of the compromise between formal democracy and covert authoritarianism. The growing importance of money in the acquisition of political power in any case made it impossible for the Janata Dal to ride roughshod over the interests of the stalwarts of Indian industrial and finance capitalism. The most that the Dal's supporters could expect was to keep agrarian subsidies on an even sharper upward incline and to use political power at the central and regional levels to stake a claim for an ever larger share of an already sprawling network of state patronage

– concessional financing, plum jobs, lucrative government contracts and the like.

A Janata Dal minority government relying on the support of the BJP on the right and communists on the left was an inherently unstable arrangement. Seeking to carve out a vote bank for himself, V. P. Singh announced in August 1990 that his government would implement the long-standing recommendations of the Mandal commission to reserve jobs in government and places in educational institutions for the backward castes. This led to a string of street protests by upper-caste youths and, more ominously, to the intensification of the BJP's campaign to build a temple to Rama – the Hindu mythical god – on the very site of a historic mosque – the Babri masjid in Ayodhya. After some hesitation the V. P. Singh government supported the Bihar state government's decision to arrest Lal Krishna Advani, the leader of the BJP, and the UP state government's measures to stop Hindu militants from desecrating the mosque. The withdrawal of BJP support ensured the defeat of the V. P. Singh government in a parliamentary vote of confidence in November 1990.

In one of the more curious twists in India's democratic politics a small gang of barely sixty parliamentarians led by the erstwhile Young Turk of Mrs Gandhi's populist days, Chandra Shekhar, formed the government with Congress support. Chandra Shekhar's group had split away from the Janata Dal to form the Janata Dal (S) for socialists. Once the Janata Dal (S) and the Congress fell out, another reference to India's vast electorate became inevitable. In the violent elections of May and June 1991, punctuated by the tragic assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the Congress managed to emerge as the largest single party in parliament. It did so by barely staving off the challenge of a loose alliance of the National Front led by the Janata Dal and the Left Front led by the CPI-M as well as the BJP. Particularly striking was the precipitous decline in the Congress vote in north Indian states. The BJP not only won a majority of parliamentary seats from UP, but also formed the state government. It was also triumphant in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh while the Janata Dal emerged victorious in Bihar. For the first time in India's political history a party decimated in the Hindi-speaking heartland nevertheless managed to put together a government at the centre.

The Congress minority government of P.V. Narasimha Rao unfurled an elaborate economic reform programme with a clear accent on privatization and liberalization. Intended to dig the national economy out of the quagmire of deficits and debts since the early 1980s, the new policy marked a break with the statist socialist principles of the past. Yet the change of direction stemmed less from an ideological conviction than pragmatic considerations of how best to deal with the immediate problem of a growing fiscal and financial crisis. The seismic shock administered by the Indian

state's abject failure to prevent the destruction of the Babri mosque in December 1992 put a weighty question mark on the course of the economic reform. Allegations of close links between corruption scandals in the Bombay stock market and the prime minister's office deflated the enthusiasm with which the programme of liberalization had been received in business circles.

In the 1990s a deeply discredited Congress regime came to preside over a new and dangerous conjuncture in the overlapping dialectics of nationalism and communalism as well as centralism and regionalism. The pariah-like status of the BJP in the eyes of other political parties after the demolition of the mosque gave only a temporary reprieve to the enfeebled Congress government at the centre. Its decision to dismiss the BJP state governments in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh along with the UP government for its conniving role in the events at Ayodhya was almost calculated to backfire. By the summer of 1993 the BJP was prepared to vote with the Left and National fronts which brought a no-confidence motion in the Lok Sabha chastising the Rao government for its corruption, economic mismanagement and failure to slow the pace of deteriorating communal relations in many parts of the country. The survival of the government in July 1993 by the narrowest parliamentary vote in history signposted a new phase in India's lengthening political paralysis.

With widespread social disorder and the political party system in a state of atrophy, the continuities of government were provided by the tarnished but as yet unbroken non-elected institutions of the state, particularly the civil bureaucracy and the police. The salience of the non-elected institutions in India's state structure was not lost on the BJP and its even more extremist allies such as the Bombay-based Shiv Sena whose sympathizers have been systematically infiltrating not only the civil bureaucracy and the police but also the judiciary and the army. It is this communalization of state institutions that has transformed what used to be periodic outbreaks of communal riots into vicious and organized pogroms against members of India's religious minorities, Muslims in particular. The nexus between the forces of Hindutva and segments of India's non-elected institutions represents on the one hand a conservative reaction along religious, caste and class lines in northern and parts of western India. On the other the discourse of national unity articulated by these regionally grounded forces of communalism claims that they would be more effective and ruthless defenders of the Indian centre against recalcitrant peripheries and suspect religious minorities than the politically bankrupt Congress. In any case, the writ of the centre in such troubled peripheries as Kashmir, Punjab and Assam has for some time been maintained by the coercive arms of the state, including the 'apolitical' Indian military.

The combination of formal democracy and covert authoritarianism had,

of course, always characterized the post-colonial Indian state. Keen observers of Indian politics were becoming accustomed to the spectacle of a formally democratic centre masking its application of increasing doses of overt authoritarianism in many regions. What has been unique about India in the 1990s is that attempts are being made to enact the charade in troubled regions with a firmer determination not to undertake any fundamental structural reforms at the centre. Justified on the grounds of preserving national unity, this unbending posture of the Indian centre is likely to stoke the embers of regionalism in even the more cataleptic parts of the country. The alternative proposed by the BJP and its associates aims at buttressing nationalism and centralism through a bid for state power resting on a potent and pernicious combination of their regional power bases and an all-India Hindu communal ideology. An implicit inversion of the old equation between centralism and secularism, the BJP's gamble, if it pays off, might harden the centre in the short term but hasten the longer-term process of India's regional fragmentation. Regardless of the eventual outcome of the battles being fought in the political arenas, the authoritarian features of the Indian state structure are likely to be accentuated in this period of uncertainty. Having lost much of its democratic gloss ever since the waning of Mrs Gandhi's populist politics, the Indian state in the 1990s has become even more tractable to comparison with the overt authoritarianism of military dominated Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Resurgent authoritarianism and the democratic compulsion in Pakistan and Bangladesh

With the dismantling of Bhutto's and Mujib's populist regimes, Pakistan and Bangladesh slipped into a long and trying night of military rule. Gone were the populist pretences which the socio-economic and political disaffections of the late 1960s and early 1970s had thrust upon the ruling configurations. This was to be a phase aimed at fortifying the old world of privilege against the minor infractions made by an enthused but unempowered world of underprivilege. The brutal treatment meted out to the two leaders who had dared engendering illusions of hope among the lower social strata signalled the resolve to brook no nonsense from any quarter opposed to the authoritarian option. Deprived ever so often of civil liberties, the people of both countries could not quite envisage what the pertinacious military jackboot was about to perpetrate in the name of political stability, economic efficiency and social morality.

The similarities between the Pakistani and Bangladeshi experience under post-populist authoritarianism are not confined to the coincidence of two military rulers bearing the same name. Although General Zia-ur-Rahman of