The Rise of Populism: a Threat to Civil Society?

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Populism is a long-dated phenomenon that manifested in diverse ways in the mid-nineteen century. At that time, the concept of "the people" gained the attention and curiosity of intellectuals, initially representing "the honest, self-sacrificing agent of revolution and modernity" (Jacobson, 2018). However, this conception of "the people" changed over the years, considered in the twentieth century as a mass of destructive and primitive instincts, as seen by Freud (1920). In the Cold War period, populism was considered in the West as reuniting uneducated and authoritarian people, while in the Soviet Union, it represented the "empire of people's democracies and popular fronts" (Jacobson, 2018). Several philosophers have sought to define a model of populism, but no single definition appeared to accommodate the large diversity of populisms. Indeed, movements in Russia, the Americas, Africa and Asia have been called populist, although they manifest very little similarities. Isaiah Berlin (1968) attempted to determine some universal attributes to identify populisms. In his perspective, populism is apolitical and populists use the state to pursue their goals. Populist movements stand for the majority, constituted by a group of perverted people, against a political, economic, or cultural elite.

In this perspective, "the people" characterise a group identified as the true citizens, often left out and dominated by the state. In that sense, they often advance a programme of anti-industrialisation and anti-capitalism, "to avoid the horrors of what is happening in the Western world" (Berlin, 1968). Although the importance of the people's sovereignty connects populisms with democracy, there is an innate tension that exists between these two concepts. Liberal democracy involves the information and political participation of citizens, political pluralism, and transparency of the political structures and institutions (Pasquino, 2008). However, populist conceptions of the power of "the people" are rarely applied under these conditions. Populisms often oppose political structures mediating between the people and the power, such as civil society actors. In fact, the exclusionary view whereby "the people" are represented by a certain range of society only, based on the socio-economic class, religion, or ethnicity, creates an incompatibility with the fundamentals of liberal democracy. Thus, although views differ among scholars, this paper questions whereas the populist phenomenon poses a threat to liberal democratic principles and more specifically, to civil society.

In this context, the visible rise of populisms in the post-cold War period and the ambiguous relationship with civil society can be considered obstacles to the consolidation of democratic principles and to the exercise of fundamental rights. This article will focus on Indian populism, its effects on civil society and more largely on liberal democracy. We will address the main characteristics of Indian populism and observe that in this case, populism can constitute a danger for the civic space and to the fundamental rights of people.

The Case of India

Populism in India represents one of the most radical expressions of populism that emerged in the past decades. It represents a considerable shift from post-colonial policies of inclusion, pluralism and tolerance, introduced after 1947 (Hajdari, 2018). Indeed, the nationalist ideology carried by the state opposes the idea of a secular, diverse and ethnic nation. To understand the current political context and the rise of populism in India, it is important to draw a brief history of the nation's post-colonial politics.

Context

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After India's independence in 1947, the Indian National Congress (also called INC or Congress) ruled the nation as the dominant political party, promoting liberalism, secularism and social-democratic principles (Hajdari, 2018). Due to several difficulties encountered to maintain the idea of a secular nation, the INC started to decline in the 1960s. At the same time, populist groups emerged and gained support, establishing coalitions with other political parties (Hajdari, 2018). In 1977, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) formed a government under the Janata Party (JP), a coalition of several parties adopting radical measures such as the modification of history books to idealise the Hindu civilisation and marginalise the Muslim community (Ammassari, 2018). Consequently, conflicts between Muslims and Hindus intensified in the 1980s, leading the Janata Party to split in different fractions and to the creation of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Within the context of violence between Muslim and Hindu communities, opened up the possibility for the BJP to attract voters around a dominant Hindu nationalist ideology, known as *Hindutva* (Ammassari, 2018).

In parallel, during the 1990s, the institutional inefficiency and the growing corruption among political elites played in favour of the BJP's popularity, soon overtaking the Congress (Hajdari, 2018). In 1999, the BJP formed a governmental coalition named the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which was anti-Muslim, anti-secular and supporting the *Hindutva* agenda (Ammassari, 2018). During the 2004 general elections, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), a coalition of centre-left parties mainly constituted by former INC members, was elected to rule the nation until 2014. However, socio-economic inequalities were not successfully addressed and additionally, several members were incriminated for corruption (Ammassari, 2018). Narendra Modi, Chief Minister of Gujarat from 2001, appeared at that time as a pro-business leader rising at national level under the BJP. In 2014, Modi became Prime Minister with a populist ideology based on the domination of the Hindu majority and on the idea that minorities constitute a threat to the nationhood (Hajdari, 2018). In the recent general elections of May 2019, the BJP won a full majority, obtaining 353 seats (out of 543) in the *Lok Sabha,* the Indian Parliament (Times of India, 2019). Several elements favoured the victory of the BJP, such as the ideological principle of the party and the image of the charismatic populist leader, Narendra Modi (Ammassari, 2018).

Ideology and Leadership

Hindu nationalism, or *Hindutva*, the idea that Hindu people equate the nation, represents the dominant ideology of the BJP. This populist conception of the nation guides the party towards anti-secularism principles, opposing the idea of a homogeneous Indian population. Hindu nationalism opposes pluralism, a fundamental pillar of liberal democracy, and rejects any possible opponents to the nationhood (Jaffrelot, 2017). In that sense, the BJP favours majoritarian rule, constituted of Indians or Hindus, and restricting minority rights. The idea of "majoritarianism" is used by Modi to carry the concept of Hindu supremacy, differentiating the true citizens from "the others", the "courtesy citizens", the minorities (Hajdari, 2018). Moreover, the perception of minorities as a threat to the nationhood tends to spread fear amongst the majority, attracting populist votes and victories (Hajdari, 2018).

In the Indian context, minorities mainly constitute immigrants or ethno-religious minorities that have been established in India for decades or that migrated for economic purposes. A survey from the Census Organization of India shows that the religious landscape in India is composed of a majority of Hindus, representing almost 80% of the total population, Muslims (14.2%), Christians (2.3%), Sikhs (1.7%), Buddhists (0.7%), Jains (0.3%) and others (0.6%) (Chaney, 2019, p.3). India is home of the second most significant Muslim community worldwide, representing nearly 180 million people, considered by the government as a threat due to the expansion of Islamic fundamentalism in neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh (Ammassari, 2018). For example, illegal immigrants from Bangladesh in the North East are perceived as dangers for the nation, which affects ethnic identities and increases socio-economic inequalities. These immigrants are also seen as contributors to the development of anti-national thoughts and supporters of terrorist organisations. To counter their expansion, the BJP proposed a series of measures such as deportations and reinforced security at the borders. Moreover, the Citizenship Bill was introduced by the BJP in 2016, to restrict Indian citizenship to six religious minorities only, from which Muslims are not part (Ammassari, 2018). In a more general perspective, any anti-national discourse seen as an obstacle for the unity of the nation is strongly repressed and can lead to fundamental limitations in the name of national security. In this regard, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or social activists, often considered anti-national and a threat to Hindu unity can suffer strong restrictions from the state (Jaffrelot, 2017).

The Rise of Populism: a Threat to Civil Society?

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The political figure of Narendra Modi represents an influential and charismatic leader, elevating India's position in the global community. The economic success of the country is an important factor which increases Modi's popularity among the population (Jain, 2017). Also, Narendra Modi uses slogans such as "I am new India", to equate himself and the party to the nation. Slogans constitute a method often used by populist leaders to connect with the population. In this case, these attempts are made through mass meetings or through TV, social media, and Modi's radio programme "Mann Ki Baat" (Jaffrelot, 2017). In fact, the Prime Minister is active on social media networks, fostering citizens' engagement with the party. It is important to note that the BJP is said to be well-organised at the grassroots level, reinforcing connections with the local population and using social media to enhance communication. For example, WhatsApp discussion groups are used to spread the party's ideology and to reach a large number of people (Mitter, 2019). Therefore, a part of the civil society sphere supports and expands the state's interests (Chaney, 2019).

Moreover, the Prime Minister stresses to maintain the implication of civil society in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a process established by the United Nations to review human rights records of all Member States (ohchr.org). Therefore, a strong strategy was developed by the party to attract civil society actors and popular votes. Consequently, in 2016, Modi was nominated by the readers as the TIME's Person of the Year (Jain, 2017). In addition, several initiatives in favour of the poorest sections of the society have reinforced the leader's support among the masses. Externally, Modi promotes peaceful and diplomatic relations with partners and neighbouring countries, which enhances his picture as an esteemed leader worldwide (Jain, 2017).

Although the BJP used to be led in a more decentralised perspective under the former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Modi, in contrast, tends to shape the BJP at his image. Modi's leadership is often characterised as authoritarian, concentrating power and eroding any other centre of authority (Vaishnav, 2019). Modi's re-election in 2019 testifies of his ability to regain the nation's dignity based on the *Hindutva*, the supremacy of Hindu values and culture. The centralisation of authority that emanates from Modi's leadership can constitute an important obstacle for civil society actors to act as watchdogs and more generally, a limit to India's liberal democracy.

India's Populism: a Threat to Civil Society?

The Indian case constitutes a relevant case of analysis due to the large ethno-religious diversity that characterises the civil society sphere and the socio-political environment. In this context, politics are shaping the relations between minorities and the exercise of their rights. The Hindu supremacy and purity pronated by the *Hindutva* constitutes a major element increasing violence between minorities and constraining civil society actors (Chaney, 2019). According to Neera Chandhoke (2001), "the domain of civil society is delineated by the state itself. And states simply happen to have their own notions of what is politically permissible, what is culturally permissible and what is socially permissible" (p.9). Therefore, the principles of Hindu nationalism carried by the state determine the scope of action of civil society actors.

Civil society has played an important role in India's development and history. A broad range of actors such as NGOs, grassroots organisations, women's movements, trade unions, and mass movements, have achieved important progress, especially in delivering basic services and promoting human rights (Harneit-Sievers, 2016). Ethno-religious minorities are increasingly forming networks, NGOs, and grassroots organisations to promote and defend their interests. Some relevant examples of these are the All India Coordinating Forum of the Adivasi/Indigenous Peoples (AICAIP), building solidarity amongst indigenous people and grassroots organisations in India, the Al-Hera Mission, a religious NGO providing education to deprived Muslims, and the Mandhra Lions Club, promoting education and health services to indigenous people in rural areas of the West Bengal Region (http://mcrg.ac.in). However, although India's legal framework guarantees the application of basic fundamental rights for all citizens, including freedom of expression, association, and the access to information and security, such rights are often limited by the state's action (Harneit-Sievers, 2016). Civil society organisations have alleged that human rights activists and NGOs are often repressed by authorities, and there is an increasing tendency of harassment, imprisonment, and violence. Since 2010, restriction policies against civil society organisations have limited their operations, and in some cases, NGOs' legal registration was suspended (Chaney, 2019). Foreign funding for civil society organisations has been limited since 1976, under the Foreign Contribution Regulatory Act (FCRA), initially adopted to control financial flows of

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political opponents. FCRA began to regulate foreign funding for national NGOs, enabling the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to strictly control any organisation of political nature. In 2010, the FCRA was strengthened by several amendments to reinforce limitations of foreign funding and to request NGOs to renew their registration every five years (Harneit-Sievers, 2016). In 2018, nearly twenty thousand NGOs found their licenses and registration cancelled, and from 2015 to 2018, foreign funding declined from almost 40% (Kumar, 2019). In the same year, several civil society activists were arrested, accused of being engaged against the government. In addition, several foreign donors were prohibited by the state to realise bank transfers to India without the Ministry of Home Affairs' authorisation (Harneit-Sievers, 2016). Thus, an important number of NGOs, grassroots and religious institutions suffered the consequences and had to stop their activities.

The measures undertaken by the 2010 FCRA amendments can be considered as exceeding moral principles in order to comply with the *Hindutva* (Duerksen, 2017). The idea of restricting civil society organisations from foreign funding undercovers a broader objective of pulling away minorities from empowerment and expansion. A representative example is the case of the organisation Compassion International (CI), a Christian charity association active in India for nearly fifty years. The organisation provided meals, healthcare and education to children before it was forced to close, accused of religious conversion. The fact that CI was donating to local churches, providing Christian education to children and promoting the Christian faith, appeared as a threat for the state and the Hindu majority. Although it is important to control NGOs' accountability, in that case, the restriction of foreign funds can be seen as a restriction on religious freedom and the elevation of one religion over the other (Duerksen, 2017). Some scholars argue that Modi is very likely to gain power and increase his control over civil society actors, representative of the Indian liberal democracy (Mitter, 2019).

Conclusion

The Indian case reveals that populism can significantly affect civil society and civil liberties, such as freedom of religion. Taken to its more radical forms, populism constitutes a threat to liberal democracy. Populism can be manifested in several ways, from softer to more radical, from left-wing to right-wing. Populism is often linked with nationalism, as observed in the case of India, opening up on authoritarian and discriminative practices against individuals or views considered as anti-national. Indeed, although the democratic Constitution remains respected in some aspects, ethnic minorities appear strongly marginalised (Jaffrelot, 2017). The Indian case shows that populism presents anti-elitist and people-centred characteristics with a conception of "the people" that can be exclusionary. On another hand, populism emphasises a more equal distribution of resources and is often committed to a more egalitarian society, which attracts the support of the lowest ranges of the society. Thus, it is important to consider that populism must be understood in a pluralistic way because its forms and manifestations vary from place to place. A great part of the literature addressed populisms in the United States, Europe, and Latin America. The Asian and African continents have been overlooked, although the diversity of culture, ethnicities, and history that these regions present can add significant variables to the study of populism (Ammassari, 2018).

To prevent the rise of extreme populism and to maintain a liberal democratic order, citizens must defend their interests and fundamental rights. In this regard, civil society has a primary role in consolidating democracy and the liberal doctrine, emphasising that no human being has a natural claim to rule over the others and all legitimate power would be justified based on a mutual contract. To open up on further reflection, I quote one of the most important philosophers for our understanding of liberalism, John Locke (1960):

Men are naturally in a state of perfect freedom […] a state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another: there being nothing more evident, than that Creatures of the same species […] should be equal one among another without Subordination or Subjection. (p.189).

The utopian narrative of Locke's statement and the understanding of the global rise of populism and nationalism contribute to rethinking liberal democracy. Thus, it is legitimate to consider that that rise showcases the individualistic nature of human being, moving away from the ideas of universal equality, 'perfect freedom', and ideal political system. The case study presented in this article shows that populism can contribute to delegitimising certain people's voice, and thus, confronting fundamental democratic principles.

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The Rise of Populism: a Threat to Civil Society?
Written by Lucie Calléja

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