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G20 and the Culture of Protests

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MONISH TOURANGBAM, DEC 26 2014

The Australian city of Brisbane was host to the 9th G20 summit held in November 2014, where world leaders congregated to deliberate on issues of primary importance to global governance, more specifically pertaining to the management of the global financial system. However, another story unfolded on the streets of Brisbane. Protesters came together to call the attention of leaders to issues that are usually relegated to lesser role in international affairs, that are considered not vital for the survival of states. With the rise of transnational issues that affect people across the globe and with intra-state/domestic challenges lacking international policy attention, these kinds of protests have become more common in recent times. In principle, these protests are seen to represent 'voice for the voiceless'. While the centrality of these issues to global governance can be debated, the continued blurring of lines between domestic and international politics and inter-linkages among issues and their implications, implies that these protests and the issues they bring to the fore cannot be entirely neglected, if international affairs is to be viewed holistically.

'March of Ideas' in Brisbane

Protesters took the streets in Brisbane calling for the rights of the aboriginals, and raised a host of other issues supporting anti-capitalism, pro-renewable energy, anti-offshore detention, anti-coal and anti-war. Climate change and criticism of Australia's lack of action on the same topped the list of protesters' priorities. The 'angelic Climate Guardians' had travelled from Melbourne to take part in the protest in their white attires and expansive wings, lending to maximum visual impact.

This was not all. Protesters including aid workers called the world leaders' attention to Ebola-stricken nations in West Africa. Protesters also attacked China's failure to resolve the Tibet issue and the lack of action on issues of the environment, lampooning the proverbial 'head in the sand' approach by burying their heads in the sand to emulate what they believed the world leaders were doing. Major efforts were made to avoid clashes between the protesters championing different causes and issues, with different priorities. There was even a pro-capitalist protest supporting G20's push for free market trade. Arrangements were also, for instance, made to avoid clashes between pro-Russian demonstrators and the Ukrainian community in the city. Or for that matter, right-wing Cossack protesters with extreme views (like the abolition of democracy in Russia) were kept away from the more moderate groups out there that celebrated Russian culture.

Past is Prologue

Protesters have always followed all the G20 summits using the annual gathering of the world's powerful countries, to raise public awareness about both national and international issues that are believed to be hardly represented in these summits. Besides the usual international affairs menu, the venues of the summits and their local issues also impact the range of issues to be taken up during the protests. Social issues like gay rights and same sex-marriage in particular have caught attention in most of the protests against G20 summits. During the G20 summit in Mexico in 2012, protesters attacked economic policies that the G20 countries represented, that they believed created social inequality and poverty in the world. The protests called for world leaders to think about long term solutions to fight global poverty and not just knee-jerk reactions to economic crises and bailing out singular countries from the financial mess. As usual, local issues like unemployment in Mexico and the lack of control over organized crime also got reflected in the protests.

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Written by Monish Tourangbam

Demands for honestly reassessing the global financial system for a fairer distribution of wealth are generically similar to the concerns that the Occupy Wall Street Movement in the United States raised calling for an end to high income disparity, what they dubbed as the “99 percent vs 1 percent” system that made the few rich at the expense of the poor many. Improved labour laws, job creation and the implications of free trade regimes have formed important focal points during protests at the G20 summits. Anti-war groups have made their presence felt too in most of the summits, including those protesting against America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Besides, the issues of Palestinian statehood, Chinese human rights policies and China’s policy towards Tibet have also occupied a prominent place on the list of issues raised by the G20 protesters.

A major theme running through all the protests till now has been the call for greater attention to the needs of common people around the world. For instance, the clamour for focus on “jobs, justice and climate” reverberated throughout the protests during the G20 summit in London in 2009. Since the global financial crisis, protestors have been highlighting how unregulated markets have brought such economic miseries and have resolved neither the problem of poverty nor increasing environmental degradation, drawing parallels between the crisis in carbon-emitting economies and the dangers of climate change.

A Culture of Protests: What For?

It is worthwhile recalling that the growth of the G20 as a global forum is complemented by the need felt for a more inclusive inter-state cooperation to better manage global economic issues. However, what protesters demand on the streets during these summits and the issues they represent question the very foundations of the states and their responsibility towards people within their borders and beyond. While issues of domestic nature come to the fore, protesters have been found mostly appealing to the world leaders to focus on issues like global finance, human rights and climate change that transcend borders and hence the traditional responsibilities of the states. So, when protestors hit the streets during the G20 summits, demanding the leaders to keep “people first,” transnational issues that necessitate a sense of global responsibility and global citizenship assume importance.

A sense of “grassroots movement” prevails in these protests; with elements of old school anarchism that believes that socio-economic issues that are discussed at the G20 summits have failed to account for the real problems facing the common people all over the world. The culture of protests has become a common sight in all G20 summits, so much so that maintaining peaceful demonstrations and preventing violent activism have become an inevitable part of the security planning. And as questions continue to be asked as to what extent these protests really matter and if states are really paying any heed to them, they will at the least serve as alternative mirrors to international relations.

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