The Issue of Populism

Populism is defined as 'the political approach that claims to represent the opinions and wishes of ordinary people.'

The acceleration of the populist approach in global governments over the recent years is evident. There are nearly five times as many populist leaders and parties in power today than at the end of the Cold War, and three times more since the turn of the century. `Over time, it spreads to Asia, Western Europe, Africa, and to North America. The rapid rise of populist leaders and parties in power occurred between the mid-2000s and early 2010s, and the latest evidence shows that the prevalence of populism remains near its 30-year high.

The support for traditional social democratic parties has shrunk, and new parties have emerged and have rapidly gained consensus, positioning themselves on the new dimension of political conflict. Many of these new parties, so-called populists, campaign on anti-establishment and anti-elite platforms, and claim to represent the 'true interests' of the people at large.

Four root causes are carved out for today's populism:
- economic problems
- cultural causes
- the speed of change generated by globalisation and digitalisation
- the failure of policy to manage a transition to higher welfare, globally and locally

An approach regards populism as a form of rhetoric. Populists may adopt certain ideas in their discourse, such as claims to rid politics of corruption or restore power to ordinary people, but they may abandon these promises once they rise to power, or indeed even do exactly the opposite.

This notion was captured in a widely quoted essay during the 2016 presidential campaign which argued that Donald Trump's campaign rhetoric of "Build a Wall" or "Lock her Up" was treated literally but not seriously by the press. Similar observations could be made of other persuasive slogans, such as Theresa May's "Brexit means Brexit" or Boris Johnson's "Get Brexit Done."

In Western democracies, the most common antithesis of populism is 'Pluralism', emphasizing the importance of tolerating multiculturalism and social diversity in society, governance through liberal democratic institutions, the role of checks and balances on executive powers, and respect for minority rights to counterbalance the majoritarian voice of the people. In non-democratic countries, however, populism may also be contested by those advocating 'elitism,' claiming that power should rest in the hands of a single leader, a leadership elite, or a predominant party.

If action is not taken to reduce the rapid spread of populism, there will be nothing ephemeral about national populism.

Points to consider

- What impact has a populist government had on your country, and to what degree does populism pose a serious threat to your country?
- What can be done to improve representation and accountability to keep voters engaged
- What can be done once a sizeable share of the electorate is so alienated from political parties that it elects a populist government?

Useful links

- www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/global-4#
- https://institute.global/policy/high-tide-populism-power-1990-2020
- https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1354068820927686