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Populism, Protest and Democracy in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Protest is an important measure of discontent within society and can be seen as a form of politics by other means. In periods of uncertainty and instability, protest can harm incumbent regimes by heightening and amplifying tensions, potentially leading to crisis and collapse in extreme cases. The wave of democratisation that characterised the last quarter of the 20th century saw a number of weak democracies emerge and struggle, whereas other regime changes saw new forms of authoritarianism emerge. Crises in the early 21st century have shaken both democratic and non-democratic states, leading to large-scale 'occupy' movements and uprisings that have brought down regimes in the former Soviet Union and across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)[1] region. Common to these diverse protests is a feeling of anti-politics that draws on populist and religious motivations to challenge the state. The aim of this paper is to consider the significance of this apparent wave of protest and identify the driving factors. In order to do this the paper examines arguments around the quality of democracy (and autocracy), state-social movement interactions and the rise of populist and religious movements.

Keywords: protest, democracy, authoritarianism, populism, civil society

Introduction

The early part of the 21st century has been characterised by an apparent proliferation of protest. Recent actions around Occupy and its manifestations echoed and appeared in some senses to resurrect the anti/alter-globalisation movement of the 1990s (Tarrow, 2013; Wood, 2012). However, protest has not been confined solely to Europe and North America; the Colour Revolutions and the Arab Spring demonstrated the way in which large scale contentious events were able to diffuse to different geographical regions (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011; della Porta, 2014). The food riots that captured the world's attention in 2007-08 fit within this wave of protest, reinforcing the effects of globalisation on dispersed groups (O'Brien, 2012). The spread of technology has also facilitated the spread of information and

[1] The MENA region stretches from Morocco to Iran.

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resources in these protests and enabled the targets to respond more quickly (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). Protests in other parts of the world were not unique; they echoed and were reminiscent of protests in the 1980s that contributed to the fall of communism and challenged the hegemony of global organisations such as the IMF and World Bank (della Porta, 2015; Walton and Seddon, 1994).

In the majority of the recent protests, the state has been the target of claims, as people seek remedies for perceived injustices and problems. These claims are being presented in a very different context, as the wave of democratisation that characterised the last quarter of the 20th century has slowed and arguably began to recede (Diamond, 2015; Huntington, 1991). The promise of prosperity and freedom following the end of the Cold War has been challenged by events that highlight the relative weakness of the state in the face of non-state actors and global trends. Just as the Occupy movement sought to challenge the power of big business and corporate greed, new (and old) nationalist movements have emerged to question the underlying premise of globalisation. Disillusionment with politics and a rising populist tide has seen far right groups such as Golden Dawn (GD) and the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) perform well across Europe and enabled Donald Trump to secure the nomination of the Republican Party for the 2016 presidential elections (Allin, 2016; Berbuir et al, 2015; Ellinas, 2015). The reaction of the state to these challenges has varied, depending on the nature of the claim and the resources available to deal with it. Uncertainty over the role and function of the state coupled with the rise of extreme ideologies has led to a search for scapegoats and targets for the rage that has resulted. The manifestation of religious terrorism has provided one such focus and enabled some states to find a target for the frustrations of their populations.

In contrast to the late 20th century when globalisation was on the march and increased openness was seen as the future, the 21st century appears to favour retrenchment and a closure of opportunities. The reaction against established politics has been widespread and led to the emergence of oppositional movements in a variety of forms. The aim of this paper is to consider the significance of this apparent wave of protest and identify the driving factors. The remainder of the paper is divided into three sections that reflect the core themes. The first section considers the arguments around quality of democracy, considering the extent to which weak democracies are able to resist the authoritarian temptation. In the second section, the characteristics of civil society are outlined, examining the nature of the interaction between

social movements and the state. Finally, the focus shifts to the rise of populist and religious movements in response to the crises underpinning the contemporary environment of antipolitics to determine the extent of the threat they pose to practice of democracy.

Weak Democracies and Authoritarian Challenges

The last quarter of the 20th century saw a widespread pattern of democratisation as authoritarian regimes were overthrown or collapsed. Huntington (1991) labelled pattern the third wave of democratisation, following two earlier periods of democratic advance and decline. This was a period of optimism, as it was argued that in a wide range of cases removing authoritarian regimes would open the space for democratic regimes to flourish, exemplified by the negotiated transition in Spain following the death of Francisco Franco (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Despite the early optimism, it soon became apparent that moving towards fully-fledged democracy was not a simple or linear process. A central challenge in this regard was the legacies of the prior regime that continue to cast a shadow in the form of 'behavioural patterns, rules, relationships, social and political situations, norms, procedures, and institutions' (Hite and Morlino, 2004: 26). As Lagerspetz (2001) noted, attitudes of distrust in the former Soviet countries hindered the development of generalised forms of trust that would facilitate effective institutions of governance (see also Morris and Polese, 2015). Managing legacies that have solidified over time and become part of the cultural landscape presents a significant challenge, as it requires changes to established behaviours and also threatens the position of powerholders. During periods of democratisation choices are limited by non-democratic legacies, as the culture of democracy and associated norms are still being embedded within society (see Weßels, 2015). However, more established democracies may also face challenges to their legitimacy where they are unable to meet expectations as a result of external or internal crises.

When considering processes of democratisation and the strength of commitment it is important to examine the prior regime type and mode of transition. Non-democratic regimes that exercised a greater degree of control, such as the Soviet Union, leave a stronger imprint than those like Ben Ali's Tunisia, where the regime focused more narrowly on enriching the elite (see O'Brien, 2015a). Establishing a democratic political system in such an environment requires the construction of mechanisms for representation, accountability and rule of law (see Morlino, 2004a). Additionally, the way in which the old regime is replaced determines the

options available and the path it follows. Outlining the key features shaping the mode of transition, Munck and Leff (1997: 345) pointed to the level of 'elite competition… institutional rules… [and the] key actors' acceptance or rejection of the rules of the game.' Transitions involving a negotiated resolution like those in South Africa and South Korea arguably have the potential to be more durable, as they give both incumbents and challengers a stake in the outcome (see O'Brien, 2016). By contrast, regime changes driven by mass mobilisation threaten to permanently displace incumbent elites and therefore increase the chances that they will reject the new democratic procedures. The events in Egypt following the removal of President Mubarak in 2011 show the risks, as the military intervention that overthrew President Morsi in 2013 (Pinfari, 2013) and ushered in a harder form of authoritarianism than had existed previously (Springborg, 2016). While removal of a non-democratic regime by either means is not a guarantee that a strong democracy will result, events during the initial transition will influence who participates and the options open to them.

Escaping from the grasp of the authoritarian political system is only part of the transformation required to achieve democratic stability. Considering the features of democracy, Tilly (2007: 189) argued that 'a regime is democratic to the extent that political relations between the state and its citizens feature broad, equal, protected and mutually binding consultation.' Central to this definition is the idea that democracy exists on a spectrum. As a state democratises it moves along this spectrum, developing new tools and mechanisms such as a free press, term limits and effective forms of participation necessary to reach the ideal end point. Such progress is not guaranteed, as regimes face pressures to maintain the status quo and not threaten power holders within society, which may lead to progress stalling or reversing over time. In this context, Li (2016) has considered the shift in the response of the Hong Kong government to the 2014 umbrella movement. Facing challenges from below, the government moved away from earlier promises of democratic reform towards a more pro-Beijing authoritarian form of governance. The realisation around the difficulties of democratisation initially led to the emergence of classifications of semi-authoritarian/semi-democratic regime types that were stranded partially along the spectrum between authoritarianism and democracy (see Bogaards, 2009). These classifications point to the messiness and reality of political regimes and the need to consider their distinctive characteristics in order to assess the extent to which they reach the ideal Tilly identified.

In an attempt to assess the risk of authoritarian reversion or de-democratisation, attention has turned to measures of quality of democracy. At the most basic level, Högström (2014: 405) argues 'that if democracies have a low level of legitimacy and … low effectiveness' they can be classified as weak. Addressing the factors that determine the quality of a democratic regime and therefore its strength, Morlino (2004a: 12-13) points to rule of law, accountability, responsiveness, freedom, and equality. These interconnected factors shape the extent to which the regime is seen as legitimate, as well as its ability to address the concerns of its population. Rule of law and accountability are arguably most significant in a democratic regime, as they provide the space and mechanisms by which democratic participation can be facilitated and managed. The extent to which a particular regime can meet these dimensions is in turn 'driven by various combinations of [contingent] choices and concrete opportunities.' (Morlino, 2004b: 21) Identifying manifestations of weak or lower quality democracies, Morlino (2004a: 28) identifies features such as an absence of electoral alternatives, suppression of opposition voices, and restrictions on the media. This highlights the fact that weakly democratic regimes may serve the interests of the ruling elite, as currently illustrated by states such as Hungary (Kornai, 2015) and Turkey (Öniş, 2015) that have seen dominant parties introduce reforms to undermine the rule of law and accountability.

In a recent critique of the literature on quality of democracy, Munck (2016) has advanced a number of challenges. An important element of his argument is that the concept of quality of democracy should not be used solely for assessing democratic regimes (Munck, 2016: 9-10), as applying:

> the concept of quality of democracy to cases deemed to be democracies removes from consideration a key implication of this new line of research: the possibility that the conventional description of a country as a democracy should be revised.

The risk is that countries that are labelled democratic in this perspective will be more likely to retain the label, regardless of their actual practices and behaviour. This is a particular concern in so-called weak democracies where periods of de-democratisation as observed in Turkey may not be recognised as such. Such recognition allows for critical assessment of states identified as established democracies, as well as more firmly authoritarian regimes, enabling their legitimacy and effectiveness to be opened to discretion on the terms such as those identified by Morlino (2004a). In bringing the issue of assessment of quality of democracy to

the fore, Munck (2016) argues that it is essential to bring government decision-making into the equation, moving beyond simple measures of democracy, to determine where power lies.

The challenge facing democracies ranges from authoritarian reversion in the case of weak democracies through to questions around governability in more established political systems. Identifying the source of the threat, Weßels (2015: 95) reminds us of the important point that:

> Democracy is the only regime that allows for contestation of its own rules. Thus, it can be questioned, its legitimacy can vanish, and the acceptance that the majority will create binding decisions for all can disappear. If this happens, democracy is in question.

The emergence of strong and arguably successful authoritarian regimes, such as China, present a model that groups within democratic states may seek to emulate if existing practices are deemed to be failing. Recent analyses of 'black knights' point to the way in which such regimes may seek to influence practices in neighbouring states (see Bader, 2015; Way, 2015). With the democratic recession that has characterised the past decade (Diamond, 2015) and the increasing recognition of the challenge posed by subnational authoritarian regimes (Behrend and Whitehead, 2016) domestic challenges to democracy must increasingly be taken seriously to guard against a crisis of democracy. While such a crisis will be felt more acutely in weakly democratised states, established democracies are also vulnerable to democratic regression (as suggested by Munck, 2016).

Social Movements, Civil Society and Protest

Within the literature on the quality of democracy, civil society features as an important element, providing both legitimacy and ensuring accountability (Morlino, 2004a). Defining the outlines of civil society, Linz and Stepan (1996: 7) have argued that it is:

> an arena of the polity where self-organizing groups, movements and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state, attempt to articulate values, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interests.

The breadth of this arena will be determined by the nature of the state, with authoritarian systems reducing and in some cases controlling organisations outside the formal state apparatus (Johnston, 2011). Where civil society activity is constrained in this way, associational activity declines as individuals become isolated, demoralised and focused on individualistic needs (Galston, 2000). Even in contexts where civil society has freedom to operate Chandhoke (2001: 8) argues that it is not possible to 'assume civil society is emancipated or abstracted from the ethos that permeates' the economic and political spheres.

Wilder (2016) notes the embedded nature of civil society in his analysis of the labour movement in Tunisia prior to 2011. This is reflected in the way in which the labour movement was able to exercise its influence at moments of crisis and instability, advancing and withdrawing as the pattern of opportunities and threats shifted. This clearly illustrates the way the civil society environment in a particular state is bound up in the interaction between social, political and economic constraints and interests.

Associational activity is at the core of civil society, as individuals interact and groups form to pursue particular interests. The state sets the terms on which this activity takes place, ensuring that it is not harmful to the wider interests of the population. In a more direct manner, the state undertakes activities that range from providing a legal and political setting through to supporting and influencing the shape and activities of civil society itself (Chandhoke, 2001). Civil society actors in turn place demands on the state, seeking to bring about changes that serve perceived priorities (Whittington, 1998). While civil society is generally viewed in a positive light, Berman (1997: 427) notes that it can present risks where:

> political institutions are weak and/or the existing political regime is perceived to be ineffectual and illegitimate, then civil society activity may become an alternative to politics, increasingly absorbing citizens' energies and satisfying their basic needs…civil society activity in these circumstances signals governmental and party failure and may bode ill for the regime's future

In states that are weakly democratised, civil society organising may therefore present a threat to the stability of the state. Considering how civil society asserts its claims, Kopecký and Mudde (2003) argue that civil society is a sphere in which various groups mobilise at various times and that non-violent protest provides the voice with which citizens communicate with the political elite.

Contentious politics in the form of protest and direct action provides an important tool with which civil society actors can present their claims (see Travaglino, 2014). Tilly (2008: 5) defined contentious politics as 'interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, in which governments appear either as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties.' The breadth of the concept means that it is able to capture a full range of activities undertaken by civil society actors, ranging from meetings and demonstrations through to actions that threaten the stability of the state. Further teasing out these understandings, Sewell (2001: 55) makes the case that it 'might also be defined as concerted social action that has the goal of overcoming deep rooted structural disadvantage.' Dealing with these claims, the state

determines and conveys which actions are prescribed, tolerated and forbidden, with repercussions associated with each (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007). As De (2016) notes, competing interpretations of events often serve as triggers for protest, revealing submerged tensions. Examining the Shahbag movement in Bangladesh, she argues that a single photograph activated feelings of historical injustice and contemporary inequalities, leading to large-scale mobilisation. This case reinforces the fact that the limits of what the state permits are shaped by what is deemed socially acceptable by society, as well as by the level of democracy and capacity within a particular state.

Protest is an important tool for civil society actors, as it disrupts and challenges these settled understandings and practices. Categorising the forms of protest open to such actors, Tarrow (2011: 99) argues that the 'repertoire of contention offers movements three broad types of collective action – disruption, violence and contained behavior.' The disruptive form of protest is the most effective in generating attention, as it 'incorporates claims, selects objects of claims, includes collective self-representations, and/or adopts means that are either unprecedented or forbidden within the regime in question.' (McAdam et al, 2001: 8; see also Drury and Stott, 2011) Contained behaviour represents a form of action that uses formal channels to pursue claims and may be seen as more legitimate given the particular context or the issue (see Doherty and Hayes, 2014). Ruibal (2016; see also Abers and Tatagiba, 2015) argues that in Brazil the courts have served as a key venue for abortion activists to achieve change in social and political context where other channels are closed. Where such formal mechanisms are weak or absent, the possibilities of less contentious forms of civil society activity are also reduced and violence may be seen as a legitimate option (see O'Brien and Podder, 2012). This is particularly significant in regimes with limited histories of democratic engagement or during periods of crisis when normal politics may be weakened.

By challenging the state in this way civil society actors are able to test the limits of what is tolerated and force the state to take action. When responding to claims from civil society actors, states in turn can respond with 'a mix of concessions and repression' (Goldstone and Tilly, 2001: 185). While democratic regimes may be more likely to make concessions in the face of protest mobilisations, they will also likely make use of subtle forms of social control, generally falling short of repression, due to the costs involved. In addition to formal mechanisms for channelling and governing civil society behaviour, the state may also

encourage and support countermovements (Gale, 1986) or seek to directly subvert organisations through the deployment of agents to infiltrate and undermine (Marx, 1974; O'Brien, 2015b). In the relationship between the state and civil society, the nature of the regime is key in determining what civil society actors will deem to be acceptable. As Tilly and Tarrow (2007: 161) argue:

> In mainly democratic regimes, the repertoire of contention leans towards peaceful forms of contention that intersect regularly with representative institutions and produce social movement campaigns; in mainly authoritarian regimes, the repertoire leans towards lethal conflicts and tends to produce religious and ethnic strife, civil wars and revolutions.

As noted above, states that are weakly democratised or where the quality of democracy is in question may have less capacity to deal with demands from civil society, particularly where their legitimacy is in question. This weakness may in turn lead to radicalisation of civil society actions, as noted by Tilly and Tarrow (2007), or it may lead to an acceptance of oppressive measures to deal with perceived threats to the existing order (Galston, 2000).

Populism and Religion in Times of Crisis

Alongside the apparent increase in the breadth and scale of protest in the early 21st century has been a resurgence of populism. This presents a difficult challenge to democratic regimes, in particular those that are weakly institutionalised. Populist challengers base their appeal on a 'claim to represent the rightful source of legitimate power – the people, whose interests and wishes have been ignored by self-interested politicians and politically-correct individuals.' (Canovan, 2004: 242) Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013: 153) further note that 'populism has a "chameleonic" character: populism can be left-wing or right-wing, organized in top-down or bottom-up fashion, rely on strong leaders or even be leaderless.' Claims made by populist challengers can have resonance in democratic regimes, as they point to the mismatch between what is promised and what is delivered by a democratic regime, fostering feelings of disillusionment and cynicism (Högström, 2014) As democratic regimes rely on generating legitimacy among the population, such a challenge can threaten the viability and stability of the regime.

Populist appeals speak to a people in such a way that they place themselves outside the standard political arena, performing a type of antipolitics (Rosanvallon, 2008). Although the populist claims are impractical in modern politics, as the demands cannot realistically be satisfied, they do appeal to elements of the population who feel left out. In order to bolster

what is ultimately a thin claim, Stanley (2008: 107) argues that populists must link their claims to existing ideological bases, in the sense that 'it does not so much overlap with as diffuse itself throughout full ideologies.' The result is that populists will 'take on the colour of their surroundings' (Canovan, 2004: 242) attaching themselves to issues that are relevant and significant for the particular time and place. In their definition of the will of the people, Plattner (2010: 88) argues that:

> populist movements tend to be antagonistic to cultural, linguistic, religious, and racial minorities… Those who differ from the majority in basic cultural traits are more typically viewed as enemies of the people rather than as potential allies.

In defining who constitutes the people populist challengers 'may pursue problematic goals such as the exclusion of ethnic minorities and the erosion of horizontal accountability.' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013: 149) The result is that populists potentially undermine and disrupt the current political order and create discord within society in order to achieve their aims.

The threat posed by populist actors is greater in weak democracies, as the institutions to manage such demands and address claims from the population are less well developed. Democratic political systems are in constant fluctuation, as they adjust to demands from below, with the resilience of the particular regime determined by its ability to manage this fluidity. Periods of crisis and uncertainty provide ample opportunity for populist actors to emerge and present their claims. In such situations, populists conceive of a zero sum game, where the opposition has to be delegitimised and removed from power permanently (Kaltwasser, 2012). This tendency provides a clear indication of the way in which populism can slide over into non-democratic regime forms, as 'the preservation [of democratic arrangements] also essentially requires the active support of citizens' (Abts and Rummens, 2007: 421). Considering the situation in the Andes, Levitsky and Loxton (2013: 108) make the case 'that the primary catalyst behind competitive authoritarian emergence…is populism, or the election of personalistic outsiders who mobilize mass constituencies via anti-establishment appeals.' The ability of populists to mobilise support is key to their success to the extent that Jansen (2011: 77) argues that it should be 'understood as a flexible way of animating political support' rather than an ideology in itself.

Populism in the 21st century has taken on a variety of forms that echo the specific socio-political and cultural context. The rise of groups such as Podemos in Spain (Kioupkiolis,

2016) and the Five Star Movement in Italy (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013) draw on anger with the political class following the 2008 economic crisis and its ongoing impact. Developing the ability of populist movements to gain purchase in the political sphere Roca et al (2016) examine the rise of Podemos and Kirchnerism in Argentina to determine how such movements can make the transition and the challenges they face in doing so. As suggested by the emergence of abundant parties in recent years, they argue that crises provide an opportunity for movement parties to challenge post-political technical management that had prevailed previously. Meanwhile in Greece and Germany, GD and the AfD have played on fears of refugees and religion to compound the uncertainty felt following the economic crisis (Berbuir et al, 2015; Ellinas, 2015). All of these groups explicitly claim to challenge the corrupt elite and emerge from a more bottom-up form of populist mobilisation. This contrasts with the situation in Hungary and Russia, where incumbent leaders have played on fears of outsiders and promises to protect the integrity of the state (Bozóki, 2011; Smyth et al, 2013). Comparing the situation in Europe with that in Latin America, Kaltwasser (2012: 199; also Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013) argues that while the populists in the latter are more inclusive, both 'show little respect for the rules of political competition… [as they] foster a moralization of politics'. The diversity of populist actors suggests that the feeling of antipolitics may indeed threaten the quality of democracy unless a way can be found to bring them inside the forum of 'normal politics'.

An important mobilising factor of populism in Europe has been the issue of religion. Debates around the representation of Islam in European society have been important since the early parts of the current century (El Hamel, 2002; Larsson and Lindekilde, 2009). However, the recent flows of refugees entering Europe coupled with the lasting effects of the economic crisis have heightened such tensions. Minkenberg (2007: 900) points to the challenge in that:

> established institutional and political arrangements to regulate the relationship between religion and politics in the framework of liberal democracies, long seen to have been solved once and for all, are challenged fundamentally and require new justifications.

As with the pattern of populism, the conflicts over religion point to the apparent inability of state institutions to regulate social order. Considering the nature of 'Islamism' from a social movement perspective Bayat (2012) argues that it contributes to an imagined solidarity that is shaped by the context, rather than being a unified movement (see Yates, 2007). Orofino (2016) examines the role of Hizb ut-Tahrir as a social organisation working to advance its interests through non-traditional means. Drawing on research in Australia and the UK, she

argues that the ultimate goal of the organisation presents a direct challenge to the state. Reaction against this perceived movement has animated the European right (see Bhatt, 2012), with the established church supporting and legitimising such views in some cases (on GD and the Greek Orthodox Church see Papasthathis, 2015). Jones (2016) considers the broad spectrum of social movements of the right and left in the early 21st century and takes a more positive stance. Treating these emergent movements as political religions, he argues that although they present a threat to the continued viability of democracy, it has a way of stumbling through and will weather the current storm.

Conclusion

The early part of the 21st century has seen a number of significant, large-scale protests across the globe. Uprisings in the countries of the former Soviet Union and the MENA region have brought down non-democratic regimes and forced concessions. In contrast with the regime changes of the late 20th century, the result has not been an apparent flourishing of democracy as was initially predicted. At the same time, protests in the established democracies of Western Europe and the Americas have targeted levels of inequality and forms of governance. These events are generally viewed positively, as they appear to represent the expression of the popular will and greater participation. However, the underlying drivers and outcome of such large-scale mobilisations is not necessarily positive. The collapse or loss of control in countries such as Libya and Syria has led to eruptions of sustained violence and radicalisation. In Western Europe and the United States, populist movements and politicians have capitalised on the discontent expressed and the antipolitical feeling to challenge the established political order.

Protest is a natural expression of discontent in society, enabling participants to present claims that are not being satisfied or addressed. In situations where the democracy is weak or the state lacks capacity to mediate between competing demands, the threat of democratic collapse or reversion is ever present. Where the state feels threatened by social protest it may choose to adopt more authoritarian practices in order to safeguard the existing order, potentially amplifying grievances. For their part civil society actors and social movements have a range of tactics and strategies available to press their claims on the state, ranging from large-scale protests through to legal challenges and the formation of political parties. Motivations for the mobilisation of civil society actors are key. The contemporary antipolitical, populist mood

presents a particular challenge, as it risks dismissing the role of the state in effective governance. In such a situation, social movements can therefore present a direct threaten to the viability of the state in presenting an alternative vision of society. Ultimately, the ability of the state to cope will depend on the flexibility and adaptability will the flexibility and adaptability of democracy suggests that it is the form of governance best able to address competing and conflictual demands.

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