The Far Right: Formidable but Not Unbeatable

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Abstract
The level of discontent and alienation with neoliberalism was already very high in the Global North before the coronavirus hit, owing to the inability of the established elites to reverse the decline and living standards and skyrocketing inequality in the dreary decade that followed the financial crisis. And in much of the Global South, the chronic crisis of underdevelopment under peripheral capitalism, exacerbated by neoliberal ‘reforms’ since the 1980s, had already shredded the legitimacy of key institutions of globalization. This article seeks to identify key elements in the rise of the far right in the Global North and the Global South and indicates steps that need to be taken to confront the far right.

Keywords
Neoliberalism, inequality, far right, Global North, Global South

Introduction
The level of discontent and alienation with neoliberalism was already very high in the Global North before the coronavirus hit, owing to the inability of the established elites to reverse the decline and living standards and

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skyrocketing inequality in the dreary decade that followed the financial crisis. In the USA, the period was summed up in the popular mind as one in which the elites prioritized saving the big banks over saving millions of bankrupt homeowners and ending large-scale unemployment, while in much of Europe, especially in the south, the people’s experience of the last decade was captured in one word: austerity.

In much of the Global South, the chronic crisis of underdevelopment under peripheral capitalism, exacerbated by neoliberal ‘reforms’ since the 1980s, had already shredded the legitimacy of key institutions of globalization such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization, even before the 2008 crisis.

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020, in short, roared through an already destabilized global economic system suffering from a deep crisis of legitimacy. The sense that things had run out of control—certainly out of the control of the traditional political and economic managers—was the first shocking realization. This mass perception of astonishing elite incompetence is now connecting to the already deep-seated feelings of resentment and anger boiling over from the post-financial crisis period.

Hence, the subjective element, that is, the psychological critical mass, is there. It is a whirlwind that is waiting to be captured by contending political forces. The question is who will succeed in harnessing it.

The global establishment will, of course, try to bring back the ‘old normal’. But there is simply too much anger, too much resentment, and too much insecurity that have been unleashed. And there is no forcing the genie back into the bottle. Though for the most part falling short of expectations, the massive fiscal and monetary interventions of capitalist states during the first half of 2020 have underlined to people what is possible under another system with different priorities and values.

Neoliberalism is dying; it is only a question of whether its passing will be swift or ‘slow’, as Rodrik (2020) characterizes it.

Who Will Ride the Tiger?

Only the left and the far right are serious contenders in this race to bring about another system.

Progressives have come up with a number of exciting ideas and paradigms developed over the last few decades for how to move toward a truly systemic transformation, and these go beyond the left-wing technocratic Keynesianism identified with Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman. Among these truly radical alternatives are the already mentioned Green
New Deal, democratic socialism, degrowth, deglobalization, ecofeminism, food sovereignty, and *Buen Vivir* or ‘Living Well’.

The problem is these strategies have not yet been translated into a critical mass on the ground. The usual explanation for this is that people are ‘not ready for them’. But probably more credible as an explanation is that most people still associate these dynamic streams of the left with the center left. On the ground, where it matters, the masses cannot yet distinguish these strategies and their advocates from the social democrats in Europe and the Democratic Party in the USA that were implicated in the discredited neoliberal system to which they had sought to provide a ‘progressive’ face. For large numbers of citizens, the face of the left is still the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany, the Socialist Party in France, and the Democratic Party in the USA, and their records are hardly inspiring, to say the least.

In the Global South, leadership of, or participation in, liberal democratic governments also led to left-wing parties being discredited when these coalitions adopted neoliberal measures that came under the rubric of ‘structural adjustment’, even as the ‘Pink Tide’ in Latin America ran into its own contradictions, and communist states in East Asia became state capitalist systems with a strong dose of neoliberalism. Once seen as a break with the past, the Concertación in Chile, the Workers’ Party in Brazil, Chavismo in Venezuela, and the so-called Beijing Consensus are now seen as part of that past.

In short, the center-left’s thorough-going compromise with neoliberalism in the North along with progressive parties and states going along with, if not actively adopting, neoliberal measures in the South tarnished the progressive spectrum as a whole—even though it was from the non-mainstream, non-state left that the critique of neoliberalism and globalization initially issued in the 1990s and 2000s.

### The Momentum of the Far Right

Before the novel coronavirus made its sudden appearance in late 2019, the political momentum belonged to the far right. It is likely that COVID-19 has not dented this momentum, except perhaps in the USA, where Donald Trump’s credibility has been severely eroded by his mismanagement of the US response to the virus as well as to a surge from the left stemming from anger over the police killing of George Floyd.

Understanding why the far right is the most dynamic political movement in many parts of the world today requires going back to last
decade of the twentieth century. The global rise of the far right is one of the two biggest surprises of the last half century, along with the collapse of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the last decade of the twentieth century.

When the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe fell, it was proclaimed that the future belonged to liberal democracy, a mood of liberal optimism that was captured by Francis Fukuyama’s thesis of ‘the end of history’, that is, that there was no longer any system of rule that could compete with liberal democracy for the future of humanity. Indeed, the first decade of the new century appeared to bear him out. The next 10 years, however, proved to be a different story.

In 2010, there were no regimes of what we might call the ‘new far right’ globally, except for Hungary. Now we have seen far-right personalities come to power in four of the seven biggest democracies: India, USA, Brazil, and the Philippines. And even where they are not part of coalitions in power, by their electoral weight, they have in many instances moved the center of gravity of politics to the right, as in Germany, Denmark, and Italy. To take just one example, in Denmark, to be able to win the elections in 2019, the Danish Social Democratic Party adopted an anti-immigration stance.

What are the factors that have propelled the right to power or the antechamber of power?

**The Rise of the Extreme Right in the Global North**

Right-wing regimes have come to power in both the Global North and the Global South. While sharing common characteristics in their genesis, there are also unique features to these regimes associated with their place in the global political economy; hence, it is useful to consider them separately for the purposes of analysis.

*What factors account for the rise of far-right regimes and personalities in the Global North?*

First, the far right in Europe and the USA was able to take advantage of the negative impact of neoliberal policies on people’s living conditions. As noted earlier, social democrats, or the center left, were implicated in the formulation and implementation of neoliberal policies; hence, this left a big part of their base feeling they could no longer rely on Social Democratic parties to protect them, leaving them vulnerable to being pirated by other parties. Sensing an opportunity for electoral expansion, the far right
abandoned the opposition to social welfare policies characteristic of the center right, and opportunistically championed some anti-neoliberal and pro-welfare state policies to win working-class votes. The best example of this was Donald Trump’s use of his opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) to win key mid-west states to come to power and, once he came to power, his withdrawing the USA from the TPP that the preceding administration of President Barack Obama had committed to.

Second, in Europe, the far right was able to harvest resentment against the European Union (EU) by riding on the democracy issue, saying that the unelected technocratic leadership of the EU was lording it over the democratically elected national leaders of the member states. Thus, when, in 2015, the so-called Troika disregarded the results of the Greek referendum on the austerity program it imposed on the Greek people, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the National Front in France, draped herself as a democrat, proclaiming, ‘[t]he choice is either democracy or Euro-dictatorship’. The Peace and Justice Party in Poland and Viktor Orban in Hungary have harvested a lot of support with the same battle cry.

Third, extreme right-wing parties have been able to dominate the migrant issue, with little effective opposition. They have not only accused the center right and center left of not having a viable policy on migration but have also advanced the conspiracy theory that the center right, the center left, and the European Union are complicit with what they describe as the ‘migrant hordes’ to subvert European and American society. Once more, Le Pen captured these themes in the right-wing narrative when she said, ‘[i]mmigration is the organized replacement of our population. This threatens our very survival. We don’t have the means to integrate those who are already here. The result is endless cultural conflict’.

Ensuring dominance of White society over minorities and opposition to migration are the central issues on which the far right is riding and mobilizing, and it is within a racist gestalt that they have positioned their opportunistically advocacy of anti-globalization, anti-neoliberal, and ‘pro-democracy’ stands. Certain measures to safeguard and promote social welfare, save jobs, and protect the economy are all fine, they say, so long as the beneficiaries are only people of the ‘right’ skin color, the ‘right’ culture, and the ‘right’ ethnic stock. Of course, this stance may not be stated that explicitly, but that is essentially the message that comes through.

The Rise of the Far Right in the Global South

Turning to the Global South, while it is certainly true that, as in the North, neoliberal structural adjustment contributed to worsening the
already terrible conditions of existence of the vast majority of citizens of democracies in the South, what was occurring in places such as the Philippines, India, and Brazil was something more fundamental: a repudiation of liberal democracy. Rodrigo Duterte, Narendra Modi in India, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil personify this rejection: Duterte boasts about violating due process as he presides over the extra-judicial execution of thousands; Modi glories in the fall of secular and diverse India; and Bolsonaro waxes nostalgic over the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil for 20 years.

The following observations focus mainly on India and the Philippines, which have been regarded as two of the most durable democracies in the Global South (though they have experienced major interruptions or interludes of authoritarian rule).

What mainly accounted for citizens’ alienation from liberal democracy was simply the massive gap between the promise of liberal democracy and its reality. This disillusionment is perhaps best described by Mishra (2019):

[r]ived by caste as well as class divisions, and dominated in Bollywood as well as politics by dynasties, India is a grotesquely unequal society. Its constitution, and much political rhetoric, upholds the notion that all individuals are equal and possess the same right to education and job opportunities; but the everyday experience of most Indians testify to appalling violations of this principle. A great majority of Indians, forced to inhabit the vast gap between a glossy democratic ideal and a squalid undemocratic reality, have long stored up deep feelings of injury, weakness, inferiority, degradation, inadequacy and envy; these stem from defeats or humiliation suffered at the hands of those of higher status than themselves in a rigid hierarchy.

The same ressentiment could be said to have marked pre-Duterte Philippines. The rise to power of the far right cannot be understood without taking into consideration the disillusionment of the middle class. In the last 30 years of the twentieth century, the middle class was a central factor in the undermining of dictatorships throughout the Global South. Over the last two decades, however, they have been greatly disillusioned at the failure of liberal democracy to deliver on its promises and at the deterioration of their living standards. They have become open to more drastic political solutions, and some have even endorsed neoliberalism, although neoliberal policies have had contradictory effects on them. These policies eroded their conditions of life for some in the class but have simultaneously benefited others as well as some members of the lower classes, creating what some have called the ‘aspirational middle
class’, or people who are in income terms not middle class but aspire to be such (Jaffrelot, 2015).

The fear of crime and the so-called dangerous classes are also factors behind middle-class mobilization toward the right, and this occurs especially when inequality and poverty are so rampant that some people turn to drugs and crime. It is certainly the genius of the Philippines’ Duterte to take drugs and crime out of their social context and demagogically turn them into the main problems confronting all classes, rich, middle class, and poor (Curato, 2016).

There is also the powerful appeal of an anti-corruption stance and not just to the middle class. There comes a time, however, when every party that comes to power on an anti-corruption platform becomes corrupt in power, so that people become very cynical of electoral exercises and are attracted to leaders like India’s Modi, who they might not agree with on many points, but seem to be singularly non-corrupt.

Anti-corruption was a sub-theme in Duterte’s 2016 campaign for the presidency, which overwhelmingly focused on crime. But many people seeking a savior read in Duterte what they wanted, and they saw him as one who would bring his tough stance on crime to taming corruption as well as disciplining a corrupt oligarchy. In office, he has reinforced his anti-corruption credentials by the high-profile firing of close associates from government office, one of them during a cabinet meeting, an event that, of course, contributed to his mystique.

The rise of the right also cannot be understood without the support of the economic elites. However, one must not fall into the erroneous notion, common on the left, that right-wing personalities are merely doing the bidding of the elites. Duterte and Modi have a great deal of autonomy from them, and in the case of both (as well as Bolsonaro in Brazil), the relationship is an uneasy one. Indeed, in the case of the Philippines, the elites’ support of Duterte is motivated partly by fear, fear that he might expropriate them or adopt some redistributionist policies. Indeed, he is now in the process of expropriating the powerful Lopez family, which owns the country’s largest television network. Both Duterte and Modi have power bases in civil society and government that affords them this position of strength vis-à-vis the dominant elites although they do not breach the political economy of capitalism.

As for the working class, the peasantry, and the urban and rural poor, it would be foolish to deny that Duterte and Modi enjoy widespread support among them. It might be said, however, that there is a difference in the support given to these personalities by the lower classes from that of the middle class. Borrowing from Gramsci, one would say that of the
lower classes is more of a ‘passive consensus’, while that of the middle class is more of an ‘active consensus’ manifested in the opinions articulated in television, the Internet, and the print media. The middle-class intelligentsia has always taken the lead in forming public opinion, and in India and the Philippines, a large sector of this stratum has supported Modi and Duterte.

One also cannot understand the success of some of these far-right personalities without taking into consideration their charisma. Both Duterte and Modi are charismatic individuals, though they have different types of charisma. Both are case studies of a troubling relationship between charisma and democracy. This is the paradox whereby free elections are resoundingly confirming their hold on power and leading to even more concentration of power in their hands. Even if people may not agree with all of their actions, they are holding their critical faculties in abeyance and identify with these dangerous but charismatic personalities—who announce their disdain for liberal and progressive values—for due process in the case of Duterte and secularism in that of Modi.³

These personalities may not deliver on their promises, and their economic policies may be causing major problems, like those caused among the urban and rural poor by Modi’s program of ‘demonetization’, or withdrawal of ₹500 and ₹1,000 notes from circulation, but no matter, they get thumping majorities. In this sense, democracy, paradoxically, strengthens authoritarianism. These personalities have cross-class appeal, and this is why charisma must be considered a central reason for their success, though the left tends to be skeptical or even hostile to explanations based on charismatic appeal. Charisma is a social relationship between leader and the led that is subversive of reason. Without trying to come to grips with it, it would be difficult to understand why in the midst of the heaviest bombing in the history of warfare, the vast majority of the German people—including the young SS recruit (but later Social Democrat) Gunter Grass—remained loyal to Hitler even after der Fuhrer (the leader) had shot himself in the bunker. The charismatic appeal of Modi to Indians is one of the reasons that Amit Shah, Modi’s second in command, has boasted that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will be in power for the next 50 years.⁴ A few other observations are in order from the above experiences.

**Othering and Trolling**

One is that a great part of the success of these dangerous personalities is they are experts at ‘othering’, or scapegoating certain social groups,
at concentrating popular hatred on them as the source of all of society’s ills—in the case of Modi and the BJP party he leads, Muslims occupy this special place; in the case of Duterte, drug users and drug dealers. There are, of course, other groups that are the focus of anger. In the case of Duterte, the so-called yellow opposition politicians, communists, and some oligarchs. In the case of Modi and the BJP, Westernized intellectuals, Marxists, and Christians.

The second is that it would be a big mistake to attribute the rise of these personalities to trolls. Trolls assist these people come to power and help them to consolidate their power, but mainly by reinforcing popular attitudes already partial to them. From the author’s own personal experience on Facebook, some 75 per cent of the pro-Duterte responses to my own posts critical of the president are made by people who are true believers, not trolls. Though these leaders are reprehensible, they are popular.

Third, beyond shared structural and political realities, there are some forces unique to each country whose intervention has been critical to the success of these far-right personalities. One is an old actor in Indian politics, the disciplined radical Hindu nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), whose roots go back to the early twentieth century and which was greatly influenced by fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany, and which is the anchor of Modi’s reign. Another is a relatively new decisive actor in Brazilian politics, the non-Catholic evangelicals who played such an important part in Bolsonaro’s election in 2018.

Confronting the Far Right

What steps can be taken by left in both the Global South and the Global North to challenge, compete with, and, in the end, vanquish the right?

There are six initiatives that progressives must take if they are to remain in the political game.

1. First, they need to stop resorting to easy explanations about the rise of far right, like the claim that it is trolls that are responsible for it, and acknowledge that far-right personalities and movements have a critical mass of popular support.

2. They need to find ways of stopping the extreme right from coming to power in the first place, like building broad united electoral fronts, even with non-fascist groups they may have differences
with. It is much harder to remove the far right once they are in power.

3. They need to make sure they have at the leading edge of their resistance those movements which have a great deal of resonance among broad sectors of the population, including the middle classes, such as the movements to stop climate change, promote gender equality, and advance racial justice.

4. They must fiercely defend human rights and democratic values, even where—or especially where—they have become unpopular. This will involve aggressively championing people and groups that are currently persecuted, with majority opinion being whipped up against them, like Muslims in India and drug users in the Philippines, more than 27,000 of whom have reportedly been slain by Duterte’s police. The current generation may well be compromised by the acquiescence or support that many of them have given to far-right figures, but our resistance and defense of these values will be an example to the coming generation and will play a role in turning things around.

5. Progressives must not fear to see what they can learn from the extreme right, especially when it comes to the politics of passion or the politics of charisma, and see how their values can be advanced or promoted in passionate and charismatic ways. They must unite reason to passion, and not see them as being in contradiction, though, of course, they must not violate our commitments to truth, justice, and fair play in the process.

6. But, probably most important, they need to have a transformative vision that can compete with that of the far right, one based on genuine equality and genuine democratic empowerment that goes beyond the now discredited liberal democracy. Some call this vision socialism. Others would prefer another term, but the important thing is its message of radical, real equality beyond class, gender, and race.

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Notes
1. Quoted by Cosgrave (2015).
2. Quoted in RT Question More (2011).
3. Quoted by Bello in International Sociology (2020, September 21).
4. Quoted by Amit Shah in Hindustan Times (2018, September 9).

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