

The Return of Neo-Nationalism?

By Political & Economics Analyst Sheldon Birkett

The perceived return of 20th century nationalism, and the subsequent rise of populist rhetoric is deepening the fragmented flaws present in “western liberal democracy”. The United States as a unipolar imperial power, with a rise in populist politics, begs to question if a liberal democratic form of governance is the best form of governance in the 21st century. Although the subsequent rise of neo-populist leaders in America, East Asia, and Europe are deeply rooted in the macroeconomic failures of the capitalist world system, it is of the utmost importance to consider if regime change in the west is necessary as there is a heightened sense of political uncertainty. Specifically, are the alternatives to liberal-democratic regimes less susceptible to populist politics? If so, how should these alternative regimes govern in a globalized world? I do not intend to provide any definite “answers” to the questions of regime change. Instead, I wish to reconsider the normative perception of liberal-democratic regimes in an age of populist politics.

Firstly, if one is to reconsider regime change in the 21st century it is necessary to seek alternatives to liberal-democracy, because no form of governance is a form of governance. Traditionally democratic governance is seen as the best form of governance as it provides a wide variety of civil liberties, human rights, and universal suffrage. This conception of democracy is usually equated to Robert Dahl’s narrow definition of “procedural democracy” (Schmitter & Karl, 1991). Dahl’s definition of democracy is narrow as it does not allow for an adequate variation in how democracy is enacted (i.e. by means of direct action movements). Instead, Joseph Schumpeter’s conceptualization of democracy as democratic electoralism is too broad in nature as a democracy is merely more than an election every four to five years, as democratic practices should be continuous in nature (Schmitter & Karl, 1991). Therefore, finding an adequate balance between a *rechstaat* (rule-state) democratic order and an open-participatory democratic order is a difficult balance to achieve in an age of rising global inequality which is threatening the democratic framework.

In the aim to provide alternatives to our current democratic regime, it is necessary to see if alternatives to liberal democracy have succeeded in the past. When examining regimes such as Fujimori, Chavez, and Cardenas it becomes apparent that their form of democratic governance is not wholeheartedly a western “liberal-democracy”. Instead, such regimes present a form of delegative democracy, in which political leaders win elections by means of appealing to an disenfranchised populous, once in power such regimes limit state rights in order to maintain political power (O’Donnell, 1996). For example, following the re-election of Venezuelan Hugo Chavez in 2006 Chavez held a referendum on the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution that would extend the presidential term from six to seven years, and allow for indefinite re-election (no two term limit). Chavez referendum failed to pass in 2007 as the political opposition viewed it as a grab for political power (Hellinger, 2009).

Though a more accurate depiction highlighting the instability of a delegative democracy sustaining western civil rights and liberties is the declaration of Martial Law by Filipino Ferdinand Marco’s in 1972. Principally, the enactment of Martial Law by Ferdinand Marco’s was to guarantee Marco’s political hegemony in the Philippines. Marco’s enactment of Martial Law was justified against the resurgence of the communist Huk rebellion in Central Luzon, which was virtually non-existent by the 1970’s. Instead, Marco’s attainment of political hegemony by means of delegative democracy was principally to extend Marco’s rule by parliamentary means of consistent re-election without a constitutional limit on the presidency (Celoza, 1997). As shown, delegative democracy as an alternative to “western liberal democracy” does not provide adequate civil rights and liberties to citizens. Therefore, it begs to question if there are valid alternatives to liberal democratic regimes, that are both politically stable in an age of globalism and not susceptible to populist political rhetoric? What about authoritarianism?

The most prominent “democratic” authoritarian regime in the western world is Vladimir Putin’s Russia, albeit with an approval rating over 80% Putin is one of the most popular leaders ever to be elected (Esipova & Ray, 2014). Though, if you have a further examination of Putin’s regime it is very clear that most of Putin’s success is in comparison to Boris Yeltsin’s political-economic failure as a leader of Russia, during and after Russia’s transformation from communism. Now, with rising tension between the U.S and Russia (i.e. 2016 Election Cyberattack on the U.S, and expulsion of Russian diplomats), and the 2014 annexation of Crimea, it is becoming apparent that Russia could be falling into another power seeking Thucydides trap. Showing that even democratic-authoritarian regimes are susceptible to political instability.

Delegative democracies, authoritarian democracies, and liberal democracies all appear to be inadequate in dealing with the growing complexity of globalism. The growth of populist parties across western liberal democracies in Greece, Spain, Italy, France, Hungary, Germany, United States, and Britain (just to name a few) is threatening the fundamental nature of democratic institutions. In an age of globalization, it is necessary to critically think of regime change as a possible aid to the resurgence of populist politics, neo-nationalism, and political uncertainty. Fundamentally, there is a need for a reconceptualization of democracy in an age of globalism, as 2016 goes to show that 2017 is looking more politically uncertain than ever before.

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Citations

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“Neoteric, Substantive, Global”

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