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The rise of personalistic autocracy: What should we do?



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These counterfeit democracies are described as hybrid regimes. Those who are in power in hybrid regimes manipulate the constitution to their benefit and rig the election to the extent that it is no longer an instrument of democracy but becomes a tool to gain a veneer of legitimacy. These rulers unleashed a process that would ensure democracy's death by a thousand cuts. They claim that

their system is a different kind of democracy and use culture and/or religion as the justification for discounting the defining elements of democracy, such as freedom of speech and assembly, representation through fair process, and accountability. The number of such regimes has increased over the years because the incremental nature of the decline and decimation of democracy are

overlooked by citizens. Besides, these counterfeit democracies can fool the international community. These rulers have external backers who shield them from any kind of adverse consequences. Many of these hybrid regimes continued to be in the grey zone for decades, but some have muted to become closed autocracies; very few experienced successful democratization.

WHAT IS A PERSONALISTIC AUTOOCRACY?

The second phenomenon – personalistic autocracy – is an evolving characteristic of the global scene and warrants our attention. According to available data, in 1988 these regimes constituted 23 percent of all autocracies, by 2010 the percentage reached 40 percent. In one sense personalism in politics is nothing new, but what

makes it distinctly different in recent decades is that this has become a defining feature of a regime, or in other words, it has become a category of existing regimes. Autocratic regimes which emerged after WWII were led by parties or military juntas. They were, in large measure, collective leadership. Until the late 1980s, this was the major trend. As the Third Wave of democracy began in the mid-1970s, this particular feature of the undemocratic regime dissipated. After the end of the Cold War, personalistic rule in non-democracy began to emerge.

Political scientists Andrea Kendall Taylor, Carisa Nitsche, Erica Frantz, and Joseph Wright, who have been studying this phenomenon for the past decade, identified personalism as the 'domination of the political realm by a single individual'. They noted that, in some instances, personalist leaders dominate a respective country's political system 'to such a degree they become virtually indistinguishable from the regimes they rule.' Erica Frantz elsewhere described this kind of regime as a 'personalist dictatorship'. In her description, 'personalistic dictatorships [are] those regimes where power is concentrated in the hands of an individual rather than a political party, royal family, or military junta.' It is common knowledge that autocratic leaders are characterized by their centralized and unilateral decision-making style, and they demand unquestioning obedience to their directives and personal loyalty.

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Since the middle of the 2000s, the world has witnessed a precipitous decline in democratic countries. After almost three decades of proliferation of democratic governance, described by Samuel Huntington as the Third Wave of democracy, the third reverse wave is sweeping the globe. Two previous waves, 1882 through 1926, and 1945 through the mid-1970s, were followed by similar reversals. During these reversals, countries that regressed from democracy became outright autocracies. There was no grey zone in between. But the third reverse wave is characterized by two important phenomena. The first is the emergence of counterfeit democracy while the second is the rise of the personalistic autocratic system.

WHAT IS COUNTERFEIT DEMOCRACY?

Counterfeit democracies are those that have some traits of democracy, for example, periodic elections and limited space for opposition parties, while the essential system of governance is authoritarian.



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