

COMMENTARY

Neither Strongman nor Strongman Politics is New, Only Avatar is Different

Economic-Political Power has Long Dominated the Society

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Where there is a massive discontentment in the general population, there is a way to popular politics. A strongman capitalizes those popular sentiments and takes charge as a warrior of the people. Is it a win of that strongman and his popular politics? Not so, it is in fact a defeat of the past political leaderships that has let built up the social discontent and gave a chance to a so-called strongman. Like it or not, current wave of strongman politics is slowly engulfing all-over the world from the east to west, rich to emerging to poor, from social democratic to democratic to autocratic regimes. Current popular dissent is in a way an expression of social frustration, helplessness and anger which has amassed in the recent history throughout the world. Strong-men all over the world are capitalizing that public resentment with their strongman politics. One can name it rising populism, far right, nationalism, popular rebellion or radicalism.

Social Discontentment as Polity and Policy Diverged from the Social Interests

People, economy and politics are at the core of a nation; their actions and interactions make the landscape of nation-building. Ideally, economy and politics should serve the people. However, this has not been the case in practice. Political economy, especially post-WWII, has diverged greatly from the aspirations of the society. There have been large scale structural changes which have long been upsetting the framework of the society, particularly the economic one. To mention a few, middle class has disappeared, inequality has increased, manufacturing has moved to the global production hubs, large number of populations are excluded from the waves of economic prosperity, decent (unionized) jobs have been replaced by insecure gig employment, private indebtedness is increasing, financial insecurity is joining hands with job and general insecurities, public sector has lost its shine, corporate power has ever been increasing to the extent of bullying, global forces are dominating domestic policy-polity, immigrants are forced on the struggling local economies, wars against terrorism have gone endless, environment is deteriorating, racialism- intolerance- polarization are increasing. So, strongmen have been ruling the (poor!) society for a long time now. Only difference is that this time society is trying with different political persona.

Social discontentment has taken different forms as the evolving divergence between the interests of people and political economy has been widening over time. People have been

trying from early on with anti-war and anti-nuke movement of 50s-60s to anti-corporatization, anti-capitalism and environmentalism of 70s to 80s and since then on to anti-globalization, anti-neo-liberalism, anti-neoliberal globalization type protests during recent decades. People have been trying hard to convey the message across, but neither politicians nor policy-makers have given them an ear. In fact, politics and policy have long failed the people. When mainstream establishment works differently than the society mandates to do, anti-establishment social reactions are natural outcome.

Failed Liberalism

In fact, rising of the populism has been in a way failure of the market, open and global liberalism. Local, regional, national, international all levels of governments have long been imposing over people (despite their general refusal) what is the best for them saying that there is no alternative. However, contrariwise people (generally) have been experiencing their conditions actually worsening and their concerns being unheard. This has created a huge discord between the political economy and society. And people have since been searching some alternative who can speak their voice and who can lead them to meet their expectations. The avatar is current strongman and his (strongman) politics.

National disintegration with increasing global integration has been forced on the developed world initially during 50s to 70s, then along with developing countries during 80s and 90s with no end in sight till date. Neither rising tides of economic growth lifted all the boats in the developing countries nor increased prosperity worked well for the majority in the developed countries. People of both the worlds, rich and poor, screamed with demonstrations and movements etc. But no one at right, left and centre of political spectrum heard them. The single-minded political agenda of the global integration to achieve the liberal (market-driven, least-regulated, highly-open) capitalism through post-war institutional architecture has led the evolution of present-day popular revolt in the form of nationalism. Established mainstream is once again being challenged by the counter-forces, but this time around with a different form. This anti-establishment popular voice is nothing but a public cry against the failed liberalism.

Too Much Capitalism

It is not only the politics, capitalism has its own fair share in plying its strongman role for a very long period of time. The well-known is a nexus between the capitalists and politicians; capitalists using their capital power in getting done the laws, policies, taxation, subsidies, regulations (like market, capital, environmental, financial) etc. in their favor. Reckless play of animal spirit and associated boom-bust at the hands of capitalism is the price the entire society pays for years even after the businesses recover from the cycles. There is no law which can protect the society from that recklessness the way limited liability and other laws provide cover to the capitalists. Generally, white-collar crimes are treated with partiality than the other crimes in the society by the judiciary; and even getting justice on favorable terms with the help of expensive (buddy) lawyers and consultants is not difficult. This is not any less than buying the judiciary with the capital power.

Next, about one of the most-selling point, namely corporate social responsibility (CSR), first earning profits with all and any means then donating/charity or window-dressing can be termed as socially responsible behavior in a capitalist system. But how their greed-led tactics harm a society at first place, there is no one to evaluate it in a system with mighty corporates. Isn't responsible gambling, responsible gaming, responsible smoking, responsible marijuana, responsible drinking type campaigns by the involved addictive-businesses a mockery of the social responsibility?

Yet another (invisible) way of overpowering the society by liberal capitalism is through its most-sung virtues of self-interest and profit-maximization which have made rational individualism almost contradictory to the social values like co-operation, collaboration and collectivism. Business schools have been teaching these (anti-social) virtues and others like these successfully world-wide to the past- present- future generations and getting huge profit-rewards too. Social values make human being a social animal and unwarranted individualism makes human being a beast filled with ego, selfishness and self-righteousness. That is how social cohesion, co-existence and mutualism have now become ornamental terms, whereas in reality me-alone, why me, not in my backyard are the most practiced phrases.

This is the unchecked mighty power of the corporations that they are at loose to shape the social attitudes, behavior and preferences with their persuasive advertising. It is the brand that determines the value rather than the virtues of an individual. Classification and patternization have hardly left any room for natural originality, simplicity and diversity. For example, particular colors are classified for particular gender/class and certain toys define the particular children. Its not the right versus wrong that prevails, it is the manipulative influencers being always right and the other is always a passive stakeholder. These are the corporations with their persuasion/advertising power that these are directing individual tastes, choices and status. Apparently, these signs may be termed as the strong-ness of the market-based capitalist system but actually these bound and constraint the human freedom, originality and creativity on the one hand and inculcate division, intolerance and anxiety in the society on the other.

Individual liberty is notional in such a so-called 'greedy or profit-hungry' liberal capitalism. Political economy is doing what capitalism is dictating. Their nexus has overpowered the society; and both are playing with the people for their own interests with their ever-increasing influence and power.

Question Marks on the Strongman (Politics)

The current strongman avatar is generating apprehension in the intelligentsia circles. As conventional wisdom goes, a strong leader makes a nation strong by making its society and economy strong. Even world becomes a peaceful place with strong leaders. So, what is the problem with the present strongman politics? The problem is that neither strongman politics appears to have the strong values nor strongman a strong character. Both strongman and his politics are fine if (big IF) there are strong values at the base. Then

this strength is constructive and a gift in deed. Otherwise both strongman and strongman politics are destabilizing, destructive and dangerous. These (pseudo) strong men are manipulating, power-hungry, intolerant, divisive, unjust and selfish. And the politics with such arrogant leaders would lead/add-on to polarization, division, power-imbalance, inequality and injustice in general. Strong character has strong values of humanity, integrity, equality, justice, tolerance and fraternity. This is a strong character world celebrates Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Nelson Mandela like personalities forever.

A nation can have a strong economy, strong military and strong politics – but without a strong character it can not sustain all these strengths in the long run. Such nations can not have real freedom, equality and justice in their rules, systems and governance. The powerful dominate and rule. Whatever values they boast are generally notional, face-saving and pretence. Whether it has democracy or autocracy – the intention and the outcome may not change, what changes is the form or degree. Even globally, strong nations (superpowers) without character lead to colonization, exploitation and dominance only, as history is full of such examples. Such superpowers are remembered for their tyranny, plunder and carnage. For such powers, it doesn't matter who those oppressed are whether natives, colonial people, foreigners or even their own people. Their target is to maintain the power, come what may.

Solutions: Power Dominance to Go; Society First; and Strong Character to Lead

Where is the equality when there is power imbalance (might is right!)? Where is the liberty when choices are framed and decisions are influenced (powerful persuasion!)? Where is the justice when laws are biased (rule of power!)? Where is the democracy when people have no say (power politics!)? Where is the human dignity when livelihood and future are at stake (power of political-corporate nexus!)? That is why top-layer institutions of state, administration, religion, justice, politics, policy have long failed the people; and next-layer institutions of education, sports, aid/development etc. have failed them too. There are plenty of examples – plight of Natives, racial bias, political economy ignoring people and environment, corporate bullying, clergy abuse, gun-violence, admission-bias in universities, abuse scandals at sports organizations, Flint water crisis, differential Puerto Rico storm recovery response, and exploitations by humanitarian aid agencies – all these showcase the governance in the richest and strongest nation of the world. This is the same superpower (strongest nation) that has for long been governing the world at its whims and fancies, directly or indirectly, through the multilateral arrangements. In fact, a hard fact is that this is a story not only of America, whole world is going through a challenging time. 99% vs 1% and #MeToo Movement etc. narrate the story of global society, spoken or unspoken. What else can be expected when institutions are structured by the powerful and for the benefits of the powerful!

Power is balanced with the responsibility. If responsibility is not realized, it would lead to misuse of power. Power misuse results in corruption, suppression and exploitation. World

needs visionary strong characters to lead the nations who can think beyond the interests of the few (powerful) and salvage the disgruntled society from the powerful nexus of corporate and politics. Who can force the political economy and corporations to protect the social interests. Who can save the earth from further deterioration. Who can lay humanity, human values and social values on the top than anything else. Who can preserve the interests of future generations intact. Unfortunately, there are many strongmen rising up all over the world; however, world needs strong characters to show the right path!