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Development studies and the rise of conservative nationalism

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Once upon a time development studies were relevant, not least in the Nordic countries. This began after World War II when Keynesian economic policies were supposed to nourish democratic reconstruction in the North but also to contribute to modernisation and democracy in the South. This was part of the efforts at decolonisation in Asia and Africa, and reduced dependency in Latin America, facilitated by the UN system. Much of this ambition did not materialise. The old empires were reluctant, while the new ones built spheres of interest. But in northern Europe there was an interest in retaining national independence during the Cold War, and in combining liberal and social democratic welfare-oriented development with international cooperation, along with like-minded actors in the emerging "third world". So, in addition to area studies and "international relations" there was a pursuit of development studies.

But the times they are a-changing. It is fifty years since fascism in Portugal was crushed by a wave of emancipation emanating from the resistance in African colonies. It spread around the world, until it was undermined by unequal globalisation, and many people suffered. Hence, it was replaced by a conservative tsunami of autocratic rule over citizens defined by historical empires, race, suitable cultures and opinions. A tsunami led by mercantile autocrats and oligarchs like Putin, Trump and Musk on the one hand, and party bosses like Xi with state-led capitalism in sweet union with free trade on the other, together with pro-business ethnic and religious nationalists, like Israel's Netanyahu, India's Narendra Modi, and similar European leaders.

The Nordics are no exception. Even leaders who claim liberal and social democratic credentials make concessions to conservative nationalist policies. The necessary support for Ukraine is typically at the expense of solidarity with refugees from other conflict zones, international development cooperation, action against climate change and support for human rights and democracy in the South.

This is of course untenable given our insights within development studies. Who shares the responsibility for the conflicts and devastation that the refugees flee from? How could Putin gain power with popular support for authoritarian policies to "make Russia great again", and Trump follow suit? Or Modi turn India into a Hindu-nationalist state? And Alternative für Deutschland expand quickly? And what is the difference between Putin's and Netanyahu's aggression against neighbouring countries and people?

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It is true that most of the recent protests in the South as well as in Europe and the US have been against conservative nationalist regimes. And there are renewed efforts to defend liberal democracy, as most recently in India, Brazil, the US and Serbia. But will this generate new viable politics and policies? I think that it is a professional obligation for scholars of development studies and senior practitioners to ask how the authoritarian onslaught was possible and what it takes to turn the tide.

So, how did we get here? What happened between the positive post-war ambitions and today's tsunami of conservative nationalism, and new protests?[2]

From democratic development to political shortcuts and neoliberalism

The initial post-war success may be illustrated by the two major colonies of India and Indonesia that gained independence in the late 1940s and built the largest and third largest democracies. Three major factors were involved. Firstly, nationalism for equal citizenship based on universal rights. Secondly, the largest emancipatory popular movements in the world – the Indian Congress and Indonesian Nationalist parties, both alongside democracy-oriented communists. Thirdly, the participation of the new nations in the UN. The vision was to create the economic and social conditions previously denied to the people of the "third world", through democratic means, with leaders like Nehru and Sukarno, and a new non-aligned movement.

Within a few years, however, the Cold War came to dominate. Western support for South Korea and Taiwan against China was reminiscent of the Marshall Plan in Europe, except for democratisation. But the "third world" in general was plagued by uneven development with weak links between investment and consumption, in contrast to the showcases in the North. Instead, attempts were made to implement shortcuts to development. The West's recommendations were based on the idealised history of strong nation-states in Europe. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, proposed its own authoritarian primitive accumulation of resources for rapid investments. And China acted similarly. So, from the mid-1950s these shortcuts began to dominate the "third world" too.

The Western position was that the middle class in the "third world" was not sufficiently strong to promote market-driven modernisation and benefit from liberal democracy. Democratisation as in India and Indonesia had instead benefitted the Left, which their opponents did not trust. Ahead of democracy, they said, there must therefore be more solid states with rule of law and strong institutions, the so-called politics of order, soon to

[2] I am mainly drawing on (i) the attempts by concerned Scandinavian scholars to pool and summarise their answers based on extensive regional and local case-studies, most recently in the Swedish anthology Törnquist, O. et al (ed) *Egentligen är världen full av hopp. Om det solidariska motståndet mot den konservativa nationalismen* (Actually, the world is full of hope) (2025), Göteborg: Korpen. And (ii) on my own "endbook" *In search of new social democracy: Insights from the South – Implications from the North* (2022), London and New York: Zed-Bloomsbury, along with updates available on olle-tornquist.com.

be theorised by Samuel Huntington. But in the absence of actors who could build and implement this order, its advocates typically relied on the military.

Meanwhile the Eastern bloc and its allies believed instead that the major problem was the weakness of the working and peasant classes, as well as nationalist capitalists. The idea of how to compensate for this, however, was reminiscent of the West's "politics of order". In other words, relying on the military, albeit with radical nationalist officers at the forefront in favour of state control and the nationalisation of foreign companies, and so-called non-capitalist development. The major exception was the leftists in the Indian state of Kerala who held on to democratisation.

Both shortcuts proved disastrous. On the one hand, in the form of Western-backed "middle-class coups" and dictatorships, for example in Indonesia, the Philippines, Brazil and Chile, and on the other hand, Eastern-backed national autocracies, beginning with Egypt. Both paths were also characterised by kleptocracy and repression. Most broad popular movements of reformist communists and leftist social democrats were undermined or eliminated, the worst being the Indonesian genocide.

The city-state of Singapore was an exception. Its socialist party created a corruption-free judiciary and administration by authoritarian means, which it retained, given that the focus was on finance and export-oriented development based on strategic location, imported cheap labour and inflow of capital from the plunder of neighbouring countries.

South Korea and Taiwan were also different, with their Japanese-influenced economies and stronger bureaucracies than in other parts of the "third world". Their authoritarian regimes were thus able to combine Western-backed mobilisation against China with their own state-led land reforms and export-oriented development, in cooperation with domestic oligarchs (*chaebol*) and transnational corporations (TNF).

Other parts of the South were often left behind, but from the late 1960s the East Asian dynamics, along with the new technology and faster communications, shaped the new international division of labour between the North and South. In the process the post-war currency regulations that had enabled reformist policies in the North were also abandoned.

The effects in the North were not necessarily a disaster. The employees in, for example, textile factories and shipyards that were shifted to the South could be protected and re-educated, and new investments made in advanced economic sectors in cooperation between the state, unions and entrepreneurs, as in the Nordics. But when the autocratic OPEC-states raised the world market price of oil without importing much more from the North, the outcome here was both stagnation and inflation. In other words, producers and consumers had become so far apart that it was difficult to keep national Keynesianism and Fordism going (i.e. that the workers who produced the cars could afford to buy them). Hence, the social democratic model must be internationalised to survive, and leaders like Olof Palme, Willy Brandt and friends in the "third world"

attempted a UN-based "New International Economic Order" through "partnership between North and South". But the political and economic establishment objected, along with unions that prioritised "their" TNF-related company's ability to pay good wages. And the non-aligned movement was in decline, the liberation movements were economically weak, and the oil-states were as happy as the developmental states that collaborated with transnational corporations for their own good.

In the 1980s, Milton Friedman's neo-liberal economics was instead given free rein, with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan at the forefront, subsequently backed by the digital revolution, unregulated information technology and social media.

By implication, the scope of democracy and the capacity of the state to facilitate fair structural transformation were reduced. In the North, capital escaped for example François Mitterrand's socialist oriented reforms. And leaders like Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder and Göran Persson tried a "third way" to combine market-oriented reforms and welfare but increased inequalities and social insecurity. Many people lost trust in the "old alternatives", becoming susceptible instead to conservative nationalist arguments.

Incomplete democratisation

In the South, the socio-economic effects of structural adjustment were even worse – but there seemed to be an alternative. A global wave of human rights and democracy had begun against fascism in Portugal in 1975. It spread to Greece and Spain. The US was defeated in Vietnam and elected a president who promised to promote human rights, Jimmy Carter. The wave rolled on to Latin America, with Brazil at the forefront, and then on to the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan, as well as to Eastern Europe. After the end of the Cold War in 1989, the wave gained more strength with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the spread of economic and political liberalisation in its former empire. Mandela's South Africa was the great triumph in Africa. In Asia, Indonesia became the world's third largest democracy again. And in cases like Brazil there were encouraging efforts at substantial democratisation.

Liberal democracy that had been generally considered unrealistic in the South and East since the mid-to-late-1950s was thus deemed feasible again – for four reasons, none of which was borne out in practice.

The first assumption was that there would be demands for the rule of law and other freedoms as the economy became more market oriented. But in China and Vietnam authoritarian party-state-led-capitalism clamped down on pro-democrats and adjusted successfully to the global neo-liberal order. In Russia, the neoliberal shock therapy slowed down democratisation and generated kleptocracy and oligarchy, which enabled Vladimir Putin to gain broad support for harsh measures against disorder and injustice, and to "make Russia great again". This was the general global trend: democratisation was weakened by the privatisation and deregulation of the economy. There was simply less to decide on in a democratic way.

The second suggestion was that there should be "interventions against the enemies of democracy". But the "war on terror" did the least to advance democracy. The UN was undermined, as was international law. Great power politics gained the upper hand, conflicts multiplied, repression increased, autocrats remained in power, and the Arab Spring protests were crushed, most brutally in Syria – before things got even worse in Gaza and Sudan.

The more convincing third thesis was that because of economic liberalisation the international community, together with powerful reform-minded groups inside the countries, might be able to negotiate democratic institutions – from freedoms, rights and elections to the depoliticisation of the military and a powerful legal system and administration. In the process, even old landowners, oligarchs, clerics and generals were expected to adapt to the new rules of the game. Initially, this line of reasoning seemed to be vindicated and was taken on board by many international donors, including the Nordic ones. But usually, the influential groups that negotiated democratisation could draw on their economic and other positions of power outside of politics to shape the new institutions and rules of the game to their own advantage.

To counter this there was a fourth supplementary argument, advocated by left liberals, social democrats and related donors, namely that a more equal distribution of power was a prerequisite for democratisation, and that it could be pursued by civil society organisations and popular movements thanks to new freedoms and international support.

But there were problems even when the third and fourth arguments were combined. For example, the centre-left Indian coalition that won elections in 2004 failed to modify liberal economic reforms with sufficiently comprehensive welfare reforms and popular participation. Instead, the coalition was mired in corruption scandals and lost in 2014 to the conservative Hindu nationalists led by Narendra Modi.

Similarly, the liberal and social democratic Philippine coalition government that won the 2010 elections did not meet people's expectations and lost in 2016 to the "strongman" Rodrigo Duterte, who blamed all evil on criminals and drug addicts, whom he said should be killed and then did kill.

In Indonesia, from the mid-2000s, numerous civic organisations, trade unions and social movements united behind alternative reform proposals and facilitated the election in 2014 of the populist technocrat Joko "Jokowi" Widodo as president. But the groups could not agree on how to proceed. Instead, Jokowi built broad support for a grand coalition of the country's political elite, oligarchs and religious leaders – after which he ensured that dictator Suharto's former son-in-law, the authoritarian ex-general Prabowo Subianto, was elected the next president.

In Brazil, Lula da Silva's policies were immensely popular when he handed over to Dilma Rousseff in 2011, but corruption scandals at the country's centre could not be prevented by the otherwise acclaimed local popular participation. And business as well as social

policy had become dependent on income from the export of raw materials, which suffered from reduced world market prices. Jair Bolsonaro won the next election.

In South Africa, the trade union movement in particular criticised President Thabo Mbeki's version of the "third way" policy, and preferred Jacob Zuma, whose rule soon degenerated into an authoritarian kleptocracy with ethnic undertones. The democracy movement that previously had a strong base in social-movement unionism has been unable to offer significant resistance.

Why did popular engagement in democratisation not make more headway? In essence, neoliberal reforms reinforced uneven economic development. This nourished differences in interests and organisational possibilities between permanent and temporary employees, freelancers and those working in the informal sector. It was difficult for trade unions and social movements to come together and agree on common demands and proposals. Meanwhile, the ILO's work and international trade union solidarity were often limited to formal sector unions.

Likewise, social movements and civil society groups focused on specific interests and issues, on lobbying and attempts to exert pressure rather than mobilising and organising members, and on avoiding even non-party-political engagement, at the request of international donors. Meanwhile political decentralisation was rarely accompanied by opportunities to scale up local improvements and to build fresh parties.

Finally, most new rules and regulations on parties and elections were to the advantage of the established political and economic elite. So, even though the new freedoms and rights were good for progressive movements, it was hard for pro-democrats to organise people, enter mainstream politics and make a difference with alternative proposals.

Having tried and failed, many people instead came to support "strong leaders", and at worst to appreciate ethnic and religious solidarity, and turn against alleged "competitors", such as migrants.

Counter movements

In brief, global conservative nationalism was thus nourished by increased social insecurity under market-driven globalisation, and by frustration with shallow democratisation and poor progressive alternatives – alternatives that had first been weakened by rightist as well as leftist attempts at authoritarian shortcuts to progress, followed by the new international division of labour dominated by authoritarian developmental states and transnational companies, and from the 1980s, by global neo-liberal politics. But is this the end of it?

The recent glimmer of hope is the so-called Gen-Z revolts, which many others are also joining in. The protests in Chile, Hong Kong and Sudan (2019) and Iran (2022) were followed by Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Peru, Madagascar, Nepal, the Philippines, Indonesia, Serbia, France, Germany and more. This is nothing new. One predecessor was

the Arab Spring (2011). Well-informed young people tend to be at the frontlines given their opportunities to meet on campuses and on social media, thus being able to build informal "rhizome-movements" in a world of otherwise fragmented working conditions. It is also not the first time that youth and others have stood up against authoritarian rule, as recently in Brazil, Hungary, Serbia and the US. But now there is something more to it. For three decades conservative nationalists mobilised many people who were frustrated by the negative effects of globalisation and dysfunctional democracy. Now it is also the youth who reach out and mobilise, but turn against the autocratic and corrupt conservative nationalists who have "robbed us of our future".

But is there an alternative? There are several concerns. Protests against high prices, corruption and repression are fine, but the unified actions are rarely based on viable, alternative reform proposals that popular organisations agree on. There tend to be long lists of incoherent demands from scattered groups. And the dissidents often avoid democratic participation and representation in favour of technocratic leaders and lawyers. A common formula is insurrectionary pressure politics. First, mobilising supporters online, on campuses and the streets, to compensate for the lack of homogeneous social movements. Then, intensifying actions and convincing reform-minded officers and officials to abandon the ruling politicians in favour of a transitional government of experts, who are supposed to get rid of corruption and the abuse of power, and are on speaking terms with key activists. Finally expecting that the new government will initiate fair elections, in due course. But where has this really succeeded?

Of course, Sri Lanka is at least one promising exception. The insurrection in 2022 (which was captured by the establishment) was followed by the building of a National People's Power (NPP) alliance with a comprehensive programme and landslide victories in the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2024. But the implementation of transformative reforms has not met expectations. Promises are one thing, democratic governance another.

In short, it is not clear whether the new counter movements will be able to generate viable democratisation and progressive economic alternatives – or be followed by new popular frustrations with strongmen in the forefront. A key issue is how the established popular movements and centre-leftist parties relate to the new protests and demands. Will such movements and parties in for example the Nordics acknowledge that it takes more internationalism in the tradition of Willy Brandt and Olof Palme to reinvent the Nordic Model? Domestic distributive policies that increase consumption are no longer only of benefit to our industries, with rather fair employment conditions, but also for imports of goods from countries with poor work conditions and environmental regulations. The Nordic solidarity wage policy is being hampered by individual wage negotiations and the fact that an increasingly large share of people's income is based on return on capital that may be withdrawn from taxation. There are interesting proposals on how to build renewed internationalism, for example in the *Global Justice Report: A*

Plan for Equality & Prosperity Within Planetary Boundaries, by the *International Panel on Inequality,* and within the framework of the *Global Progressive Mobilisation*.[3] But there is little about the politics of getting there, and about the partnership in governance by representation of labour, business as well as social movements, that had once proven crucial in the Nordics.

Options in the South

In the South in particular, the problems of the recent counter movements call for politics to counter the fragmentation of labour, given the different work conditions that make it so difficult for unions and social movements to come together and agree on common demands and proposals, as well as to contain the disintegration among social movements and civil society groups. And to find ways to scale up efforts at local progressive development and connect them to the wider economy and politics. These are unresolved issues that have caused political setbacks, even in the most impressive cases of popular participation, as in Brazil and the Indian state of Kerala.

What might be the best way to address these challenges? The research that I have been involved in and know about indicates that change is possible by building broad alliances *and* related democratic governance in favour of reform packages based on common interests beyond conventional employer-employee relations. There seem to be three major entry points – all of which call for further studies, experiments and support.

The first is rooted in the historical struggle for equality, equal rights and popular education (later depicted as human rights) against colonial as well as local repression and exploitation. This is for example the basis for why South India resists Hindu nationalism.

The second is the possibility to build broad alliances and democratic politics beyond fragmented class interests and civil society issues. In Kerala in the 1990s, for instance, numerous civil society groups in cooperation with researchers and progressive politicians managed to combine insights from local projects to foster a state-level people's planning campaign. Even in Indonesia with much harsher political conditions, it was possible around 2010 to build a successful broad coalition of unions, social movements and progressive politicians in favour of a universal public health reform.

The third is the possibility (and necessity) to follow up such alliances with additional reforms and a comprehensive political programme for democratic partnership governance. This is hard. The Nordics managed to some extent, from the 1930s, with social pacts between labour and business, supplemented by their representation in public policymaking and governance. But the model became centralised and many locally rooted popular movements and initiatives were marginalised. There are efforts in for example Brazil to overcome this by regional and national policy councils involving unions and

[3] Global Justice Report - Global Justice Project; International Panel on Inequality | Columbia Business School; https://globalprogressivemobilisation.org/en

social movements. And Mariana Mazzucato's framework for mission-based strategies that adhere to key principles of common good development and involve all relevant actors is promising,[4] even if there is little on the politics of nourishing and sustaining the missions.

Renewed international cooperation?

In conclusion, I would maintain that we should focus now on the challenges of the counter movements and the three entry points. But is there an interest in the North in renewed cooperation with progressive actors in the South?

It is often argued that solidarity beyond our "immediate vicinity" is an outlay. Politicians use military terms like "front reduction" to avoid difficult issues such as solidarity within and outside the country, and "triangulate" security, restricted migration and the welfare economy to garner the most votes. But cooperation on human rights, democracy and sustainable development between the global South and North is also necessary for our own security, to reduce the climate threat, to prevent conflicts so that fewer people are forced to flee their countries, and to promote fair taxes, trade and welfare. Besides, migrants are needed to keep our own welfare systems going. Reduced cooperation and solidarity will lead to further conflicts and reduced dialogue.

We must not allow that. Most of our research and insights show how international cooperation based on solidarity is a prerequisite for saving the climate, democracy, jobs and welfare even here at home. It is necessary to sustain the possibility of imagining ourselves in others, and work for a peaceful, democratic and solidary, inclusive and sustainable world. I would thus argue that there is a particular obligation for us who engage in development studies and for related experts to stand tall.

[4] E.g. https://marianamazzucato.substack.com/p/the-common-good-economy-a-new-compass