



The convergence of fundamentalisms and new political closures – What next in the struggle for pluralism?

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A centrally important phenomenon of the past two decades, and one that is likely to persist for some time in different parts of the world, is the rise of fundamentalism of various kinds, whether religious and ethnic, or cultural, racial and linguistic.¹ The impact of fundamentalism is evident in social relations and in new social fault-lines in and across many countries, in domestic and international politics, in national, regional and global balances of power, and in the many manifestations of violence around us – above all, in terrorism, of both the state and the non-state kind.

Ethnic and religious fundamentalism

Fundamentalist belief systems have been at the root of numerous forms of identity politics, or politics centred on particular identities, especially ethnic and religious ones. Identity politics burst explosively upon many parts of the world at the end of the 1980s, beginning with the former Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact countries. As the Berlin Wall came down and the Eastern Bloc began to unravel, several countries of the Second World, earlier known for relatively well-knit societies and stable politics, experienced tectonic convulsions that rent them asunder.

Not only did the mighty USSR disintegrate into 15 different nations, but plural and multi-ethnic states like Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia also broke up, in the latter case with catastrophic consequences that became most evident first in Bosnia and later in Kosovo. Within some of these societies, new forces of identity assertion, often violent, erupted, which increased in ferocity as the state ruthlessly repressed these movements.

¹ The term is used here as a convenient shorthand description rather than as an analytical category with unvarying characteristics or universal application. It is important to guard against a purely pejorative, rather than a neutral and descriptive, use of the term. It is even more vital to avoid its selective use – e.g. in respect of 'Islamic fundamentalism', when 'Christian fundamentalism' and 'Zionist' or 'Buddhist fundamentalism' are considered inappropriate and quaint.

The effects of the identity politics of the 1990s are felt even today in much of the (former) Second World – through the aftermath of bloody wars and near-genocidal violence, through continuing ethnic conflicts and through movements to secede from one nation in order to form a separate nation-state based on a specific ethnic-linguistic group.

In numerous countries of the Third World, recent manifestations of fundamentalism have been even more violent and destructive – witness Somalia, Rwanda, Sudan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Bangladesh Guinea, Burma, Ethiopia and Sri Lanka. The violent conflict between the Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda led to as many as one million killings in the course of barely a year – a scale probably unmatched anywhere else in the world in recent times. Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden and the Taliban represent an especially violent, millenarian and apocalyptic form of Islamic fundamentalism. They regard Christians and Jews as their historic enemies who must be destroyed – no matter by what means, but preferably by military force targeted at non-combatant civilians. Pakistan has emerged as the global epicentre of *jehadi* terrorism, whose effects are felt not just in the neighbourhood – India witnessed a terrible episode of armed attacks in Mumbai on November 26–29, 2008 – but all over the world, especially in Western Europe and North America, not to speak of the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

Although less catastrophically violent, other forms of identity politics also driven by fundamentalism have claimed a heavy toll in societies as varied as India and Algeria, Iraq and Fiji, the Philippines and Sudan. This has arrested and aborted development, distorted and undermined democratic structures, and created deep insecurities among citizens.

Third World fundamentalisms erupted almost at the same time as the collapse of the USSR and coincided with the setback delivered to the project adopted in many newly liberated countries to create a plural, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and socially egalitarian alternative to late capitalism. Although this seems like a mere coincidence, there was a causal link, as we shall see below, between Third World fundamentalisms and the ascendancy of neoliberal capitalism which took a triumphalist form following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The First World has been no exception to the global trend reflected in the rise of identity politics based on religious, ethnic or racial fun-



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damentalism. On the contrary, it may have pioneered or preceded the trend – as suggested by the first (early 20th century) use of the term ‘fundamentalism’ to describe a Christian tendency in the United States, which believes in the literal interpretation of the Bible as the word of God.

Although the domestic manifestations of First World fundamentalism are not always violent, its overall global impact has been extremely destructive of peace and stability. In recent years, it has been both overtly and covertly violent. For instance, anti-Arab prejudice and Islamophobia played a definite role in many Western societies, especially in the US, in impelling the illegitimate use of military force against randomly selected Arab targets in the 1990s, well before the attacks on New York and Washington of September 11, 2001.

These prejudices certainly shaped the conduct of the war on Iraq and its occupation, which has already resulted in the deaths of over 100,000 civilians. In general, the hatreds and prejudices nurtured by Christian fundamentalism in the US have given a major push to the political Right’s aggressiveness and encouraged American unilateralism and bellicosity.

The collective violence and vicious personal attacks unleashed by the xenophobic Far Right on ethnic minorities and immigrant workers in countries such as France, Germany, Britain and Italy have produced waves of fear and insecurity among these vulnerable groups. ‘Counter-terrorist’ operations and special security measures have created conditions conducive to the growth of racism and xenophobia in the European Union.² Equally, they have devalued democracy and the principle of equal citizenship rights in these countries. Besides anti-Black racism, the US is today marked by growing ethnic prejudice against the Hispanic and Arab minorities. (Samuel Huntington, of ‘Clash of Civilisations’ fame, has tried to give anti-Hispanic prejudice academic respectability by arguing that Spanish-speaking migrants threaten the very character and core-culture of the US.)

Western arrogance and faith in the intrinsic superiority of the Occident (or ‘Christian civilisation’) over the Third World (or Islamic and other ‘civilisations’) have greatly influenced the prevalent television-determined ‘common-sense’ views of ethnic conflicts from Somalia to Serbia – and hence the decisions of powerful governments about whether to and how to intervene to prevent large-scale bloodshed

² Please see the 2005 *Shadow Reports on Racism in Europe*, published by the European Network against Racism (www.enar-eu.org).

within the (deeply problematic) framework of the politics of ‘humanitarian intervention’.

Even Tony Blair, former Prime Minister of ‘multiculturalist’ Britain, gave vent to his prejudice by saying that ‘there’s an arc of extremism now stretching across West Asia and touching, with increasing definition, countries far outside that region’, and that the West can only defeat this extremism by waging a war centred on ‘values’ – ‘ours’ versus ‘theirs’ – in addition to using conventional military tactics against it.³

It is perhaps in Israel, that intersection of the First and Third Worlds, that fundamentalism finds its most malign and blood-soaked expression. There, extremist Zionism of the kind practised by the Likud and Kadima parties made a dual alliance with powerful forces in the US under the Bush administration: on the one hand, with neoconservative fundamentalists of the Richard Perle–Paul Wolfowitz variety, and on the other, with Christian Zionists.⁴ The first alliance is deeply ideological and has a top-down, elite character. The second is more strategic and reaches out to the ‘bottom’ – to the considerable following, estimated at 50 million people, perhaps even more, that the Christian Zionists are believed to enjoy in the US.

This system of fundamentalist alliances is indispensable to understanding the unique nature of state terrorism practised by Israel to



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3 Blair delivered himself of these remarks in his lecture on ‘Future Foreign Policy’ at the Los Angeles World Affairs Council on 1 August 2006. He said: ‘What is happening today out in West Asia, in Afghanistan and beyond is an elemental struggle about the values that will shape our future. It is in part a struggle between what I will call reactionary Islam and moderate, mainstream Islam. But its implications go far wider. We are fighting a war, but not just against terrorism but about how the world should govern itself in the early 21st century, about global values... Whatever the outward manifestation at any one time – in Lebanon, in Gaza, in Iraq and add to that in Afghanistan, in Kashmir, in a host of other nations including now some in Africa – it is a global fight about global values; it is about modernisation, within Islam and outside of it; it is about whether our value system can be shown to be sufficiently robust, true, principled and appealing that it beats theirs... This is not just about security or military tactics. It is about hearts and minds, about inspiring people, persuading them, showing them what our values at their best stand for.’

4 Christian Zionism is a theological doctrine which holds that God himself gave the land of Israel (Biblical or Eretz Israel, or Greater Israel, that is) to the Jewish tribes. Hence the Zionist project to establish Greater Israel (including Judea and Samaria, which comprise the present-day West Bank) must be unconditionally supported, regardless of the means used. The establishment of such a Jewish state will hasten Jesus Christ’s return to Earth. Thereafter, however, Christians and Jews part ways. Either the Jews convert to Christianity, or they will burn in hell. Armageddon will follow, in which no non-believer will be spared. Good Christians will of course go to Heaven! Jesus will personally take them there.

perpetuate its illegal occupation of Palestinian land by brutalising the Palestinian people, impoverishing them and otherwise victimising them in every conceivable manner. Without the strong, uncritical ideological-political support of the Christian Zionists, it is doubtful whether Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert could have gone as far as they did in their project to construct the Apartheid Wall – in flagrant violation of international law and elementary democratic norms – and to break up Palestinian land into a series of Bantustans, and to put an end to ‘the dream’, as Sharon put it, of Palestinian nationhood itself.

Nor would Israel’s new government, led by Likud’s Binyamin Netanyahu, but including the extreme-Right’s Avigdor Liberman as well as Labour’s Ehud Barak, besides smaller religious ultra-conservative parties, have persisted with that project and hardened their resistance to a two-state solution.

Israel’s month-long invasion of Lebanon in July-August 2006 clearly lacked the rationale of a *casus belli*. So did its month-long military campaign in Gaza in December 2008-January 2009. Both invasions visited extreme brutalities upon civilians.

The invasion of Lebanon was related to this larger project and Israel’s desire to establish complete hegemony and supremacy in its entire neighbourhood. It is also not unrelated to the US campaign to weaken and isolate Syria, and more important, Iran, whose passive ‘stooge’ Hizbollah is wrongly depicted to be. Washington’s refusal to restrain Israel from invading Lebanon was a shameful reminder of the US’s complicity in Israel’s bellicosity and continued occupation of Palestine. Even more deplorable was Washington’s silence (in particular the silence of newly elected President Barack Obama) on the invasion and further brutalisation of Gaza, already one of the most impoverished and wretched places on earth.

It does not seem that the Obama administration is about to chart a new course on Israel-Palestine. The appointment of George Mitchell as the special envoy on the issue does not raise much hope; nor does the acceptance by many US officials of a number of premises as to what would constitute a just and fair settlement of the Palestinian question, including issues such as the right of return of refugees displaced in 1948, a land-for-peace agreement, and the fate of East Jerusalem. These premises favour Israel, or rather the Zionist agenda, and are loaded against the cause of Palestinian statehood.

Non-religious fundamentalism

The sources of these different fundamentalisms related to Christianity, Islam and Judaism are divergent, although many of these derive a degree of rationalisation from religious belief.⁵ But there are *non-religious fundamentalisms* too. Over the past quarter-century, these have registered impressive growth in different parts of the world, and especially in the former Second World comprising post-Communist societies.

In the post-Communist countries, there is a strong and fairly straightforward correlation or equation between the collapse of ‘actually existing’ socialisms, the disintegration of the ideological-political cement binding different social strata and ethnic groups, and the sudden, dramatic coming to the fore of ethnic-linguistic-religious identities. A major factor in this disintegration has been the rapid, indeed explosive, growth of individualism and individualistic identity-assertion.

Collectivist ideologies and heavy-handed state practices had long tried to suppress or ignore individual identities, rights and concerns as well as religion and religious institutions in formerly Communist societies. As their regimes came apart after the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, there was mass rejection of collectivism and an embrace of both individualism and all kinds of religions and religious cults. A variation on this was the sudden political decompression that occurred post-1991, which created the possibility for certain oppressed ethnic minorities such as the Chechens to break free of old, unequal political arrangements and form their own states or autonomous units within existing state structures. Many states of the former USSR – in particular, Russia and Georgia – have tried to suppress such ethnic

5 Strictly speaking, religious fundamentalism may itself be a bit of a misnomer, in the sense that its problematique is not so much about religion as about society and the *polis*, the political community which makes decisions. It seeks to define the *polis* as a religious community. The new fundamentalists are not chiefly concerned about theological doctrines or religious beliefs. Rather, they aim to reorganise society along the lines of arbitrarily drawn up models or schemes. Often, but not always, this model is based on some fanciful imagining and ascription of what it is to be a ‘true’ Christian or Muslim, or to be religiously ‘pure’ – for instance, the notion that women should keep out of public life and must wear the *hijab* when stepping out of the home.

Whatever the content and validity of their reference to religion, the fundamentalists reinterpret and redefine theological doctrines with a definite purpose: namely, to radically reorder *society* by imposing their beliefs upon all its members, whether ‘true’ believers or not. The revolutionary character of their project lies in its central objective: to bring about retrograde and despotic *social* change, not in the transformation of religion as such.



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aspirations by brute force, provoking hardline and fundamentalist reactions.

Fundamentalisms in the post-Communist states may have relatively straightforward, direct origins. But their evolution could get enormously complicated in the coming years thanks to the policy regimes being imposed upon most of these societies, including ‘free-market’ neoliberalism, wholesale opening-up to global capitalism, indiscriminate privatisation, and the wrenching social stresses that all these produce, not least through growing environmental crisis related to and part of global climate change. These stresses have been exacerbated by dislocations owing to the sudden expansion of US-style ‘mass culture’ and the absence of any socially anchoring values and belief systems among the youth in many of these societies.

Even the entry of some of these states (mainly of Central Europe) into the European Union, and the economic aid they stand to receive by virtue of their EU membership, may not relieve the stresses adequately. These ‘societies in transition’ may remain a fertile ground for the growth of exclusivist and fundamentalist forces for many years to come.

Fundamentalism in the Global South

The causes behind the growth of fundamental tendencies in the less developed Third World or Global South are more numerous and complex. In this millennium, these are perhaps easiest to explain in the case of Islamic extremism. This derives its legitimacy from the history of hostility and bellicosity of successive governments of the West, in particular, the United States, towards Arab (or Persian and other Middle Eastern) nationalisms and pan-Arabist and other secular movements, or towards governments sympathetic to socialism and economic nationalism. In the more recent past, political Islam has derived strength from the grossly unjust war on Iraq and the country’s occupation, and from Washington’s criminal complicity with Israel’s Zionists in preventing the establishment of a sovereign, viable Palestinian state.

These US Middle East policies are often rationalised at the popular level, if they are not driven by, the intense Islamophobia and prejudice

against Muslims and the Arab peoples that is prevalent in America.⁶ But the roots of the prejudice go back much further than the 1990s. In any case, the phenomenon of fundamentalism in the Middle East is by no stretch of the imagination confined to Islamic extremism.

Failing states, the failure of development and neoliberal globalisation

It is best to comprehend the causes of the growth of fundamentalism in the Global South through three clusters of factors: the weakening of the authority and legitimacy of the state because of the general failure or ‘arresting’ of, or general crisis of, development; an undermining of cohering and binding factors such as secular ideologies in many countries, which were associated with their earlier development models and which are now themselves in crisis and have proved ecologically unsustainable; and the social disruptions, dislocations and popular disempowerment produced by economic neoliberalism in many countries.

More than 120 countries of the world have been through some variant or other of ‘Washington Consensus’-driven policy regimes, such as World Bank-imposed Structural Adjustment Programmes or International Monetary Fund-imposed ‘austerity’ measures. And only a slightly smaller number have had to support the Fund/Bank-endorsed PRSP (Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper).

The three clusters are closely related to and often interact with one another. They also reinforce one another. For instance, neoliberal globalisation is among the main causes of a deepening of the crisis of development in many Southern countries. The conceptual framework within which neoliberal policies are conceived and implemented often clashes with the cohering ideologies of the state and society. Such ideologies or models include progressive nationalism, national self-reliance, *Ujamaa*, decentralised, community-based social organisation, and development based on people’s needs and participation.

6 For instance, an August 2006 poll of 1,007 Americans showed strong anti-Muslim feeling. Thirty-nine per cent of respondents in the sample said they felt at least some prejudice against Muslims. The same percentage favoured requiring Muslims, including US citizens, to carry a special ID ‘as a means of preventing terrorist attacks in the US’. About one-third said US Muslims were sympathetic to al-Qaeda, and 22 per cent said they wouldn’t want Muslims as neighbours. American Muslims have been the victims of such prejudice and have suffered mentally as a result of verbal harassment and discrimination. According to a study of 611 adults by a Yale University psychologist, Arab-Americans had much worse mental health than Americans overall. About half had symptoms of clinical depression, compared with 20 per cent in an average US group. Muslims made up 70 per cent of the study’s participants.

Similarly, corruption is a serious problem in most Third World countries, which both undermines the legitimacy of the state and prevents it from providing services to the people. It is nevertheless useful to distinguish between these clusters.

The crisis of authority of the state, itself related to the crisis of 'bourgeois developmentalism' or traditional top-down economic policies which aim (but often fail) to generate growth and prosperity, is widespread through the Global South. Indeed, it now takes the form of the failed or failing state, which is dysfunctional, internally incoherent and cannot provide even minimal public services to the population.



Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) launched by George W. Bush in September 2001

It is a reasonable guess that about half the world's 190-odd nations fit the description, 'failing or failed state'.⁷ These states are viciously predatory upon their peoples, and act as debt collectors on behalf of international finance capital. Their policies aggravate poverty, deprivation and social disparities and create social discontent and conflict. To deal with the latter, they resort to the use of armed force and social repression. In recent years, such states' military expenditures have grown to gargantuan proportions under a proliferating obsession with 'national security', itself defined in largely, if not solely, military terms, and further legitimised by the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) launched by George W. Bush in September 2001.

All these phenomena together spell *less* human security, understood comprehensively as food security, security of employment and income, gender security, environmental security, personal security, guarantees of citizens' rights and entitlements, and a degree of social cohesion. Social cohesion is itself related to a broad social consensus and a sense of sharing a common national vision and a collective project. Heightened human insecurity, fear, paranoia and visible signs of disintegration of social cohesion prepare a fertile ground for the growth of social discontent and of violent means of resolving its causes. This creates conditions propitious for the rise of religious-ethnic fundamentalism.

Processes eroding the authority of the state have been at work in many Southern countries for 30 years, even longer. What has accelerated them, and at the same time detracted from the appeal of the universalist ideas on which their once-prevalent ideologies of social

7 This is discussed at length in my article 'From What Now to What Next: Reflections on three decades of international politics and development', published in *Development Dialogue* No. 47, entitled 'What Next: Setting the context', Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, Uppsala.

cohesion were based, is the proliferation among their social elites of crude notions such as ‘greed is good’, ‘markets are always right’ and ‘governments are almost always wrong’. These notions tend to displace and discredit all ideologies promoting the public good and the possibility of individuals acting less selfishly.

Finally, social discontent is greatly exacerbated by unequal neoliberal globalisation. This has further widened North-South disparities, distorted terms of trade between industrial goods and primary commodities, and added to distress and deprivation in the Third World. Coupled with the trade barriers raised by the North and other economic processes which have impoverished large numbers of Southern people, the overall effect of corporate-led globalisation has been devastating. This often produces a strong, parochial and chauvinist-nationalist reaction in the South. Fundamentalists are ideally placed to tap this vein of discontent by appealing to crassly nationalist sentiments, nativism, revanchism, and illiberal, intolerant and hate-driven anti-West ideologies.

Fundamentalist demagoguery typically takes the form of demonising ‘Western-Christian’ identities – and hence Northern states and peoples – in a sweeping manner. Within this demonology, it is not globalised capitalism in its neoliberal *avatar* that is the villain, but the West – with its hegemonistic designs upon the Third World’s resources – and its Southern allies. The latter are depicted as evil and sinful because they have abandoned their ‘true’ religious (Muslim, Hindu, or whatever) beliefs and identities, and deviated from the ‘pure’ practices prescribed by the scriptures.

This ‘Fall from Glory’ – and not lack of democracy, participatory governance or state legitimacy, and/or growing economic and social inequality and disempowerment of a majority of the people – is seen as the root cause of the ills that afflict Southern societies. These societies must be ‘liberated’ through a religious struggle for ‘self-purification’ and a return to the fundamental tenets of their ‘true’ faith.

Economic fundamentalism

Competing with such religious and ethnic-nationalist fundamentalism, and often aggravating it, is thus the fundamentalism of ‘free market’ dogma’. This *economic fundamentalism* underlies the dominant policies and practices in many countries. It is based on a one-size-fits-all approach: the market is an infallible guide to all economic strategy;



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it is sacrosanct; and investor interest must prevail over the public interest.

The market-fundamentalist dogma, pioneered in Thatcherite-Reaganite policies in the 1980s, and copied in countless countries since, derives from the work of the Austrian economist Friederich von Hayek. This is an extremist sub-school of the neoclassical school of economics, which in turn is one of many schools of economic thought. It is blind to the very possibility of market failure, and regards all state intervention as anathema – the *Road to Serfdom* (the title of Hayek's famous book). This theory prescribes a developmental model based on pure, unadulterated subservience to the interests of capital, unfettered trade, and total freedom for private enterprise – in *all* situations and circumstances.

The theory stands in complete and consistent violation of the actual historical experience of economic growth and development for the past three-and-a-half centuries. No country – whether Imperial Britain, the United States between the late 19th century and the Second World War, or Germany and Japan after the War, or the Asian Tigers in the 1970s and 1980s – has ever developed without a degree of protection for its nascent industries, and some form of state intervention in technology promotion, in international and domestic trade, or in distribution of assets and incomes. Efforts to dominate, overrule and regulate the market and to 'discipline' capital have been crucial to achieving rapid economic growth and even more to ensuring its equal and sustainable distribution.

Reliance on the market and on unbounded freedom for capital have been at the root of the grave crisis facing humanity in the shape of dangerous climate change. This alone should be enough to discredit the neoliberal ideology – and solutions to the climate crisis based mainly on market-driven mechanisms like carbon trading.

The reason why neoliberal dogma has acquired the currency it has has little to do with its intrinsic merit or even its acceptance among mainstream economists. Rather, market fundamentalism has proliferated rapidly over the past quarter-century because it was embraced by powerful international financial institutions and hegemonic states like the US, propagated by right-wing foundations and think-tanks, and most important, because it was *imposed* upon government after government.

Fundamentalist counter-reactions

Yet, market fundamentalism provokes a reaction to itself in many Southern countries – both from sections of the domestic elite, and more importantly, from their dispossessed peoples. In the absence of popular mobilisation based on equity and humanistic ideologies and politics, the reaction becomes amenable to manipulation and exploitation by ultra-nationalists and fundamentalists of all descriptions.

This potent combination of factors has been at work, for example, in India, where it took the form of ethnic-Hindu exclusivism, or the ideology and politics of *Hindutva* (literally, ‘Hinduness’). This political current grew especially rapidly after the mid-1980s thanks to a skillfully organised hate-campaign directed at a 16th century mosque in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, which was presented as a symbol of Muslim ‘conquest’ and ‘humiliation’ of ‘Hindu India’. The campaign’s organisers claimed, without evidence, that the mosque was built at a site where a Hindu temple once stood and was destroyed by a Moghul army. The context for the rise of *Hindutva* was set by an ideological vacuum left by the decline (until recently) of centrist parties like the Indian National Congress, and of the Left.

The *Hindutva* forces, headed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), came to power nationally in a coalition in 1998 on a platform which sought to reshape Indian politics by overcentralising it on the basis of a ‘one nation, one people, one law, one culture’ ideology, a form of Hindu majoritarianism and an aggressive, atavistic, narrow-minded nationalism.

The BJP-led coalition followed a strong pro-business and pro-globalisation policy orientation, with all the enthusiasm of a new convert. It tried to establish a ‘strategic partnership’ with the US, overthrowing the independent and non-aligned foundations of India’s foreign policy. The BJP glorified India’s ancient past – to claim that India is quintessentially Hindu, and that the religious-ethnic minorities must defer to the primacy of the Hindus. Indeed, they must accept that they are ‘outsiders’ who came to India as invaders and conquerors. They must apologise for the past.

The BJP and its associates forged a strategy to privilege a small group of people (upper-caste Hindus) by virtue of their religion and the ritual ‘purity’ of their status within the religious hierarchy. The BJP’s aim was to politically disenfranchise the non-Hindus and turn them into second-class citizens. Under its project, sections of India’s religious and social minorities, comprising over 250 million people,



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would be effectively excluded from political participation and prevented from shaping Indian society or managing its affairs.

The most egregious instance of the BJP's anti-minority politics was a bloody pogrom of Muslims in Gujarat, in which 2,000 people were butchered in February–April 2002 with the complicity and approval of the BJP-ruled state government. This was a grievous, organised, ruthlessly executed assault on democracy and the very idea of India's multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious identity. Seven years on, justice continues to elude the victims of the pogrom.

The BJP and its even more extremist cohorts such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) did not quite accomplish their mission although they left a trail of destruction in numerous political, administrative, educational and cultural institutions. In recent years, they have been targeting India's Christians, a minority of just over 2 per cent in the population, by branding them as "foreigners" although Christianity in India goes back to the first century AD. Their depredations continue both in the states where the BJP is in power and elsewhere.

Mercifully, the worst of this terrible, dark phase in Indian politics ended with the Parliamentary elections of 2004, when the Indian people threw the BJP and its allies out of power in a forceful assertion of pluralism, secularism, the centrality of the poor, and issues of distributive justice. The rationale for this vote was a rejection of neo-liberal policies as well as of Hindu majoritarianism. But the Manmohan Singh government continued to follow conservative neoliberal policies and failed to reassert the secular agenda with adequate force. It is not clear how the next government will conduct itself after the April–May 2009 parliamentary elections where the United Progressive Alliance and Manmohan Singh managed to get re-elected. The danger of Hindu-communal fundamentalism has certainly not vanished. The phenomenon continues to menace India and complicate her relations with neighbours. India is not the only case of confluence or a tight fit between religious fundamentalism and neoliberal globalisation. Many other countries have witnessed similar processes (for example, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, the Philippines). But equally important is the *opposite process*, in which fundamentalism exploits public sentiments *against* globalisation. This is precisely how many radical Islamicists position themselves in the Arab world and in South Asia.

Islam – and many Muslim-majority countries – falls in a special category. For many Western, especially American, ideologues, Islam is

a very special villain. After the end of the Cold War, they needed, and started looking for, new enemies to replace Communism, which had been a binding target legitimising the Western war machine, the ‘Pentagon system’ and much else in the prevalent world order based on a skewed distribution of power favouring the US. This search soon focused on Islam – much in the manner of the medieval Crusades.

Islam was now declared to be the bearer of a ‘civilisation’ which is in interminable conflict with the West’s Judeo-Christian ‘ethos’. Islam was demonised, indeed it continues to be demonised, as fundamentally intolerant, doctrinaire, rigid and anti-pluralist. Muslims cannot be at peace with democracy and all the great ‘values’ the West stands for. Thus, Osama bin Laden is not only a diabolical figure who as al-Qaeda’s head planned and directed the terrorist attacks of September 2001. He is also the stereotypical Muslim perpetually at war with the West.

This barrage of Western propaganda, disseminated by tele-evangelists and even ‘strategic experts’, has produced a sense of victimisation and injustice among millions of Muslims, regardless of nationality, location and social circumstances. Former President Bush further compounded the problem through the occupation of Iraq and Washington’s Israel policy. The terrible injustices suffered by the Iraqi people, and especially the exposure of revolting forms of sexual torture in the Abu Ghraib prison, have convinced millions of Muslims the world over that they have no alternative but to oppose and fight the world’s sole superpower and the West’s self-proclaimed leader.

Fundamentalism in the First World bears great *continuity* both with colonial notions of domination and the White Man’s inherent superiority, and the 20th century’s Extreme-Right traditions such as racism and fascism. But it is also marked by *discontinuity* of a new kind. This lies in the legitimisation crisis of the state in the advanced capitalist countries, to which the goals of equity/shared prosperity, redistributive justice and social cohesion were once extremely important. The goals seemed realisable during the Golden Age of Capitalism (1945–75). Since then, particularly since the early 1990s, a highly dualistic neoliberal model of capital accumulation has replaced the old paradigm. The new model creates and aggravates terrible iniquities and disparities, tolerates high levels of chronic unemployment and deprivation, and destroys social cohesion, indeed any idea of citizens’ common or collective stake in a shared project.



Islam continues to be demonised as fundamentally intolerant, doctrinaire, rigid and anti-pluralist

This model has produced disorientation and unhinging of people from their old belief systems and encouraged irrational atavistic values and exclusivist politics. It also helps the fundamentalists develop and refine their own toxic brand of hypernationalism in opposition to the hollow globalism or cosmopolitanism of neoliberalism.

In the US, fundamentalism, whether of the Christian or Christian-Zionist variety, or of the racist and ethnic-chauvinist kind, has become inseparable from the project of constituting a US-dominated Empire. This lethal combination has had a profoundly debilitating impact on democracy in general and civil liberties in particular through the PATRIOT Act, illegal detention of terror suspects and intrusive surveillance of citizens' activities. In the US, social cohesion was always weak. It has been further eroded by authoritarian policies and draconian measures instituted after September 11, 2001.

Some of these tendencies are getting transposed to Western Europe, where support for Empire has driven governments in Britain, Italy and (before the change of government) Spain to take extremely divisive and unpopular stands on Iraq. A number of European Union governments have colluded with the US in organising special 'renditions' of terrorism suspects through clandestine flights – in blatant breach of human rights and their own domestic laws.

To make matters worse, many countries in Europe have increasingly followed policies that result in economic dualism and loss of democratic control over economic processes. The 'democratic deficit' is growing by leaps and bounds in the West as a whole.

Convergence of fundamentalisms and political closures

The world is witnessing a powerful convergence among different kinds of fundamentalism. They feed on one another. Each furnishes a rationale for the existence of the others and strengthens them. The Islamic variant of fundamentalism has acquired particular virulence over the past few years – not least because of the US's direct interventions or its complicity in patently unjust and illegal actions especially in Palestine/Israel and in Iraq. Iraq and Palestine are the fulcrum around which the whole Islamic world will be reshaped in the coming decade and more.

US policy in the Middle East has deepened the sense of hurt and humiliation among ordinary Muslims (and non-Muslims too) who have no sympathy for Al-Qaeda and kindred organisations. Equally im-

portant are growing xenophobia, racism and anti-Islamic prejudice in the West.

The general political effect of fundamentalism everywhere is to further contract the pluralist-secular space and exclude more and more people from active participation in society and governance processes. But this only adds to the existing – and growing – political closures. There are many varieties of such closure: a shrinking of the space or areas amenable to public control, supervision and correction; severe erosion and degradation of democracy through rampant violations of citizens' social and economic rights as well as their civil and political rights; marginalisation of large numbers of people through neoliberal policies that exclude them from participation in economic processes; and a narrowing of social choices available to the public.

To start with, the nation-state as the pre-eminent space for decision-making about the economy and social priorities has been greatly enfeebled by neoliberal globalisation. Perhaps a majority of states of the world lack the resources to do anything positive for their citizens, including providing elementary services. Even more important, what is emerging is *market-driven politics*,⁸ which substantially removes large chunks of decision-making possibilities from the public sphere altogether.

Parliaments and governments, however democratic, increasingly find themselves no longer able to decide or act on issues as varied as trade, health, intellectual property and patents, investment, labour rights, taxation, and stipulation of minimal local content in the manufacturing operations of multinational corporations, etc. Control over these domains is increasingly passing into the hands of the World Trade Organization or the World Bank-IMF, which are not democratically answerable to the public. Sometimes, control is subject to unequal bilateral or regional trade agreements such as NAFTA, which effectively displace national legislatures from their designated legitimate roles.

Erosion of the social and economic rights of people is a widespread and growing phenomenon. Even the Global North is becoming a 'one-third–two-thirds' society in which only a minority of the population is secure and has bright or good future prospects, another one-third faces a bleak future, and the rest hovers uncertainly in between. In many industrialised countries, the pruning of the welfare state and

8 This term and some of the analysis is drawn from Leys, Colin, *Market-Driven Politics: Neoliberal Democracy and the Public Interest*, Verso, London, 2001.

Even the Global North is becoming a 'one-third-two-thirds' society in which only a minority of the population is secure



cutting back of entitlements and social benefits, coupled with loss of social opportunity, is producing levels of impoverishment which were unheard of in the post-War period. On top of this comes a sustained attack on political rights in the name of 'security' and fighting 'terrorism', including intrusive surveillance of citizens – a process rationalised by the United Nations Security Council, no less.

The third variety of political closure is attributable to the effects of neoliberalism on vulnerable social groups which are forced to compete on the marketplace, but cannot. Their economic marginalisation, and failure to fulfil the demand for conformity (especially in consumption patterns) effectively leads to their exclusion from the public sphere and politics altogether. This is reflected in falling rates of participation in elections in many countries (very pronounced in the US), and in general apathy towards politics itself.

The phenomenon is further compounded by a reduction of social choices in many areas. For instance, large numbers of people even in relatively affluent societies have no control over their savings and where these might be placed by governments or pension funds and banks. Growing political closures have corroded and compromised the legitimacy and credibility of a large number of governments the world over.

If all these processes proceed apace without let or hindrance, the world will assuredly and steadily become a progressively worse place to live in. Some of the greatest achievements of humanity – democracy, inclusiveness, pluralism, human rights, the rule of law, and respect for cultural diversity – will severely erode. So will security – understood both in conventional military and physical terms, or more comprehensively. Indeed, the 'Global War on Terrorism' launched in

September 2001 has made the world more, not less, insecure, unsafe, paranoid and vulnerable to yet more terrorism. The general prospect in this scenario is one of social retrogression, growing economic dualism, collapse of social solidarities, further growth and hardening of hierarchies, and steady descent into a Hobbesian state of being in which life is nasty, brutish and short.

What Next? Some hopeful signs

However, such a bleak scenario is by now means inevitable. Some of the processes and trends at work may change, some of them radically, if forces and institutions that have a stake in participatory, inclusive democracy, social rationality, and minimal decency in public life – and which base themselves on universal values of equality, justice and human dignity – assert themselves both internationally and nationally. These range from multilateral bodies and organisations within the UN system (which the US has tried to bypass), all the way to local government agencies and grassroots social movements. Crucial to such change is the role of national governments, political parties and civil society organisations that press for progressive changes in policy.

There are some signs that parties and governments closely associated with the negative trends of the recent past are losing legitimacy and support. This is especially true of the ‘Anglo-Saxon *bloc*’, which has been the main driving force behind these trends. Barack Obama’s election in the US, on a platform that promised a better deal for the poor than raw predatory capitalism has to offer, and immense grassroots mobilisation among underprivileged communities and young people, raise new hopes.

Similarly, the global financial and economic crisis, the grimmest since 1929, has generated disillusionment the world over with economic neoliberalism and the free market, as nothing else has in recent decades. Nationalisation of failing corporations, unthinkable since the 1980s until now, is back on the agenda. People are in search of alternatives and radical, but practical, solutions to real problems. There is growing opposition to militarism, social exclusion, and racism and xenophobia. New anti-capitalist movements have come into being and are making their impact felt, as happened during the G-20 summit in London in April 2009.

If these processes gather momentum, they could bring about and contribute to significant changes at the local, national, regional and in-

ternational level through shifts in policies, social perceptions and access to resources through which activists can mobilise public opinion. These changes could reopen closing political spaces and help re-democratise society in radical ways.

A question of crucial importance here is: how far can radical agendas be promoted in the current debate on holistic and integrated solutions to the global recession and the climate crisis? The real solution to the economic crisis lies in large-scale investment in public works programmes (a greatly expanded globalised version of Roosevelt’s New Deal). If these can be made to generate “green jobs” on a mass scale, that can simultaneously help resolve the climate crisis by putting the world on to a low-carbon trajectory.

Fortunately, some such countervailing tendencies are in sight – the global justice movement, the growing peace movement, the ecology movement (which is fighting for non-market approaches to prevent climate change and for radical agendas at the Copenhagen conference in December 2009), civil society mobilisations on local, national and international issues, as well as specifically anti-fundamentalist political campaigns which fight for pluralism and inclusivism. Perhaps the most potent force would be the combined energies of the global justice (including climate justice) and peace movements. Mobilising them and harnessing them purposively to the agenda for radical transformative change is one of the greatest challenges we face today.



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