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Antidemocratic Populism in Power: Comparing Erdogan’s Turkey with Modi’s India and Netanyahu’s Israel

Abstract:

By the end of the second decade of the 21st century, populists have taken charge in Turkey, India and Israel, all previously heralded as exceptional democracies in difficult regions. This moment offers a unique opportunity to explore populism in power outside Europe and the Americas, in three states shaped by deep social, ethnic and religious divisions. This article locates Turkey, India and Israel within a global wave of electorally successful populist movements. It explores how populism can jeopardize democratic choice in deeply divided societies and whether Erdogan’s capture of democracy in Turkey offers a blueprint for the political strategies employed by Modi and Netanyahu. In unravelling parallels between the three administrations, our analysis uncovers a common populist playbook of neoliberal economic policies, the leveraging of ethnoreligious tensions as well as attempts to denigrate independent news media, by portraying it as the “enemy of the people”. Although their position on the spectrum between democracy and authoritarianism differs, our analysis reveals striking continuities in the erosion of democracy in Turkey, India and Israel as a result of these policies, thus highlighting the vulnerability of political systems, particularly those of deeply divided societies, to democratic decay.

Keywords:

populism; democratic decay; neoliberalism; religious sectarianism; fourth estate; Turkey; India; Israel; autocratization; deeply divided societies

Introduction

Turkey suffered a spectacular fall from grace in the global democratic imagination. Once celebrated as the Middle East's 'only Muslim Democracy'¹, Turkey morphed into a 'U.S.-style executive presidency – minus the Supreme Court and Congress' (*ECFR*, April 8, 2017) and 'the biggest jailer of journalists in the world' (*Amnesty International*, 2017). Turkey is by no means an isolated case of populist-driven democratic decay. India – the world's largest democracy – saw the rise of a religio-nationalist *Hindutva* ideology, which coincided with overt discrimination of India's Muslim minorities. Israel, despite its occupation since 1967 of territory inhabited by almost 5 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, still prides itself on being 'the only democracy in the Middle East' (*Independent*, March 11, 2019). Yet, escalating threats to the freedom of the judiciary, the press, civil society and minority communities raise questions about the future of Israeli democracy.

Taking the study of populism beyond the familiar geographies of Europe and the Americas, this article explores how populism undermines fragile democracies in difficult neighbourhoods, particularly in Turkey, India and Israel, each marked by profound social, ethnonational and religious divisions. In evaluating whether Recep Tayyip Erdogan's capture of democracy in Turkey offers a blueprint for the populist strategies employed by Narendra Modi and Benjamin Netanyahu, it demonstrates how three distinct democratic cultures –which differ in their size, history, official form of governance and relationship with one another– were all driven further away from the values of liberal democracy. Turkey, India and Israel all exhibit strong political and economic ties with liberal democracies in Europe (Turkey), Japan (India) and the United States (Israel). The democratic decay analysed in this article, thus, challenges Levitsky and Way's emphasis on the linkage to- and leverage of Western liberal democracies as shields against autocracy².

While Turkey³, India⁴ and Israel⁵ have all been studied as instances of populism, we suggest thinking of these countries together, as signifying different stages in the slippery slope between fragile democracy and outright authoritarianism. Turkey appears furthest down this path of democratic decay, Erdogan's removal of 'effective democratic choice' in Turkey serving as a model for the antidemocratic effects of populism in power⁶. We outline the distinct version of right-wing populism exemplified by Erdogan and advanced to different degrees and through different mechanisms by Modi and Netanyahu and suggest the vulnerability of deeply divided democracies to its combination of neoliberal policies, ethno-religious polarisation and attacks on the fourth estate. Situated within a third wave of autocratisation, which is characterised by incumbents who seem to abide by formal democratic rules⁷, all three countries recently experienced a hollowing out of democracy despite continuing to hold electoral contests and, in the case of Turkey, a referendum.

Anti-democratic populism in power is no longer merely a fringe phenomenon. Yet, the countries at the heart of this study differ from familiar instances of populism in Europe and the Americas in several respects, which make them particularly vulnerable to democratic disintegration. India and Israel are classified by Harel-Shalev as deeply divided societies, navigating internal conflict around ethnicity and religion⁸. Like Turkey, both countries face what Harel-Shalev and Chen refer to as a 'normative duality', in which democratic equality and the protection of human rights are challenged by right-wing entities that lay claims to the state in exclusive, ethno-religious terms⁹. While national religious identity and the balance between religion and secularism were central to all three countries' constitutional debates¹⁰, each country saw their founding elites and 'nation builders' displaced by right-wing challengers, more willing to accommodate alternative conceptions of the nation¹¹. Thus, Erdogan's justification of policies with reference to an Islamic mandate, Modi's embrace of *Hindutva* and Netanyahu's emphasis on Israel's Jewishness all point to a conflation of religion

with the national vision.

Like Erdogan's AKP, Modi's BJP and Netanyahu's Likud differ from the personalistic 'electoral vehicles for [...] populist leader[s]', controlled by Alberto Fujimori in Peru or Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand and, instead, represent positions firmly entrenched in their respective societies and histories¹². Nonetheless, each leader influences the political trajectory of their party as well as their nation's transition away from liberal democratic values. What further distinguishes these cases from ethnically divided societies in the Americas is each countries' dangerous, conflict-ridden neighbourhood, which makes threats to the nation an ever-present reality and offers a fruitful underpinning for populist fearmongering. Moreover, all three countries deny the national aspirations of a substantial minority – the Kurds in Turkey, Kashmiris in India and Palestinians in Israel – which further destabilizes the local *status quo*.

As recognised by Mudde, populism is a 'thin', 'parasite' ideology that does not articulate specific policies but offers a particular vision of society's organisation: It "considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people"¹³. The relationship between populism and democracy remains disputed, some scholars viewing populism as rehabilitating and strengthening democracy¹⁴ or as offering the opportunity for democratic betterment. Others note that although populist rhetoric emphasises democratic principles like the popular sovereignty, populist regimes often exhibit undemocratic tendencies¹⁵. A third strand of scholars, like Abts and Rummens, go further to argue that the populist rationale is *inherently* antidemocratic, and flourishes where democracy fails¹⁶. Populism, they explain, is antithetical to liberal democracy, as it is necessarily anti-pluralist. The conflictual relationship between populism and liberal democracy and populism's antidemocratic potential manifest clearly in the cases discussed in

this article.

This article analyses the antidemocratic manifestations of the populist politics employed by Erdogan, Modi and Netanyahu through three lenses: First, the economic aspect, which breaks from early conceptualisations of populism as advocating for economic equality. Second, the religious dimension, through which leaders address issues of belonging within the national community and sow divisions between “us” and “them”, thus bolstering their legitimacy as embodiments of the “people”. Third, attacks on the media, which underpin populist attempts to undermine democratic institutions. The article concludes with a synthesis of these comparative perspectives, which serves to (re)assess the continuities in different antidemocratic populist movements and their significance for the challenges facing democracies across the globe.

1. Economic Dependency and the “People”

Unlike classical “welfare chauvinism”, which tends to single out migrants and the unemployed as undeserving of social services, all three leaders implemented policies that combine commitments to neoliberalism with making disproportionate welfare services available to the “people”, as defined by the populist leader, at the expense of society as a whole.

In what may be referred to as a form of neoliberal clientelism, Erdogan combined reductions in state-administered welfare services with an appeal to economically disadvantaged sections of society, from which the AKP receives the majority of its votes¹⁷. The loyalty of this constituency was secured using social assistance programs that take place largely outside formal state structures and are framed around an emergent conservative, Islamist and nationalist ‘common sense’ within Turkey¹⁸. As will be expanded upon in the next section, this

religiously-legitimated ‘common sense’ underpins a populist definition of the “people” to the exclusion of secular and non-Muslim sections of society. Thus, while the AKP implemented characteristically neoliberal policies (see Table 1), the adverse implications of these reforms for members of its base were softened by the expansion of the welfare net to ‘sections of the working class that had been hitherto excluded’¹⁹ and reforms to the social security system, whereby ‘social assistance programmes mostly supplied by Islamic-oriented charity groups and philanthropic associations [act] as a substitute for welfare state functions’²⁰.

This dual-strategy allowed the AKP to privilege the “people”, defined around conservative values and traditional family structures, over women contemplating abortion, single mothers and other “non-traditional” family units, who face institutional discrimination as well as being labelled unpatriotic²¹. In light of the debilitated welfare system, this alternative services offering, nurtured dependency between the “people” and AKP affiliated organisations and undermined citizen loyalty to democratic institutions, as jobs and benefits are tied to membership of an AKP supporting “people”, while other segments of the public outside these informal networks are economically disenfranchised.

Following the 2016 failed coup attempt, Erdogan used a state of emergency to advance this clientelistic economic strategy, seizing businesses and organisations from what he labelled the “people’s enemies”. His government appropriated over one thousand schools, companies and hospitals owned by members of the Fethullah Gülen-affiliated *Hizmet* Movement, which was framed as the “terrorist organisation” allegedly behind the coup. It also initiated the sale of seized businesses, such as the Koza-Ipek Conglomerate, to AKP loyalists. In so doing, Erdogan’s combination of corporate seizures and clientelism enabled the AKP to conflate the government with the state: In order to receive services, the “people” enter a relationship of

servitude with Erdogan, while their “enemies” are excluded from welfare and benefits. While the AKP’s use of clientelism is not unique in Turkey’s history, its scale reached new levels under Erdogan²². This widespread resort to open and outright clientelism corresponds with the populist assertion that the AKP’s political opponents are external to the “people” and should, thus, be excluded from services.

Erdogan’s neoliberal clientelism exhibits noteworthy parallels to Modi’s neoliberal developmentalism. Modi’s self-presentation as India’s ‘development man’ entailed claiming the title of ‘the most reform-minded party’ for the BJP and leveraged ‘right-wing neoliberal discourse[s]’ to discredit the Congress Party, whose role in liberalising the Indian economy in 1991 made it the “natural party of reforms”²³. Highlighting the corruption of preceding governments, Modi’s promise to deliver “minimum government, maximum governance” followed Erdogan’s neoliberal playbook (see Table 1). While India’s neoliberalization goes back to the 1990s, Modi reframed these policies as serving the “people”, defined in religious and economic terms. This notion of the “people” is ‘market-based, entrepreneurial [and] self-improvement’ centric and substitutes rights-based welfare with insurance schemes and digitally-enabled cash transfers that play into the “development” narrative²⁴. Poor, newly urbanized and middle-class Hindus are framed by the BJP as the good, deserving “people”, threatened by a “secular, ‘anti-national’ liberal ‘elite’, who are deemed corrupt because they monopolise resources and pander to non-Hindu minority groups”²⁵. This corrupt “elite” is discursively associated with meddling by foreign NGOs, allegedly seeking to halt India’s “development” through advocacy for minority rights and environmental causes²⁶.

Modi’s promise of a USD 3.3 trillion infrastructure programme for India has more than a passing resemblance to Erdogan’s showcasing of Turkey’s development through symbolic infrastructure projects, including Istanbul’s new seven terminal mega-airport (*Welt*, April 8,

2019). His definition of the “corrupt elite” matches the caricature of Turkey’s secular socio-political elites. Yet, while the AKP’s connection to the “people” is based on clientelism and charity networks, Modi constructs the “people” by reference to an individualistic “development” vision, paired with technology-enabled plebiscitary approval of his policies, through surveys conducted on the Narendra Modi mobile phone application that claim to evidence public support for the BJP’s policies²⁷. This vision subordinates welfare rights to particularistic top-down development schemes benefiting specified groups within the “people”. Even without seizing opponent-controlled businesses, Modi’s neoliberal developmentalism remains largely consistent with Erdogan’s populist playbook of systematic privileging the “people”, exclusively defined, and nurturing their dependency on the populist leader.

Modi unilaterally invalidated more than eighty *per cent* of India’s paper currency overnight and defamed opponents of this radical assault on the informal sector (accounting for thirty to forty *per cent* of the economy, including large swathes of India’s rural poor) as anti-national enemies of the “people”²⁸. His personalised show of force, designed to augment promises of development by transitioning towards a cashless society, resembles Erdogan’s interference with Turkish Central Bank policy and demand, in 2018, that the “people” turn their gold and foreign currency reserves into Turkish Lira to fight the currency’s plunge against the US Dollar. Hardship caused by each leader’s policies is justified through a religious framing, as a Hindu purification ritual by Modi and as un-Islamic usury by Erdogan. Both discourses articulate notions of citizen sacrifice with promises to advance the long-term interest of the “people”, while simultaneously striking out against the corruption of their enemies. Their use of an exclusionary definition of the “people” serves to justify the erosion of minority rights and “elitist” democratic institutions, while simultaneously garnering the support for neoliberal reforms.

[Insert Table 1 here.]

Netanyahu's selective neoliberalisation shares several of Erdogan and Modi's policy priorities (see Table 1). Although the liberalisation of Israel's economy traces back to the 1980s, its shift from a social-democratic welfare state into a privatised economy was bolstered by Netanyahu's reforms as Minister of Treasury and Prime Minister²⁹. His framing of neoliberal policies as taken on behalf of economically disadvantaged Jewish masses (*i.e.* the "people") and as revenge against "corrupt" public sector, workers' unions and the welfare state mirrors that adopted by his counterparts in Turkey and India. Like Modi's opponents in India's 'Congress-System' (*Economic Times*, September 12, 2019) and Erdogan's White Turk adversaries, Netanyahu's "enemies of the people" were labelled incompetent burdens on Israel's economy, part of the allegedly "anti-patriotic" left, which favours Israel's enemies over the "people". For instance, during the 2015 elections the Likud aired television ads showcasing a fictional support group meeting where unionists, public broadcasters and *Hamas* terrorists comfort one another against Netanyahu. When Netanyahu enters the frame, the slogan "It is Us or Them" – the prime motto of divisive populism – appears, underscoring Netanyahu's willingness to take-on these "enemies of the people" directly (*Ynet News*, May 3, 2015).

While Netanyahu did not soften its neoliberal agenda through charity or social assistance programmes, its political ally Shas, a religious party of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, applies Erdogan-like clientelism within the ultra-orthodox sector³⁰. Netanyahu's Likud conducted occasional give-and-take liaisons with municipal councils based on partisan loyalty. For instance, a 2015 bill guaranteed tax benefits to sixty settlements in the West Bank and four Likud strongholds. Miki Zohar, the Likud MP behind the bill, explained: 'The idea is gratitude.

Those cities voted Likud and we should remember that' (*Calcalist*, November 24, 2015). Such clientelist relationships between the Likud and its voters challenge the impartiality aspiration of ordinary state mechanisms, thus fostering the "people's" reliance on continued privileges dispensed by the populist leader.

Yet, the foremost instance of Netanyahu's version of clientelism manifests in Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank. Although settlers amount to only 4.6 *percent* of Israelis, their parliamentary representation approaches twice their proportion of the population. As the Likud and their allies view settlers as an important electoral constituency – and due to the inability of the settlement project at the heart of the occupied territories to survive on its own – a welfare state was established *de facto* in the West Bank, spanning housing subsidies, integration into public education and support for settlers' organisations with close ties to the Likud and Yamina parties³¹. Thus, by shielding settlers from many of the adverse consequences of the government's neoliberalisation, including severe housing shortages and overburdened schools within the acknowledged borders of Israel, Netanyahu nurtured a relationship of mutual dependency, in which loyalty to non-partisan state institutions is circumvented in favour of allegiance to Netanyahu, Likud and their allies.

As Table 1 suggests, Erdogan, Modi and Netanyahu's populist economic policies share a neoliberal core. Despite the geographical and historical contingencies of each case, Erdogan's neoliberal clientelism can, with some variations in the tools employed, be viewed as a template for both Modi's neoliberal developmentalism and Netanyahu's selective neoliberalism, particularly in its aggravated post-2009 form. Importantly, each leader's nurturing of relations of economic dependency with an exclusively defined conception of the "people" replaces rights-based welfare services and ostensibly impartial state institutions with a more immediate and openly partisan relationship with the populist leader. Both the increased economic

disenfranchisement of the “people’s enemies” and the conflation of the government with the state undermine liberal democratic aspirations and, thus, manifest democratic decay across all three cases.

2. Weaponizing the (ethno)religious Divide

Pre-existing ethnic, nationalist and religious tensions in all three deeply divided societies were ripe for populist exploitation by Erdogan, Modi and Netanyahu. Despite differences in each countries’ social composition and historical experience, this section uncovers consistencies in how these leaders exploited the religious divide to an antidemocratic effect.

From his days as mayor of Istanbul, Erdogan, the self-proclaimed ‘Imam of the city’, made overtly religious signalling a central element of his politics (see Table 2). In response to an avowedly secularist political establishment, committed to upholding Mustafa Kemal’s prohibition on virtually all public manifestations of religion, the AKP weakened the checks on its policy agenda by contrasting the “people” with secularist elites. Erdogan’s religiously-legitimated “anti-elitism” leverages deep, pre-existing social divisions between secular urban elites and conservative middle- and lower-classes, who self-describe as religious and endorse public displays of religion. This cleavage translated into confrontations between the electorally dominant AKP and secularist-dominated state institutions. For instance, the AKP’s appointment of President Gül, whose wife publicly wears *hijab*, triggered a constitutional crisis and an investigation of the AKP for purportedly violating the principle of laicism³². In response, Erdogan portrayed political and institutional opponents as corrupted by military interference against the “people”, a framing strengthened by Turkey’s history of military coups, which repeatedly privileged elite interests over electoral majorities, and served to deepen the

cleavage between Erdogan's conception of the devout, overtly religious "people" and their secular, "deep-state enemies".

Since 2011, Erdogan increasingly used the Directorate of Religious Affairs, *Diyanet*, to entrench his own political narratives in mosques, religious and educational institutions³³. Established in the early days of the modern Republic, *Diyanet* always served as an apparatus of the state, which (re)defined the practices and social function of Islam in line with its agenda. Instrumentalising its pre-existing politization, Erdogan would transform *Diyanet* into a facilitator of the AKP's populist politics, which cast aside remnants of institutional independence and mobilised religious segments of society in support of Erdogan and to suppress dissent using a religious mandate³⁴. The capture of this ostensibly non-partisan state body gave an institutional basis to the distinctions drawn by Erdogan between the religious "people" and their secular "enemies" and amplified these by conflating overt religiosity with a sense of national duty.

This conflation of religiosity and membership of the national political community would manifest in 2013 Gezi Park protests. Desperate to secure the moral high-ground over critics of the party's privatisation of public land, Erdogan doubled-down on the dichotomy between his constituency and their opponents. Religious masses were, once again, identified as the "real people", Erdogan emerging as their sole "saviour" against Western (non-Islamic) plotters blamed for the protest. This religious framing became the prevalent means to paint extra-parliamentary opposition and non-loyalist civil society initiatives as nefarious and alien to Turkish society, a framing captured in Erdogan's promise that the "the people" could be unleashed against the protesters. Erdogan invoked a dichotomy between White Turks, *i.e.* privileged, corrupt elites allegedly under the influence of foreign powers, and Black Turks, *i.e.*

religiously devout, oppressed, downtrodden masses, pronouncing himself to be one of the latter. While constructing a bond of fraternity and embodiment between Erdogan and the “people”, this dichotomy also helped undermine White Turks’ membership of the political community, thereby legitimating the subsequent crackdown on the protesters.

In the aftermath of the July 2016 failed coup attempt, religious polarisation would reach a new level, in which the “people’s enemies” would extend beyond secularists to include Muslims supportive of- or affiliated with Fethullah Gülen. As ten-thousands of, so called, “Gülenists” were dismissed from their jobs, arrested and/or detained as alleged ‘terrorists’ and members of a criminal ‘cult’ (*New Yorker*, 10 October 2016), those killed resisting the coup-attempt were labelled “martyrs” in a simultaneously patriotic and religious cause. Comparing his survival of the coup attempt to Prophet Muhammed’s experience at Hira Cave (*Birgun Daily*, April 12, 2017), where a miracle is said to have protected the Prophet from intruders, Erdogan’s self-characterisation as the leader of the faithful likened opponents’ actions to sacrilege. By equating Islamic faith with loyalty to the AKP, Erdogan delegitimised large swathes of Turkish society, who are either secular, non-Muslim or critical of Erdogan.

Modi’s echoes Erdogan in making ethnoreligious discourse central to his conception of the “people” (see Table 2). While Erdogan promises to raise “devout generations” and links the AKP’s electoral successes with victories for the Islamic world, Modi’s BJP embodies the political project of *Hindutva*, which considers Hindu religion and culture superior to that of India’s religious minorities, a belief manifesting in overt animosity towards Muslims³⁵. *Hindutva* was used by Modi to justify a new citizenship law, which reduced the naturalisation prospects of Muslim immigrants and underpinned attacks by BJP-affiliated vigilante groups on Islamic places of worship. Equating Hindu identity with national identity led to the

‘delegitimising of inter-faith marriages, privileging of Hindu symbols’ as well as campaigns to “convert Muslim and Christian families ‘back’ to Hinduism”³⁶.

In light of deep divisions between Muslims and Hindus after the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, Modi’s demands that opposition politicians “stop writing ‘love letters to Pakistan’”³⁷ delegitimise the Congress Party’s advocacy for ethnic and religious minorities, thereby nurturing a majoritarian conception of the “people”. The BJP’s religious majoritarianism goes beyond funding cuts for minority development programs³⁸ to include Modi’s Minister of Minority Affairs, Najma Heptullah’s refusal to recognise Indian Muslims as a national minority group. By invoking the post-9/11 articulation of terrorism and Islam and tacitly endorsing Hindu-nationalist moral panics around “Love Jihad”, which propagates a resonant imagination of ‘sexually rapacious Muslim youth converting Hindu women to Islam through false declarations of love’³⁹, the BJP securitises Indian Muslims and Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. More recently BJP politicians have helped disseminate conspiracy theories that frame COVID-19 as a “Muslim virus”, spread as part of a ‘Corona Jihad’ (*Time*, April 3, 2020). These discursive practices of otherization and securitization coincide with the BJP’s attempts to erode Muslims’ collective rights in Jammu and Kashmir⁴⁰ and the detention of thousands of Muslim Kashmiris around the revocation of the region’s special status underscore Modi’s inclusion of vulnerable religious minorities in the definition of the “people’s enemies”.

Modi’s populist infusion of patriotism and nationalism with religion offers supporters both a national meta-morality and an exclusionary source of identity for the “people”, from which political opponents are distinguished either because they are- or allegedly support Muslims. Beyond the illiberalism associated with the erosion of minority rights, the antidemocratic

implications of *Hindutva* are brought out by the Indian state of Assam's publication of a National Register of Citizens in August 2019, which placed the citizenship of two million, disproportionately Muslim residents of the state in jeopardy, thereby threatening to revoke their political rights as members of the national community (+972 *Magazine*, January 8, 2020). The resultant redefinition and amplification of nationalism around an exclusive ethno-religious identity marks a departure from prior, more pluralistic conceptions of the Indian state and threatens the accommodation between casts, ethnicities and religious groups at the heart of India's democratic constitutional arrangement.

Yet, the emphasis on religious homogeneity within *Hindutva* contrasts with the AKP's promise to make policies for "devout" Turks. While Turkey underwent violent processes of ethnic and religious homogenisation with respect to its Armenian, Kurdish and Jewish populations (amongst others) in the 19th and 20th centuries, the ongoing conflict between Kurds and the state is rarely framed in religious terms: For Erdogan, religious rhetoric and its conflation with patriotism serves primarily as a source of legitimation through the definition of an AKP-supporting "people"; its internal "enemy" is defined primarily in socio-political terms.

While Turkey and India share an avowedly secular constitutional self-definition, Israel was conceived *ab initio* as a both "democratic and Jewish state". As the term "Jewish" denotes religion, ethnicity and nationality, untying religious discourse from the ongoing national conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is virtually impossible. Nonetheless, Netanyahu's Likud instrumentalises the ambiguity around the distinction between religious and national identity to promote a form of religio-national populism with striking parallels to Modi's Hindu nationalism (see Table 2).

Netanyahu blurs religion and nationalism to define the Jewish claim to Israel in Biblical terms, deny Palestinians' national identity and frame a civilizational struggle between the Judeo-Christian world and "murderous Islamism"⁴¹. Yet, unlike Erdogan's emphasis on the devoutness of the "people" (*vis-à-vis* more secular elites), Netanyahu's ethnoreligious discourses nurture a dichotomy between an exclusively defined Jewish "people" (which increasingly disentitles both Reform and Conservative Jews, see *Haaretz*, November 23, 2017) and their "enemies", *i.e.* Muslim Israeli Arabs and their Jewish yet insufficiently nationalist allies on the Israeli left. Like the BJP's condemnation of opponents for alleged affinity with Pakistan, the Likud claims that "the left 'loves' Arabs"⁴², thereby questioning their Jewishness. Such attempts to monopolise Jewishness and Israeli-ness to the detriment of centrist and left-wing Jews creates new moralised ruptures within Israeli society. Political opponents, including human rights NGOs and critical news outlets, are delegitimised as "auto-Antisemites" (*Makor Rishon*, September 11, 2017), thereby reframing party-politics in ethnoreligious terms.

Simultaneously, the bleeding conflict between Israel and the Palestinians enables Netanyahu to label Arab Israelis "collaborators" of the Palestinians and, thus, a threat to the ontological security of the "people". This framing of Israeli Arabs as a "Trojan horse" with double loyalties manifested in Netanyahu's co-option of right-wing groups around highly symbolic and polarising slogans such as 'Netanyahu is good for the Jews'⁴³ and persistent warnings that a government supported by Israeli-Arab parties would destabilise Israel's security. While the Likud's securitization of Arabs resembles the BJP's Hindu-national fear-mongering about Muslims, Netanyahu's ethnoreligious sectarianism would be elevated into Israel's July 2018 enactment of the semi-constitutional, so called, Nation State Law⁴⁴, which formally elevates Jewish collective rights over individual political rights conferred as a matter of citizenship,

thereby departing from Israel's liberal-democratic aspirations and shifting towards a majoritarian conception of democracy.

By undermining the status of Arabic, previously considered one of Israel's official languages, forcing judges to consider Israel's "Jewish character" when making decisions and demarking "Jewish settlement" a national virtue, the Nation State Law further 'legitimise[d] the use of Jewishness as a criterion to discriminate against the Arabs and prefer Jews in labour, housing, education and culture'⁴⁵, thereby demarking religious minorities in Israel as *de facto* second-class citizens. By overtly refusing to assert the democratic equality of all citizens, the Likud and its allies framed the law as pushing-back against the alleged 'liberal supremacy' of judicially affirmed individual rights that are defended by an 'elitist liberal minority' against the "people" (*SWP Comment*, October, 2018). As a critical juncture in series of policies, which span both the 'national religionization' of education⁴⁶ and ongoing struggles over the expropriation of Arab-owned land⁴⁷, the Nation State Law contributes to framing Israeli-Arabs as simultaneously external and threatening to national, patriotic and religious communities of solidarity.

[Insert Table 2 here.]

Table 2 suggests that, despite each countries' unique historical experience and constitutional arrangement, some important consistencies emerge in each leaders' use of ethnoreligious populism. While Erdogan's definition of a devout Muslim "people" incorporates strands of Turkic nationalism, its "enemies" are defined primarily in socio-political terms. In contrast, both Modi and Netanyahu conflate political elites and religious minorities in the definition of

the “people’s enemies”. Thus, while Erdogan’s political Islam may not serve as a straightforward blueprint for *Hindutva* or Netanyahu’s conception of Jewishness, the antidemocratic effect of each leaders’ ethnoreligious discourse is undeniable: Through an exclusive definition of the political community large sections of the citizen population face political disenfranchisement and an erosion of individual rights. Conscious departures from the liberal aspirations of the rule of law (in Turkey), the liberal and pluralistic constitution (in India) and the judicial protection of individual citizen rights (in Israel) reveal democratic decay across all three cases.

3. The Fourth Estate undermined

Liberal democracies rely on independent news media to inform citizens and enable them to hold representatives to account. As such, the challenge posed by populists in Turkey, India and Israel to the fourth estate reveals both the direct relationship cultivated by each leader with the “people” and their departure from liberal democratic aspirations.

Erdogan’s relationship with Turkey’s mass media has long been conflictual. During the, so called, Ergenekon Trials (2008-2011), which sought to uncover the workings of ‘an ultranationalist organization with ties to the military [...] plotting the overthrow the government’⁴⁸, the AKP arrested critical journalists for allegedly spreading terrorist propaganda and painted media moguls as complicit in the “deep-state’s” schemes to undermine the “people’s will”. By procuring the investigation and firing of AKP-critical editors and journalists at major newspapers and barring their owners from state tenders, the AKP highlighted its intolerance for public scrutiny and framing of independent media as the “people’s enemies”. Repression of independent journalism coincided with efforts to nurture loyal pro-government media, both by developing narrative control over the public broadcaster

TRT and the state-run Anadolu news agency and encouraging AKP loyalists to fund media outlets, publishing houses and creative agencies staffed with government supporters⁴⁹. Residual opposition outlets, in turn, were emasculated by severe funding disparities and a culture of self-censorship among journalists, accentuated by frequent media blackouts⁵⁰. Together, the capture of private and public media manifest Erdogan's characteristically authoritarian endeavour to nurture an unmediated and unscrutinised relationship with the "people".

By 2015, Turkey's media landscape exhibited strong bias towards the AKP, the government having seized control of media outlets owned by the Ipek Group, KanalTürk television and the Bugün and Millet newspapers⁵¹. Yet, during the state of emergency declared after the 2016 failed coup attempt, the fourth estate was comprehensively emasculated: Overt censorship, the arrest of hundreds of journalists and closure of media outlets sparked a mass exodus of journalists out of the country, thereby playing inevitably playing into Erdogan's narrative that they were "external" to the national political community. Through the hyper-inflationary use of the "terrorist" label, independent voices became illegitimate plotters against the "people", marking the conflation of the AKP with both its subjects and the state. This latest stage of Erdogan's antidemocratic populist media-capture strategy undermines the principle of accountability of the ruler to the ruled, as accurate, verifiable information about the government is increasingly unavailable.

In addition to removing liberal-democratic constraints on its government, the AKP used entertainment television to digest present-day political developments and construct a social imaginary in which Erdogan embodies the nation's historical struggles for greatness and the resurrection of a "glorious past" for the "people" against the betrayals of "enemies within". In

the lead-up to the 2017 referendum, TRT aired the television series “Payitaht Abdülhamid”, a historical drama following the life of Sultan Abdülhamid II, to whom Erdogan is often compared⁵². Abdülhamid is portrayed as the ‘saviour of the Ottoman Empire’s integrity and the nation’s honour’ and serves as a mythical symbol for the struggle against the enemies of Islam, both themes corresponding directly to President Erdogan’s political narrative of fighting conspiratorial enemies of the state⁵³. Eventually, Abdülhamid is ousted from power by a military coup, a framing instrumentalised to justify for the final stage of Erdogan’s assault on opposition media.

Over a decade after the AKP’s first national election victory in 2002, Modi’s ascendancy to national politics took place in a very different, technology-enabled media environment. As such, Modi’s use of digital media contrasts with Erdogan’s treatment of social media as ‘an inherent threat to his societal vision and to himself’, which entailed attempts to remove internet and cellular access for Gezi protesters in 2013, cut access to Twitter and YouTube after corruption allegations surfaced against him in 2014⁵⁴ and block Wikipedia following suggestions of voter fraud in Turkey’s 2017 referendum. Rather, Modi’s 2014 election campaign suggests a level of digital competence unprecedented in Indian politics, utilising websites, Facebook pages, YouTube channels, profiles on Google+, LinkedIn and Instagram and a mobile phone app⁵⁵. By 2017, Modi’s became the ‘world’s most followed leader on social media’⁵⁶, thereby highlighting his ability to circumvent traditional media gatekeepers when engaging the “people”.

Moreover, the simultaneous “presence” of Modi at multiple campaign events using 3D-holograms and the widespread dissemination of Modi-selfies, Modi-masks and Modi-paraphernalia by his followers allowed Modi to construct a mythical claim to personate the

“people”. While the focus on Modi’s image seems more blatant than Erdogan’s use of television dramas (in addition to Erdogan’s image being near omnipresent in Turkish life), their seemingly unmediated relationship with the “people” allows both leaders to offer a vision of politics fundamentally at odds with the more distant and formalistic representation of political interests in liberal-democratic politics.

Despite exhibiting more digital competence than his Turkish counterpart, Modi followed Erdogan in discrediting independent media, as *fora* for democratic mediation and constraints on political power. Following criticism against Modi for ‘inaction, complicity, and even giving direction to’ large-scale violence and the killing of more than 2000 Muslims in Gujarat in 2002⁵⁷, Modi attacked elite media as corrupt ‘paid news’. Resorting to social media and sympathetic Hindi-language television, the BJP framed Modi as the ‘victim’ of a ‘news media conspiracy’⁵⁸ and undermined journalistic scrutiny of Modi by asserting that the “people” would recognise their own truths⁵⁹. Since 2016, Modi followed Erdogan in resorting to prolonged blackouts of NDTV, a news channel that frequently criticised his administration⁶⁰, restrictive media licensing, smearing and imprisonment of journalists to undermine journalism’s accountability function, including in its coverage of India’s COVID-19 response (*New York Times*, April 2, 2020).

Modi’s adoption of many of Erdogan’s repressive measures helped relegate India to rank 140 of 180 countries in the Reporters without Borders World Press Freedom Index (January, 2020), and suggests an outright rejection of the liberal-democratic aspiration of government accountability to citizens via independent media scrutiny. Moreover, the democratic decay evidenced in Modi’s attack on the fourth estate and its substitution with more immediate communication with the “people” coincides with a centralisation of government in India and a bypassing of representative institutions through decision-making by ordinance, which requires

neither formal debates nor parliamentary votes⁶¹.

Unlike Modi, Netanyahu's attack on independent and critical journalists- despite using far softer means- predates Erdogan's populist playbook. Since his election in 1996, Netanyahu denigrated Israel's mainstream media, portraying journalists as members of a subversive elite, antagonistic to the "people". As assaults on the fourth estate became increasingly dominant within his populist strategy, Netanyahu bypassed independent journalism using social media and marginal loyal media outlets. In Facebook posts independent journalists are framed as leaning against him, spreading propaganda and constituting a 'Bolshevik witch-hunt' to undermine his government and, thus, 'the will of the people'. In order to bolster journalists' image as "enemies of the people", Netanyahu blamed reporters and news outlets of "employing fans of terrorists" and "persecuting Israeli soldiers". Conflating public accountability and democratic authorisation, Netanyahu's 2019 election campaign targeted high-profile journalists, asking the public to vote against them. Netanyahu's true rival and, thus, the "people's" rival was the press.

Beyond political campaigning and inciteful rhetoric, Netanyahu like Erdogan and Modi attempted to use executive power, lawsuits and media regulation to intimidate journalists, exert narrative-control over state-owned media and weaken institutional news outlets⁶². Like Erdogan, he simultaneously engaged wealthy supporters to nurture loyal media outlets that allow him to engage the "people" in a direct, largely unscrutinised manner⁶³. Thus, in 2007, Netanyahu's donor and ally Sheldon Adelson established Israel's only free daily newspaper "Israel Today", nicknamed "Bibiton" (Netanyahu's newspaper) for its unabashed support of Netanyahu. Although parts of the Israeli media maintain their adversary nature, the combination of Netanyahu's public smearing, restrictive measures and his followers' assaults on journalists encouraged over-cautiousness and self-censorship among Israeli journalists⁶⁴.

The relative independence of the judicial and media systems, nevertheless, makes arrests of journalists and forced television blackouts unlikely.

Despite tapping into Erdogan's populist playbook, Netanyahu's attempts to secure favourable media coverage, including by offering the publisher of Israel's most influential newspaper and the owner of a popular news website preferential regulatory treatment for favourable coverage, entangled Netanyahu in two corruption scandals. His trial, due to begin in 2020, and the tangible threat it poses to his premiership, differ with Erdogan's ability to dismiss the corruption allegations against himself as a 'judicial coup' and to dismiss the prosecutors and judges involved (*Deutsche Welle*, December 30, 2014). However, as Netanyahu's supporters attack law enforcement authorities and target Israel's Supreme Court as another "enemy of the people", the current checks on his premiership may dwindle.

In short, Erdogan, Modi and Netanyahu share a highly antagonistic relationship with independent and critical news media, which they view as restricting their unmediated and unscrutinised relationship with the "people". Modi and Netanyahu appear to have adopted features of Erdogan's populist playbook, updating it for the digital age. Thus, Modi could be seen as combining Erdogan's authoritarian measures with Netanyahu's strategic use of social media. Israel's fourth estate, however, has proven more resilient than either Turkey or India's and Netanyahu's indictments for corruption and breach of trust reveal the limits of this strategy in the face of stronger nonpartisan institutions. The following years will test whether Netanyahu's Erdogan-like aspirations to subjugate the press- or Israel's vibrant (if weakened)

independent media and democratic institutions will prevail.

Discussion

This article argues that, despite the historical and socio-political particularities of Turkey, India and Israel, the populist playbook employed by each country's leader is comparable, with Erdogan offering a broad blueprint for the measures employed by Modi and Netanyahu. While these commonalities can be conceived as part of a global populist wave, the strategies employed in those three countries remain distinct from the populisms manifesting in Europe and the Americas, not least because all three leaders operate in deeply divided societies, situated in difficult geopolitical neighbourhoods. Military confrontations with neighbours, such as Erdogan's ongoing engagement in Syria, Modi's strategic strikes on Pakistan in April 2019 and Israel's military confrontations with Palestinians in Gaza serve to rally nationalist sentiment in ways that make membership of- and exclusion from the "people" more salient.

The common populist formula uncovered in this article is neither statist nor unabashedly free-market. Though neoliberal clientelism, neoliberal developmentalism and selective neoliberalisation differ in the types of intervention each leader is willing to make in the national economy, each populist economic policy undermined state institutions, preferring to bolster growth through the private sector, yet financially compensating a client-like constituency. Relying on neoliberal ideology, each leader replaced rights-based social and welfare services available to all citizens with benefits that specifically target the "people", thus, undermining the liberal citizen-state relationship. Ethnoreligious and nationalistic markers of the "people", which underpin some of the deep divisions characterising all three countries, emerge as preconditions for access, thereby nurturing unmediated relationships between the leader and the "people" outside of formal state structures. The resulting relationships of dependency allow

the populist leader to conflate the government with the state.

Unlike President Trump in the US and populist parties across Central and Eastern Europe, Erdogan, Modi and Netanyahu are not primarily resisting social change, such as that attributed to large-scale irregular migration. Although Irregular migration has recently become an important political issue in all three countries, the antidemocratic populist developments analysed in this article precede the emergence of this phenomenon on the national stage and shape how irregular migration is perceived in each country- *i.e.* in sectarian, ethnoreligious terms. Rather, the antidemocratic populist playbook constitutes each leader's attempt to homogenize an intrinsically heterogeneous society, through the mobilization of one authentic, ethno religiously conceived "people". By infusing definitions of the "people" with pre-existing sectarian conflicts that underpin each deeply divided society, Erdogan, Modi and Netanyahu undercut minority rights and liberal democratic values. They also jeopardize relatively stable, if reluctant, compromises between the ethnic and religious groups in each state by seeking to exclude their political opponents from the national community of solidarity.

Each leader's adversarial relationship with the fourth estate corresponds with wider trends in 20th and 21st century populism, which span Donald Trump's allegation of 'fake-news' and the Alternative for Germany's invocation of the *Lügenpresse* (lying-news-media). Similarly, the seemingly unmediated relationship each leader seeks to cultivate with the "people" corresponds with Mueller's discussion of populist constitutions⁶⁵. The cultivation by Erdogan and Netanyahu of their own loyalist media as well as Modi's and Netanyahu's use of state resources to support their favourite news outlets, support Mueller's thesis that populists are not opposed to institutions *per se*, provided that the institutions in question are their own. Yet this article's comparative perspective also highlights the significance of symbols and mythical

narratives for a leader's claim to individually personate the nation and its historical struggles, on behalf of the "people" and against its "enemies". These mythical narratives offer an ideological addition to Morgenbesser's menu of autocratic innovation⁶⁶. In turn, the prosecutorial pairing-back of Netanyahu's indictment following attempts to "acquire" favourable news coverage underscores the significance of nonpartisan institutions in counteracting attacks on the fourth estate in particular, and democratic backsliding in general⁶⁷.

While Erdogan has gradually stripped Turkey of all effective democratic choice, democracy in India remains free- though not fair- despite the severe erosion of minority rights. In Israel, fiercely contested elections and Netanyahu's struggles with the Supreme Court and the press suggest that he has not yet monopolised the empty locus of power at the heart of Israeli democracy. While close ties to the United States may have helped Israel avert more severe forms of democratic decay, the linkage to Europe and Japan did not prevent democratic backsliding in either Turkey or India, thus revealing limitations in explanatory power of Levitsky and Way's variables beyond the post-Cold War moment. It appears that the looming risk for all three countries is not the descent to absolute dictatorship, but rather a rescission to formal democracy, where elections take place but clientelism, incitement against minorities and assaults on democratic institutions skew the political playing field so as to deprive voters of any meaningful choice between leaders and their visions.

Conclusion

Our article presents three major features of Erdogan's populist playbook- neoliberal economic strategy, religious polarization and attacks on independent media- which are reiterated, to different degrees and with certain nuances, by both Modi and Netanyahu. These similarities

have not escaped local critics: Netanyahu's war on democratic institutions and his attempts to pass personal laws, for instance, have led his political opponents to repeatedly warn of his "Erdoganisation" (Israel National News, June 3, 2019), while the revocation of the special status of the region of Jammu and Kashmir, together with the close ties between Modi and Netanyahu, prompted commentators to decry the 'Israelification' of India (Middle East Monitor, December 24, 2019). Such claims are strongly supported by our analysis.

It may be too soon to construct a new archetype of populism around Turkey, India and Israel. Nonetheless, the analysis presented here suggests that further research in this direction may be fruitful, particularly with respect to young democracies with deeply divided societies. As this article suggests, these contexts enabled each populist leader to drag an already flawed democracy further towards authoritarianism. Rather than seeking to construct new, non-liberal variants of democracy, this form of populism is intolerant of both social heterogeneity and external scrutiny and, if unconstrained, threatens to undermine democratic contestation.

The consistencies identified in this article should not be taken as a dismissal of Turkey, India and Israel's different positions on the spectrum between democracy and authoritarianism. Rather, while Israel might serve as an example of how democratic institutions cope with antidemocratic populism, Erdogan's success in gradually transforming Turkey from semi-democracy to illiberal authoritarian regime, should alarm those who face populist leaders in power, especially in divided societies, with unstable democratic cultures or in difficult neighbourhoods. This concern is particularly urgent since 'historically, very few autocratisation episodes starting in democracies have been stopped short of turning countries into autocracies'⁶⁸.

Notes

- 1 Lewis, “Why Turkey is the only Muslim Democracy”.
- 2 Levitsky and Way, “International Linkage and Democratization”.
- 3 Rogenhofer, “Antidemocratic Populism in Turkey”.
- 4 Chacko, “The Right Turn in India”.
- 5 Filc, *The Political Right in Israel*.
- 6 Rogenhofer, “Antidemocratic Populism in Turkey”.
- 7 Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here”.
- 8 Harel-Shalev, *Sustaining Democracy in Deeply Divided Societies*.
- 9 Harel-Shalev and Chen, “Democracy and Ultra-Nationalism”.
- 10 Lerner, “Permissive Constitutions, Democracy, and Religious Freedom”, 14.
- 11 Dromi and Türkmen, “What Does Trauma Have to Do with Politics?”.
- 12 McDonnell and Cabrera, “The Right-Wing Populism of India’s BJP”, 485.
- 13 Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist”, 562.
- 14 Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*; Laclau, *On Populist Reason*.
- 15 Arditì, “Populism, or, Politics at the Edges of Democracy”.
- 16 Abts and Rummens, “Populism versus Democracy”.
- 17 Bozkurt, “Neoliberalism with a Human Face”.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Akcay, “Neoliberal Populism in Turkey and Its Crisis”, 10.
- 20 Kaya, “Islamisation of Turkey under the AKP Rule”, 61.
- 21 Yilmaz, “Strengthening the Family Policies in Turkey”.
- 22 Özdemir, “Turkey’s Justice and Development Party”, 25.
- 23 Kaur, “Good Times, Brought to You by Brand Modi”, 325.
- 24 Chacko, “The Right Turn in India”, 554.

25 Ibid., 543.

26 McDonnell and Cabrera, “The Right-Wing Populism of India’s BJP”.

27 Chacko, “The Right Turn in India”, 559.

28 Deshpande, “India’s Demonetisation”, 222.

29 Filc, *The Political Right in Israel*, 56, 62-70.

30 Charbit, “Shas between Identity Construction and Clientelist Dynamics”.

31 Gutwien, “The Settlements and the Relationship between Privatization and the Occupation”.

32 Somer, “Moderation of Religious and Secular Politics”, 259.

33 Öztürk, “Turkey’s Diyanet under AKP Rule”.

34 Ibid.

35 Palshikar, “The BJP and Hindu Nationalism”, 720.

36 Ibid., 728-729.

37 Sinha, “Fragile Hegemony”, 4164.

38 Singh, “Hindu Nationalism in Power”.

39 Ibid., 312.

40 Ibid., 318.

41 Talshir, “Populist Rightwing Ideological Exposition”.

42 Ibid., 338.

43 Arian and Shamir, *The Elections in Israel, 1996*, 71-72.

44 Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People.

45 Gutwein, “The Settlements and the Relationship between Privatization and the Occupation”, 30.

46 Maniv and Benizma, “National-Religionization in Policies of Israel's Ministry of Education”.

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- 47 Kretzmer, *The Legal Status Of The Arabs In Israel*.
- 48 McLaren and Cop, “The Failure of Democracy in Turkey”, 487.
- 49 Esen and Gumuscu, “Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey”, 1588.
- 50 Ibid., 1591.
- 51 Yilmaz, “Europeanisation or De-Europeanisation?”, 151.
- 52 Çevik, “Turkish Historical Television Series”.
- 53 Ibid., 236.
- 54 Ohm, “Organizing Popular Discourse with and against the Media”, 375.
- 55 Pal, “Banalities Turned Viral”, 379.
- 56 Sinha, “Fragile Hegemony”, 4158.
- 57 Ibid., 4161.
- 58 Chakravartty and Roy, “Mediated Populism and the 2014 Indian Elections”, 316-317.
- 59 Ohm, “Organizing Popular Discourse with and against the Media”, 371.
- 60 Govil and Baishya. “The Bully in the Pulpit”, 80.
- 61 Chacko, “The Right Turn in India”, 558-559.
- 62 Peri, *Telepopulism: media and politics in Israel*, 234-243.
- 63 Pfeffer, *The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu*, 302-303.
- 64 Panievsky, “The Double-Punch Censorship”.
- 65 Mueller, *What is Populism?*, 61-62.
- 66 Morgenbesser, “The menu of autocratic innovation”.
- 67 Daly, “Democratic Decay”.
- 68 Lührmann and Lindberg. “A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here”, 1108.

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