Social, Humanitarian & Cultural Issues (SOCHUM)
Topic 1: The rise of populism and its impact on democracy

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1. Definition of key terms

Political Representation: The democratic principle that citizens elect representatives to create laws and make political decisions on their behalf. As populations grow, ensuring fair and balanced representation becomes increasingly complex.

Social Inequality: The unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and rights within a society. Population growth can exacerbate these inequalities, heightening tensions that undermine democratic stability.

Urbanization: The process of population movement and concentration in urban areas, often driven by population growth. Urbanization presents challenges for local governance, including the equitable provision of public services and infrastructure.

Civic Participation: The active engagement of citizens in democratic processes such as voting, public debate, and activism. A larger and more diverse population necessitates inclusive mechanisms to ensure equitable and effective participation.

2. Introduction

Populism refers to a political movement or program that claims to represent the interests of common people against elites. It often combines elements from both the political left and right. In modern contexts, populism is frequently associated with authoritarian tendencies, posing a potential threat to democracy. This form of populism centres around an individual leader who consolidates power while claiming to embody the will of the people.

Authoritarian populist regimes often treat elections as a mere affirmation of their leader's authority, promote extreme nationalism and racism, and thrive on conspiracy theories. These governments have been identified by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights as serious challenges to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

Populist leaders frequently extend their power by undermining democratic institutions, eroding the separation of powers, suppressing political opposition, and controlling the media to stifle freedom of speech. Many contemporary political movements and governments have been characterized as populist, including Donald Trump's presidency in the United States.

3. Background information

The UN has identified three primary drivers of populism:

1. **Economic Insecurity**
   Economic instability and discontent among large segments of the population create fertile ground for populist movements. These movements often thrive by offering simplistic solutions to complex economic problems, portraying themselves as defenders of "the people" against an elite establishment.
   When individuals perceive a decline in their standard of living or fear economic deterioration, they are more likely to support populist leaders promising to restore their prosperity. A lack of inclusive economic growth exacerbates these feelings, as economic benefits concentrate among a small elite while many feel left behind.
   When lower-income groups experience economic hardship, trust in traditional political and economic institutions erodes. Politicians and experts are often seen as disconnected from the struggles of ordinary people, fuelling support for populist movements that promise change.

2. **Political Disenchantment**
   Disenchantment arises from the belief that political elites are corrupt or out of touch with citizens' concerns. When traditional political parties fail to address key grievances, populist leaders step in with simple, emotionally resonant messages.
   Initially, populism may appear to revitalize democratic engagement by creating a narrative of "us" (ordinary citizens) versus "them" (elites). However, its long-term effects often undermine governance by fostering authoritarian tendencies and eroding democratic norms.

3. **Cultural Alienation**
   Cultural alienation occurs when individuals feel their cultural identity is marginalized or overshadowed by external influences such as immigration or globalization. Populist leaders exploit these fears, often using anti-immigration rhetoric and framing immigrants as cultural threats.
   Populist movements claim to defend "traditional values," but their emphasis on cultural homogeneity often suppresses minority rights, religious freedom, and diverse cultural expressions. This rejection of pluralism deepens social divisions, undermining the coexistence of diverse identities essential to a healthy democracy.

4. Major countries involved

Populism has surged globally, evolving from a phenomenon initially associated with Latin America in the 1990s and post-communist democracies in the 2000s into a defining force in many established democracies. Today, populist parties and leaders exert significant influence in countries such as the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Poland, Hungary, Brazil, the Philippines, France, Turkey, and the United States—where the election of Donald Trump marked a striking example. While populism claims to empower "the people" against "the elite," it poses a serious challenge to liberal democracy by undermining institutions, eroding checks and balances, and exploiting societal divides.

The rise of populism is driven by common factors, including economic inequality, cultural polarization, and growing distrust in traditional institutions. These conditions fuel public discontent, which populist leaders exploit through rhetoric centred on corruption scandals, anti-immigration policies, and nationalist agendas. However, the specific manifestations of populism vary across regions:

1. **Latin America**: Populism is deeply tied to widespread corruption and public outrage at elite exploitation. Leaders often present themselves as saviours who will dismantle corrupt systems and redistribute wealth, leveraging economic inequality to galvanize support.

2. **Western Europe**: Immigration policies lie at the heart of populism's appeal in this region. Anti-immigration sentiment, often combined with nationalist rhetoric, capitalizes on fears of cultural change and the perceived failure of governments to protect national identity and security.

3. **Eastern Europe**: In post-Soviet democracies, populism is rooted in "delayed transformation fatigue," a backlash against the disorienting and often chaotic process of post-communist reorganization. Populists tap into frustrations with corruption, economic instability, and perceived loss of national sovereignty to the European Union.

4. **United States**: Economic inequality, cultural divides, and mistrust of the political establishment have fuelled populist movements on both the right and left. Donald Trump's presidency epitomized the rise of right-wing populism, with its emphasis on nationalism, anti-immigration policies, and hostility toward traditional elites and the media.

5. **East Asia**: Populism in this region tends to arise from authoritarianism, economic inequality, and nationalistic fervour. Key examples include the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea, and even China, in its distinct form.

5. UN involvement and previous attempts to solve the issue

The United Nations (UN) has not directly addressed the issue of populism. However, it has taken steps to promote democracy and human rights, which are often threatened by populist movements. For example, the UN developed the democracy agenda and established the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, which promotes and protects human rights worldwide. In 2000, the Commission on Human Rights recommended a series of legislative, institutional, and practical measures to consolidate democracy in Member States. Furthermore, in 2002, the Commission declared the following as essential elements of democracy:

- Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms

- Freedom of association

- Freedom of expression and opinion

- Access to power and its exercise in accordance with the rule of law

- The holding of periodic free and fair elections by universal suffrage and secret ballot as the expression of the people's will

- A pluralistic system of political parties and organizations

- The separation of powers

- The independence of the judiciary

- Transparency and accountability in public administration

- Free, independent, and pluralistic media

6. Timeline of events

- **1940s-1950s**: Juan Perón in Argentina and other Latin American leaders popularize populist rhetoric, emphasizing nationalism and social justice for the working class.

- **1960s-1970s**: Populist movements remain regional, with leaders like George Wallace in the U.S. gaining traction by challenging elites and promoting nationalism.

- **1980s**: Neoliberal policies by Reagan (U.S.) and Thatcher (U.K.) increase inequality, fostering the rise of populist sentiments in both left- and right-wing movements.

- **1990s**: Hugo Chávez emerges in Venezuela, advocating anti-elite and anti-neoliberal policies; Ross Perot runs for U.S. president, emphasizing populist, anti-establishment themes. Right-wing populism gains ground in Europe, particularly with parties like the National Front in France.

- **2001-2005**: Latin America sees the rise of leaders like Lula da Silva in Brazil and Evo Morales in Bolivia, blending populism with leftist policies.

- **2008**: The global financial crisis catalyses populist movements, as dissatisfaction with elites and economic inequality increases.

- **2016**: Donald Trump is elected U.S. president, heralding a new era of right-wing populism focused on nationalism, anti-immigration, and anti-establishment rhetoric. The U.K. votes to leave the EU, driven largely by populist arguments around national sovereignty and immigration.

- **2017**: Marine Le Pen in France and Viktor Orbán in Hungary lead populist movements, advocating anti-immigration and Euroskeptic policies.

- **2020-2021**: The COVID-19 pandemic amplifies populist rhetoric, with leaders like Trump and Bolsonaro downplaying the crisis, undermining trust in science and global cooperation.

- **2021-2023**: Populist parties continue to rise in Europe (e.g., Italy's Giorgia Meloni) and Latin America (e.g., Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico), while Turkey's Erdoğan and Poland's PiS consolidate power through populist and authoritarian measures.

7. Useful links

- https://www.oxfordpoliticstrove.com/display/10.1093/hepl/9780198820819.001.0001/hepl-9780198820819-chapter-13
- https://juriscentre.com/2023/04/10/the-global-rise-of-populism-and-its-impact-on-democracy/
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- effects of global populism: assessing the populist impact on international affairs | International Affairs | Oxford Academic
- Populism | History, Facts, & Examples | Britannica
- https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/populists-power-around-world
- https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/updates/LSE-IDEAS-Understanding-Global-Rise-of-Populism.pdf
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