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Multipolarity, the Mantra of Authoritarianism

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The Left's advocacy for 'multipolarity' against a US-led unipolar order has, in effect, defended authoritarianism across the world. The Left must reflect on how its language enables such regimes.

Multipolarity is the compass orienting the Left's understanding of international relations. All streams of the Left in India and globally have for long advocated for a multipolar world as opposed to a unipolar one dominated by the imperialist USA.

At the same time, multipolarity has become the keystone of the shared language of global fascisms and authoritarianisms. It is a rallying cry for despots, that serves to dress up their war on democracy as a war on imperialism. The deployment of multipolarity to disguise and legitimise despotism is immeasurably enabled by the ringing endorsement by the global Left of multipolarity as a welcome expression of anti-imperialist democratisation of international relations.

By framing its response to political confrontations within or between nation states as a zero-sum option between endorsing multipolarity or unipolarity, the Left perpetuates a fiction that even at its best, was always misleading and inaccurate. But this fiction is positively dangerous today, serving solely as a narrative and dramatic device to cast fascists and authoritarians in flattering roles.

The unfortunate consequences of the Left's commitment to a value-free multipolarity are illustrated very starkly in the case of its response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The global and the Indian Left have legitimised and amplified (to varying degrees) Russian fascist discourse, by defending the invasion as a multipolar challenge to US-led unipolar imperialism.

The freedom to be fascist

On 30 September, while announcing the illegal annexation of four Ukrainian provinces, Russian President Vladimir Putin spelt out what multipolarity and democracy meant in his ideological framework. He defined multipolarity as freedom from the attempts by Western elites to establish their own 'degraded' values of democracy and human rights as universal values; values 'alien' to the vast majority of people in the West and elsewhere.

Putin's rhetorical ploy was to declare that the concepts of a rules-based order, democracy, and justice are nothing more than ideological and imperialist impositions by the West, serving merely as pretexts to violate the sovereignty of other nations.

As Putin played to the justifiable outrage at the long list of crimes by Western countries - including colonialism, imperialism, invasions, occupations, genocides, and coups - it was easy to forget that his was not a speech demanding justice and reparations and an end to these crimes. In fact, by asserting the self-evident fact that the Western governments did not have "any moral right to weigh in, or even utter a word about democracy," Putin skilfully cut people out of the equation.

People of the colonised nations are the ones who fought and continue to fight for freedom. People of the imperialist nations come on the streets to demand democracy and justice, and protest racism, wars, invasions, occupations committed by their own governments. But Putin was not supporting these people.

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Rather, Putin has signalled "like-minded" forces all over the world - far-right, white-supremacist, racist, anti-feminist, homophobic and transphobic political movements - to support the invasion, as part of a project advantageous to them all: of overturning the "unipolar hegemony" of universal values of democracy and human rights and "to gain true freedom, a historical perspective."

Putin uses a "historical perspective" of his own choice to support a supremacist version of a Russian "country-civilisation" where laws dehumanise LGBT persons and where references to historical events are criminalised in the name of "strengthening (Russia's) sovereignty." He asserts Russia's freedom to deny and defy the democratic norms and international laws defined "universally" by bodies

like the United Nations. The project of "Eurasian integration," which Putin projects as a multipolar challenge to the "imperialist" EU and western unipolarity, can be properly understood only as a part of his explicitly anti-democratic ideological and political project. (It is another matter that the aspect of competition between the US and Russia as Big Powers, is complicated here by the shared political project represented by Trump in the US and Putin in Russia.

A common language

The language of 'multipolarity' and 'anti-imperialism' also finds resonance in Chinese hyper-nationalist totalitarianism.

A joint statement by Putin and Xi in February, shortly before Russia invaded Ukraine, stated their shared rejection of universally accepted standards of democracy and human rights, in favour of culturally relativist definitions of these terms: "A nation can choose such forms and methods of implementing democracy that would best suit its [...] traditions and unique cultural characteristics […] It is only up to the people of the country to decide whether their State is a democratic one." These ideas were explicitly credited by the statement to "the efforts taken by the Russian side to establish a just multipolar system of international relations."

For Xi, the "'universal values' of freedom, democracy, and human rights were used to cause the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the drastic changes in Eastern Europe, the 'colour revolution,' and the 'Arab Springs', all caused by the intervention of the US and the West." Any people's movement that demands widely accepted human rights and democracy, is treated as an inherently illegitimate imperialist colour revolution.

The demand for a democracy meeting universal standards, raised by protesters in the China-wide movement against repression in the name of "Zero-Covid", is significant in light of the culturally relativist standards favoured by the government of China. A White Paper in 2021, on "China's Approach to Democracy, Freedom and Human Rights" defined human rights as "happiness" thanks to welfare and benefits, not as protections from unbridled government power. It conspicuously omits the right to question the government, dissent, or organise freely.

Defining "China-specific" democracy as "good governance" and human rights as "happiness" allows Xi to justify the suppression of the Uyghur Muslims. His claim is that concentration camps to "re-educate" these minorities and remould their practice of Islam so that it is "Chinese in orientation", has provided "good governance" and greater "happiness".

Even amongst the Hindu-supremacist leadership in India, there are strong echoes of the fascist and authoritarian discourse of a "multipolar world" - where civilisational powers will rise again to reassert their old imperialist glory, and the hegemony of liberal democracy will give way for right-wing nationalism.

Mohan Bhagwat, head of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, said admiringly that "in a multipolar world" that challenges the US, "China has now risen. It is not bothered about what the world thinks about it. It is pursuing its goal... (returning to the) expansionism of its past emperors." Likewise, "In the multipolar world now, Russia is also playing its game. It is trying to progress by suppressing the West."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi too has repeatedly attacked human rights defenders as anti-Indian even as he declares India is the "mother of democracy." This is made possible by viewing India's democracy not through a "western" lens but as part of its "civilisational ethos."A note circulated by the government links India's democracy with "Hindu culture and civilisation," "Hindu political theory", "Hindu state", and traditional (and often regressive) caste councils that enforce caste and gender hierarchies.

Such ideas also reflect attempts to incorporate Hindu-supremacists into a global network of far-right and authoritarian forces. The Russian fascist ideologue Aleksandr Dugin (much like Putin) states that "Multipolarity [...] advocates a return to the civilizational foundations of each non-western civilization (and a rejection of) liberal democracy and human rights ideology."

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The influence goes both ways. Dugin favours the caste hierarchy as a social model (Dugin 2012). Directly incorporating the brahminical Manusmriti's values with international fascism, Dugin sees "the present order of things", represented by "human rights, anti-hierarchy,

and political correctness" as "Kali Yuga": a calamity which brings with it the blending of castes (a miscegenation which in turn is brought about by women's freedom, also a calamitous aspect of Kali Yuga) and the dismantling of hierarchy. He has described Modi's electoral success as representing a victory for "multipolarity", a welcome assertion of "Indian values," and a defeat for the hegemony of "liberal democracy and human rights ideology."

Yet the Left continues to use "multipolarity" without betraying the slightest awareness of how fascists and authoritarians couch their own aims in the same language.

Where left meets right

Putin's language of "multipolarity" is meant to resonate with the global Left. Its comforting familiarity seems to prevent the Left - which always did an excellent job laying bare the lies underpinning the "saving democracy" claims of US imperialist warmongers - from applying the same critical lens to Putin's anti-colonial and anti-imperialist rhetoric.

It is odd that the Left has made the language of polarity its own. The discourse of polarity belongs to the Realist school in international relations. Realism sees the global order in terms of the competition between the foreign policy objectives, assumed to reflect objective 'national interests', of a handful of 'poles' - Big Powers or aspiring Big Powers. Realism is fundamentally incompatible with the Marxist view which is premised on the understanding that 'national interest', far from being an objective and value-neutral fact, is defined subjectively by the "political (and therefore moral) character of the leadership strata that shapes and makes foreign policy decisions" (Vanaik 2006).

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For instance, Vijay Prashad, one of the most prominent enthusiasts and advocates on the global Left for multipolarity, approvingly observes that "Russia and China are seeking sovereignty, not global power." He does not mention how these powers interpret sovereignty as freedom from accountability to universal standards of democracy, human rights, and equality.

A recent essay by Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist (CPI [ML]) General Secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya presents similar problems as it explains the party's decision to balance solidarity with Ukraine with its preference for multipolarity and its national priority of resisting fascism in India. (Disclosure: I had been a CPI [ML] activist for three decades and a member of its Politbureau till I left the party earlier this year, due to differences that came to a head in the wake of the party's lukewarm solidarity for Ukraine.)

Bhattacharya's formulation is that "Regardless of the internal character of competing global powers, a multipolar world is certainly more advantageous to progressive forces and movements worldwide in their quest for reversal of neoliberal policies, social transformation and political advance." To restate, the CPI [ML] welcomes the rise of non-western Big Powers even if they are internally fascist or authoritarian, because it believes that these powers offer a multipolar challenge to US unipolarity.

Such a Left formulation offers no resistance at all to the fascist/authoritarian projects which describe themselves as champions of anti-imperialist "multipolarity". In fact it offers them a cloak of legitimacy.

Bhattacharya perceives whole-hearted support for Ukrainian resistance as difficult to reconcile with the "national priority" of "fighting fascism in India." The understanding that the Left's duties of international solidarity must defer to its perceived 'national priority', is a case of Marxist internationalism being muddied by Realist 'national interest', applied this time not only to nation states but to the national Left parties themselves.

But how is unstinting solidarity with Ukraine against a fascist invasion at odds with fighting fascism in India? Bhattacharya's reasoning is forced, roundabout, and oblique. He takes a puzzling detour into the need for communist movements to beware of the dangers of "prioritizing the international at the expense of the national situation." Bhattacharya inaccurately attributes the Communist Party of India's 1942 mistake of remaining aloof from the Quit India movement to its having prioritised its international commitment to the defeat of fascism in World War II, over its national commitment to overthrowing colonialism by Britain, which was then an ally in the war against fascism.

The only plausible purpose of this detour seems to be to make an analogy with the Indian Left's current predicament vis a vis the invasion of Ukraine. Since the Narendra Modi regime's primary foreign policy alliance is with the US-led West, it is suggested, the fight against Modi's fascism would be weakened if Russia, a 'multipolar' rival of the US, was routed by the Ukrainian resistance.

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This convoluted calculus obscures the simple fact: a defeat for Putin's fascist invasion in Ukraine would embolden those fighting to defeat Modi's fascism in India. Likewise, a victory for people resisting Xi's majoritarian tyranny would inspire those resisting Modi's majoritarian tyranny in India.

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." We weaken our own democratic struggles when we choose to view the struggles of others through a distorting campist lens. Ours is not a zero-sum choice between unipolarity versus multipolarity. In every situation, our choices are clear: we can either support the resistance and survival of the oppressed - or we can worry about the survival of the oppressor.

When the Left takes upon itself a 'duty' to support the survival of 'multipolar' regimes (in Russia, China, and for some on the Left, even Iran), it fails in its actual duty to support people fighting to survive genocide by these regimes. Any benefit the US might get from its material or military support to such struggles, is outweighed by far by the benefit of survival for people who would otherwise face genocide. We would do well to recall that US material and military support to the USSR in World War II played a part in the defeat of Nazi Germany.

Tyrannical regimes construe support for people resisting them, as support for foreign or imperialist 'interference' in the 'sovereignty' of those regimes. When we on the Left do the same, we serve as enablers and apologists for those tyrannies. Those in life-or-death struggles need us to respect their autonomy and sovereignty to decide what kind of moral/material/military support to demand/accept/reject. The moral compass of the global and Indian Left needs an urgent reset, so that it can correct its disastrous course that finds it on speaking the same language as tyrants.

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