

## Rise of the Anti-Political

*“Anti-political” protests in India, Spain and the us are expressions of resentment with the working of democracy.*

A new wave is sweeping across many large democracies in the world – anger against the institutions of representative democracy. These protests – by the Indignado (Indignation) movement in Spain, the Tea Party in the United States and here in India by the Anna Hazare-led campaign – are neither running in the opposite direction of the democracy movements in North Africa and West Asia nor do they seek to overthrow the State. They instead express a dissatisfaction with how the institutions of representative democracy are functioning. The form they take ranges from the extreme right-wing conservatism of the Tea Party movement in the us to the leftism of the Indignado in Spain. They can indeed be inchoate, but one common feature is that they scorn all the traditional faces of democracy – the established parties, deliberative institutions and practices. To the extent that they are built entirely on rejection and the movements do not as yet know what they are demanding, they can be seen as “anti-political”, though they certainly are making fundamental political statements.

The most striking feature of these anti-political protests is that it is the urban middle class which is in the forefront. While it would be wrong to dub the movements as solely or entirely of the middle class, this group is certainly very striking in its presence. Yet, in India, for example, it is the same middle (and upper middle) class which has been the biggest supporter of neo-liberalism that was ushered in by the same parties that the Hazare movement is railing against. Now with the stability of the neo-liberal regime under threat by the Great Recession, the middle class has begun to dissent. This dissidence has not been expressed as anger against the economic system. It expresses itself, first and foremost, as a protest against the functioning of the institutions of democracy.

While there are differences across the movements, this anti-political form of protest is a feature of the Anna Hazare campaign in India, the ongoing Indignado protests in Spain and, of course, the powerful Tea Party movement in the United States. In all three countries, the anger is borne out of a feeling that representative democracy has been reduced to the working of no more than the formal instruments of elections and legislative work, with little procedural or participative involvement of large sections of the electorate in the democracy. Politicians of all parties are seen to represent only themselves and are also seen as an elite that thrives on corruption and patronage.

In India, over the past two decades, the middle class, especially in the urban centres, has provided unstinting support to the parties and their representatives which have led the forces of neo-liberalism. However, the form that neo-liberal economic growth has taken – spawning crony capitalism and a very high degree of corruption – has ultimately alienated the middle class from the very politicians

and representatives who oversaw a process of growth that benefited them. But there has been no attempt by these movements in understanding the sources of the corruption that is so much a part of the daily life of this class. Instead, there has been an easy and simplistic characterisation of corruption as inherent to politics and politicians. This is an inevitable development since formal democracy has considerably limited the public sphere of debate on policy issues and legislation. It is no wonder that the Anna Hazare-led movement against corruption has taken a strictly “anti-political turn” as both the major political parties – the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party – are seen to be tainted by corruption. A significant aspect of the anti-corruption campaign in India is that it is organised around the “non-political” Anna Hazare and no major political party has been part of it.

A similar degree of alienation of the middle class from the mainstream political parties can be seen in Spain which is still in the thrall of an economic crisis. The failure of the Socialist Party to live up to its beliefs and its conservative response to the financial crisis have led to estrangement from its core supporters who see it now as no different from the right-wing Partido Popular.

In the United States, the Tea Party movement reflects the anger against both the Democratic and the Republican Parties in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008. Started initially to protest the large public bailouts of financial firms the Tea Party movement later took a sharp ultra-right turn expressing anger against the “government” and both the main political parties, though more against the Democrats. With their ideology of “limited government”, Tea Party representatives in the us Congress have played an obstructive role in the legislature and have consistently sought to undermine the role of government and legislative institutions in making and articulating public policy.

The frailties of the liberal democratic institutions in these three very different countries are quite evident. Their democracies are limited to contestation among political parties which otherwise do not differ substantively on economic issues. There are no mechanisms for wider public participation in legislative decision-making or governance. There is at the same time no appreciable interest in an alternative system; the socialist model which had an overbearing state and which did not have even formal democracy is not in any serious reckoning. The anger against representative democracy as it now exists is sure to spread to other countries. To prevent the emergence of anti-political tendencies that can have a destructive influence, the challenge lies in ensuring a conversion from mere “formal democracy” into a deliberative and participative variant ensuring greater political engagement, widening the public sphere and making it truly representative.