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LESSONS FROM THE PAST

History need not repeat itself this time

ON APRIL 27, we will hold the annual celebration commemorating the arrival of democracy in our country. But this year is special because the 30th birthday of freedom will be followed by the most significant national election since 1994. For the first time, the outcome of the poll is largely unknown.

We can only hope that our hard-fought-for democracy will be handed over to a caring government that will move us onto safer ground. This is vital during these uncertain times when people fear for their and their children's future.

How did we get here?

As the prominent American political scientist Ronald Inglehart observed, people's values and behaviour are shaped by the extent to which they feel secure. When they consider themselves to be economically and physically safe, people value their freedoms but when survival is at stake, they are inclined to close ranks behind a strong leader. The tendency is called the authoritarian reflex, a phenomenon that first made its unwelcome appearance in Italy and Germany after the World War I.

Italy, even though one of the winners in the war, failed to use victory as the basis on which to consolidate its democracy. Despite the post-war economic crisis and the resultant social turmoil in 1919 and 1920, the liberal elite were unwilling to switch to a democracy featuring a coalition of political parties. By refusing to contemplate an alliance with the Italian Socialist Party and the Italian Popular Party, they had paved the way for the seizure of power by a radical far-right brand of nationalism, which then led to fascism.

Fasci di combattimento – or fighting leagues, better known as Fascists – were the creation of the strong leader, Benito Mussolini. On an anti-Left and anti-Bolshevik crusade, black-shirted members of the leagues gradually expanded their influence to the national level and then formed a Fascist political party. By April 1924, in an atmosphere of violence and intimidation, the Fascist-dominated bloc won an absolute majority in parliament. During the following two years, constitutional rule ended: opposition parties and unions were dissolved, and elections were abolished along with free speech and free association. By the end of the 1930s, anti-Semitic laws were introduced and a close alliance with Nazi Germany was established. Italian democracy died.

Germany, in the wake of its defeat



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EFF leader Julius Malema addresses supporters at an election campaign rally. When people consider themselves to be economically and physically safe, they value their freedoms but when survival is at stake, they tend to close ranks behind a strong leader in what is called the authoritarian reflex, says the writer. | AYANDA NDAMANE Independent Newspapers

by the Allies, was branded an international villain. The post-war Treaty of Versailles of 1919 imposed punishing war reparations on the country, leaving the nation struggling with the psychological after effects of defeat and the heavy burden of war debts. The massive hyperinflation of 1923 was followed by the fallout of the Great Depression that had left some six million people unemployed. The dire economic conditions led to popular discontent with the government and, as in Italy, ushered a strong leader who, it was believed, would restore Germany to its former glory.

Enter Adolf Hitler, an ardent nationalist who blamed the defeat in World War I on weak domestic leadership and on Jewish, communist and international conspiracy. Hitler established the fascist National Socialist German Workers' party, known as the Nazi party, and in 1923, announced to an enthusiastic welcome by his fervent brown-shirted supporters his intention to overthrow the democratic government. This was ultimately achieved by stealth, rather than a "putsch". At the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, the Nazi party held 12 seats in the parliament; by 1932, it became the largest party and started its drive to force the resignation of the president, Paul von Hindenburg. By 1933, the aim was reached and Hitler was named chancellor, an event that marked the death of democracy in Germany and mapped the road to World War II.

India is governed by the hardline nationalist Narendra Modi. The narrative of his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party holds that the originally pure Hindu state had its Muslim minorities imposed upon it through colonisation.

Modi's ethnonationalist rule undermines the country's constitutional commitment to Muslim and Christian minorities. His Hindutva ideology is hugely successful and is threatening to turn India into a Russian-style "managed democracy", that is to say, a system that has all the hallmarks of a democracy but is, in fact, operating as an autocracy.

In Turkey, the followers of Islam rally behind strongman Recep Tayyip Erdogan who targets any institution or group standing in his way to reshape Turkey into a Muslim country. The narrative is based on discriminatory views claiming, among others, that woman's rights undermine traditional Islamic family values. From a leader overseeing an era of reform and prosperity in the 2000s, Erdogan has turned into an autocrat, despite the democratic instinct of the deeply polarised society remaining alive.

Latin America is seeing a widespread shift with right-wing leaders drawing support from conservative electorate set against cultural change and minority rights, and those who blame their erstwhile leftist governments for the miserable living conditions. Rising social polarisation and growing intolerance of dissent, combined with institutional mistrust, imperil democracy in the region by deepening the disconnect between citizens and government.

In other parts of the Middle East and Asia, as well as in Africa, there are too many examples to mention, though one case close to home merits close attention. The former ANC Youth League leader, Julius Malema, following his expulsion from the ANC, established the right-wing EFF. Malema

presents himself as the "commander-in-chief" to his ardent followers, the red-clad brigade who congregate en masse, chanting the liberation Struggle songs "One Settler, One Bullet" and "Kill The Boer, Kill The Farmer".

The "commander's" ideas on how to get the country out of the social and economic quagmire include asking China to reopen all the coal mines and invite Russia to build nuclear power stations to help South Africa resolve its dire power shortages. The EFF manifesto calls for expropriation of land without compensation and for the nationalisation of mines and banks, also without compensation.

And then there are the two hot spots, with the potential to ignite a global conflagration. The rallying of far-right nationalist supporters behind the intransigent Benjamin Netanyahu goes a long way to explain the relentless military offensive by Israel in Gaza, even in the face of increasing censure by global public opinion and calls for immediate termination of hostilities on humanitarian grounds. Vladimir Putin claims he can return Russia to its former glory by pursuing territorial expansion on spurious historical grounds and by brutally eliminating all internal opposition, as did Hitler.

Severe post-World War I economic deprivations were behind the first wave of the authoritarian reflex

As we celebrate the 30th anniversary of our relatively young democracy, we can only hope, as did Albert Einstein in a speech he gave at the Royal Albert Hall in October 1933, that "the present crisis will lead to a better world". That didn't happen then, but maybe we are wiser now?