Post-Trump World: Is Democracy Dying in America As Well?

Taj Hashmi

We know it’s fashionable to hypothesize that democracy is “dying” in the post-Cold War world. It’s true not only for some of the postcolonial democracies in the Third World, and some “new democracies” Eastern Europe, but of late, seemingly, it’s also true about the United States. I refer to the cover story of *Foreign Affairs*, “Is Democracy Dying? A Global Report” (May-June 2018)to understand the problem. Although it’s not a belated review of the essays in the above issue of the journal, yet it’s not irrelevant to my hypothesis that democracy in the US is gravely ill, and there’s no guarantee of its full recovery only because Trump is gone and Joe Biden has become the new President.

It’s unbelievable that the *Foreign Affairs* in its report on the state of “dying” democracy across the globe – which came out one and a half year after Trump had become the President – almost exclusively focused on the continuation of autocracy in countries like China, North Korea, and Saudi Arabia, and on the state of declining democracy in eastern Europe, and Myanmar. While Walter Russell Mead in his historical appraisal of the rise and decline of democracy in the US mainly focused on the retardation of democratic principles and values in the antebellum (pre-Civil War) and post-Civil War decades, from the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865 and that of President William McKinley in1901. Mead attributes the crisis of governance in the US under Trump to the IT Revolution, comparing it with the disruptive Industrial Revolution in the country during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Trumpism and what led it to its fruition – let alone its far-reaching consequences – are missing in his essay. Mead’s conclusions are quite complacent too. He believes that as humans are “problem-solving animals”, Americans thrive on challenges:

*Americans, for their part, are the heirs to a system of mixed governance and popular power that has allowed them to manage great upheavals in the past. The good news and bad news are perhaps the same: the American people in common with others around the world, have the opportunity to reach unimaginable levels of affluence and freedom, but to realize that opportunity, they must overcome some of the hardest challenges humanity has ever known. The treasure in the mountain is priceless, but the dragon who guards it is fierce.*

In the backdrop of what Trump has already achieved in, sort of, brainwashing around 75 per cent Republican supporters that Democrats somehow rigged the Presidential election to remove Trump from power, one isn’t sure if it’s time to go with Mead’s complacency and optimism about American democracy, or one should rather agree with what Ronald Inglehart ( “The Age of Insecurity: Can Democracy Save Itself?”, *Foreign Affairs,* May-June 2018) has cautiously argued as to how to save democracy, even in advanced democracies like the United States. He believes while “rising prosperity continues to move most developing countries toward democracy,” there’s nothing “inevitable about democratic decline” provided societies and governments don’t fail to “address the underlying drivers”, which destroy democracy.

Since “global democracy is experiencing its worst setback since the 1930s”, as Gideon Rose, Editor of *Foreign Policy* writes in the above-mentioned issue of the journal, one fully agrees that “the United States has turned out to be less exceptional than many thought”, in this regard. What Trump did or tried to do were centralization of power in the executive, politicization of the judiciary, attacks on independent media, the use of public office for private gain have collectively harmed democracy in the US. Whether the Biden Administration will be able to reverse the process of democratic regression in the country is the most important question today, for the US and the rest of the free world! Meanwhile, the storming of the US Capitol by fanatical, and fascistic Trump supporters on 6th January 2021, and most importantly, the overwhelming majority of Republican supporters’ approval of Trump and whatever he believes should be done to democratic institutions, civil rights, human rights and human dignity within and beyond the US will continue to haunt all democracy-loving decent people in the world.

Then again, the rot in the realm of US democracy didn’t set in with the Trump presidency. The process had started with the creation of the artificial entity called the United States of America with all the lofty promises made by its founding fathers to uplift democracy, equality, freedom, and human dignity, while some of them were themselves slave owners and the overwhelming majority of White Americans believed in the efficacy of slavery, apartheid, and subjugation of women, which are antonymous to the concepts of democracy and freedom. Thus, all rhetoric against Trump since his becoming the President – especially since his incitement of White Supremacist terrorists to storm the Capitol on 6th January – singling him as the only enemy of democracy and freedom in the US is as hollow as an empty pot! Trumpism is the culmination of the socio-political and economic unjust practices and institutions that continued ever since the European settlement in America to discriminate against and persecute the non-White, poor-White, and women. And, despite the abolition of slavery in the early 1860s, African Americans virtually remained slaves up to the Declaration of Civil Rights in 1964.

Actually, stethoscopic and lab tests of various government institutions and policies from the Watergate scandal to the divisive, racist, and undemocratic rhetoric and policies of Donald Trump and his administration, would have revealed a lot more about the state of ailing US democracy. Although touted as the “oldest democracy” in the world, the US since its emergence is a fractured, artificial entity; and not a democracy even in the very rudimentary sense of the expression. How could a country be called democratic with institutionalized slavery, and apartheid, that officially lasted for a hundred years after the abolition of slavery?  Thus, slave owners’ declaration of independence and rights of men (exclusively for the White people) was a tale, “told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”, as Shakespeare would have written about American hypocrisy and hyperbole!

One doubts if there is any room for complacency or any convincing proof about the US being a stable democracy, not to be a wavering, irresolute one! The way swastikas and the Confederacy flags are flaunted in public, statues of slave owners are protected as national heritage, and some members of the clandestine KKK endorsed Donald Trump as President (and have been solidly behind him even after the two rounds of his impeachment), one has reasons to be sceptic about the future of democracy in America. Interestingly, while more than 80 per cent of Republicans support Trump and believe Biden was elected through a rigged election if there’s any reason for complacency about the future of democracy in America! Conversely, one wonders, as the US almost took a hundred years to abolish slavery, and another hundred to grant civil liberty and equal rights to the African Americans (at least on paper) after its independence if it’s going to take another hundred years since 1964 to become a true democracy in the 2060s! Then again, in view of the prevalent mistrust and lack of mutual respect among American politicians and their followers, partially demonstrated in the violent takeover of the Capitol by Trump supporters on 6thJanuary, one can’t be that optimistic about the future of democracy and civility in American politics in the near future.

Gone are the days of Huntingtonian and Fukuyamaian rhetorical optimism about the future of democracy in the world. The way George W. Bush and his British and Australian surrogates, Tony Blair and John Howard (along with others), invaded Iraq in March 2003 – which was a totally unjustified neo-imperialist war with totally fabricated evidence about Saddam Hussein’s possession of so-called Weapons of Mass Destruction – exposed Western hypocrisy (under US leadership) about its so-called love and respect for democracy and freedom. Thus, whatever Samuel Huntington in his *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*(1991) and Francis Fukuyama in his *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) argued about democracy, as the ultimate destination of human beings across the world – because of the so-called “delegitimization” of autocracy everywhere – became as obsolete as telegraph after the IT Revolution. This happened not because of any inherent fault with democracy, but because of the hypocrisy of the Western vendors of democracy and freedom under the leadership of America. By now people across the world know what America and its allies actually mean – and don’t mean – when they say they love democracy and freedom! The Biden Administration is least likely to succeed in salvaging the wrecked confidence in US democracy among Trump supporters (the majority of Republican voters), let alone the victims of Western democracy and freedom across the world!

Now, the Biden Administration must right the wrong and salvage democracy and guarantee equal rights and opportunities to all Americans. It also needs to restore the tarnished image of America as a dependable friend to its old allies; and to nurture the CBM process among victims of its barbaric invasions in the Arab World, Afghanistan, and beyond. Above all, the US must play the role of an honest broker in the arena of international politics. However, the chances of that happening are extremely slim. Except halting the Trump decision to withdraw funding from the WHO and respecting the Nuclear Deal with Iran, the Biden Administration is least likely to do much in gaining respects of victims and marginalized people anywhere in the world. His would-be Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, has already praised Trump’s Israel policy. He hasn’t even mentioned (Israeli) “Occupation” of Palestinian land, “Human Rights of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza”, and the ”Jewish Settlements” in the occupied West Bank. In view of Biden’s forthcoming pro-Israeli and anti-Palestinian policy, it’s evident that his one is not going to be a trustworthy regime and a benign superpower – Joseph Nye’s so-called “Soft Power” – to the world, especially to countries like Iran, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, China, Russia, Venezuela, Cuba, and the Palestinian Authority. Only by signing the Paris Climate Agreement, imposing some soft sanctions on Saudi Arabia for its unjust war against Yemen (as proposed by Blinken), and resuming funding to the WHO won’t make America safe and great again! Most importantly, the Biden Administration must pay heed to the growing White supremacist terrorist threat in the US, and the fast destabilization of the world order by regional powers like India, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. Biden knows it quite well the days of US complacency as the only superpower in the so-called unipolar world are gone, maybe gone forever! He needs to address his domestic and external problems. Only a just peace at home and abroad can stabilize America and the world at large.

Only a justice to the marginalized and angry people within can be a reprieve for the Biden Administration. Most Trump supporters are not only angry, fascistic terrorists (racism is inherent in all fascist outfits), they are also among the most marginalized people in America having very little or no job security, health insurance, and prospects of going up (excepting for a tiny minority among them who achieve their “American Dream”). Biden would be fortunate if Trump is disqualified to hold office, and floats his own promised “Patriot Party”, which would divide and substantially weaken the Republican Party, and would thus help his administration in the near future. He must understand the marginalized people across the world also want justice, peace, and prosperity. They have been directly or indirectly the victims of America’s highhandedness, neglect, and duplicitous relationship with dictators and regional hegemons in Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, India, Bangladesh, Uganda, and elsewhere in the Third World.

We believe only meaningful CBMs at home and abroad can restore the elusive peace and global order. Biden has a big responsibility and challenging job to achieve both these goals.  In hindsight, we possibly can forgive Huntington and Fukuyama for their over-optimistic exuberance about the success of democracy as the panacea to most problems in the post-Cold War era. They didn’t anticipate George W. Bush’s (and their allies’) rogue behaviour, the unnecessary invasion of Iraq, which Saddam Hussein aptly said was the “mother of all wars” in the world! In sum, as the good old days of gunboat diplomacy and invasions of countries, which were in vogue up to the fag end of the Cold War, are over in the post-Cold War era (especially, in the wake of the IT Revolution), so are over the old days of appeasing the marginalized people in the name of democracy and freedom. In sum, as marginalized Americans have lost faith in democracy, so have their counterparts in the world demand empowerment of the grassroots with people’s democracy. Can Biden deliver this to his own people, and eventually, to the marginalized masses across the world?

The writer is a retired Professor of Security Studies at the APCSS in Honolulu (Hawaii). His major publications include *Global Jihad and America:* *The Hundred-Year War Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan* (SAGE Publications, 2014). He holds a PhD in modern South Asian History and is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society (FRAS). He is an executive committee member of Voice for Justice (VFJ), a global movement for peace, justice, and democracy.