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[Home](#) > [Is De-Democratization on Ascendancy?](#)

Is De-Democratization on Ascendancy?

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By Kazi Anwarul Masud

The election of Donald Trump, albeit democratically, but his continuing bellicosity with the fourth state and now his disenchantment with some of his cabinet members, daily tweets on foreign and domestic issues giving fodder for amusement to late night shows and the print and electronic media, US Senate investigation into Trump campaign and Russian connection, “secret” conversation with Vladimir Putin at the G20 dinner without an American interpreter, and scores of other misdemeanor by an American President in just about six months with an approval rating just above thirty percent, Trump’s distancing himself from long time allies and threats to NATO members to fulfill their defense commitment, his praising of North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un have placed the world in a quandary.

US foreign policy had its ups and downs with transition of power from President to President. Way back in 2012 Madeline Albright felt a tectonic shift had taken place with the change of guards from Clinton to Bush administration. Bush administration proved to be sinister, aggressive, and felt it could take unilateral military actions without fear of retaliation from the aggrieved or the international community.

This gung-ho attitude was reflected in the Doctrine of Pre-emption and Bush National Security Strategy of 2002. Popular perception that the NSS of 2006 would undergo a perceptible change towards multilateralism proved to be wrong. Lawrence Korb and Caroline Wadhams (Center for American Progress) argued that the 2006 NSS continued to confuse pre-emption with preventive war, emphasized the unachievable goal of “ending tyranny” throughout the world, and failed to make a realistic assessment of threat to the US and the Western world.

Bill Clinton left a prosperous and safer America. His efforts to sincerely try to solve the Middle East crisis reflected in the historical handshake by Yasser Arafat with Yitzhak Rabin, or Jimmy Carter’s historical get-together between Anwar Sadat and Meacham Begin on US

soil will always be remembered. President Reagan's request to Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall was not heeded but it was not followed by American military prowess. Neither did Eisenhower and Johnson employ military power to prevent Soviet Union's military interventions in Hungary and Poland in 1956 and then in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

President Bush on the other hand remained totally committed to what he called for eradication of "Islamic fanaticism". It is not known whether Bush administration had made a cost-benefit analysis of the doctrine of pre-emption before embarking on what is now commonly realized as an adventure in Iraq that turned costly both financially and materially. President Bush received encouragement from people like Melvin Laird, US Defense Secretary at the fag end of the Vietnam war, who urged President Bush that Iraq war must carry the message that the US was fighting in Iraq to bring about freedom and liberty to those "yet unconverted" to western values, little realizing that the Orient was no longer an Antarctica of freedom nor was wedded to the values of communal benefit at the expense of individual liberty or what is touted as Asian values as opposed to Western values.

By contrast Kim Holmes and James Carafano (defining the Obama Doctrine, Its Pitfalls, and How to Avoid Them September 1, 2010) have noted President Barack Obama's declaration "that America would reach out to other countries as "an equal partner" rather than as the "exceptional" nation that many before him had embraced; that "any world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will inevitably fail"; and that "[o]ur problems must be dealt with through partnership" and "progress must be shared."(American primacy in international affairs-INDEPENDENT-03-02-2012Top of Form).

Donald Trump's America First slogan is contrary to the equal partnership practised by Barack Obama and the ones before him though the world acknowledged American leadership of the free world and adopted varied forms of the Washington Consensus, a set of broadly free market economic ideas supported by the Bretton Woods Institutions, the US and Europe. Trump's ideas, sometimes conflicting, have the potentiality of pushing the global trade towards protectionism which has been found favor with those trying to protect domestic jobs as free trade and globalization wins over the less efficient industries in many developing countries. Additionally the global meltdown of 2008 brought into sharp focus the opposition to the Washington Consensus and certainly rejection of Milton Friedman and Chicago School's prescription for amelioration of the global financial difficulties.

While any reduction of US-Russian tension is good for world peace and their collaboration both in and out of the UN Security council is welcome Donald Trump's story of Russian meddling in the last US Presidential elections and her alleged attempts to interfere in the European elections are unwelcome developments. Camaraderie between the leaders of the two great powers makes one wonder if one can imagine a brake in Samuel Huntington's waves of transition to democracy that he described in his book "The Third Wave". According to Samuelson there have been three basic periods of democratization that have occurred throughout the world throughout history.

The First Wave -- during the 19th century, democracy was begun in Western Europe and North America but lost momentum in the interwar period between WWI and WWII when a number of dictators rose to power.

The Second Wave -- began after WWII and faded out around the 60s - 70s.

The Third Wave -- began in the mid-1970s and is still continuing today. Some experts have associated the collapse of several dictatorships in the Middle East and North Africa, phenomenon known as Arab Spring, with the events which followed the fall of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The similarity between the two phenomena inspired hope for a fourth wave of democratization. But then democratization process is not an unstoppable process. Slow decrease in poverty level, increase in the gap between the rich and the poor, both in the developing and the developed countries, at geometric progression have produced a rage among the dispossessed and marginalized segment of the economy.

Roger Cohen wrote in New York Times that for at least a decade, accelerating since the crash of 2008, fears and resentments had been building over the impunity of elites, the dizzying disruption of technology, the influx of migrants and the precariousness of modern existence. In Western societies, for too long, there had been no victories, no glory and diminishing certainties. Wars were waged; nobody knew how they could be won. Their wounds festered. The distance between metropolis and periphery grew into a cultural chasm. Many things became unsayable; even gender became debatable. Truth blurred, then was sidelined, in an online tribal cacophony. Jobs went. Inequality thrust itself in your face. What the powerful said and the lives people lived were so unrelated that politics looked increasingly like a big heist.)..... Democracies, it is clear, have not been delivering to the less privileged, who were disenfranchised or discarded in the swirl of technology's advance. A lot of thought is now needed to find ways to restore faith in liberal, free-market societies; to show that they can be fairer and more equitable and offer more opportunities across the social spectrum (December 5 The Rage of 2016).

In the same vein Francis Fukuyama wrote (FRANCIS FUKUYAMA-DEC. 6, 2016 The Dangers of Disruption) of disruption caused by "The shift of manufacturing from the West to low labor-cost regions has meant that Asia's rising middle classes have grown at the expense of rich countries' working-class communities. And from a cultural standpoint, the huge movement of ideas, people and goods across national borders has disrupted traditional communities and ways of doing business. For some this has presented tremendous opportunity, but for others it is a threat".

The advent of nationalism over globalization has seen Brexit in Great Britain, assertion by Hungarian Prime Minister that his country sought to be an illiberal state; Turkey's Erdogan after foiling a coup has assumed immense power and has jailed thousands of people of alleged complicity with the coup. Equally some suspect that India's Narendra Modi and Japan's Prime Minister Shinjo Abe, both democratically elected, are quietly supporting actions of intolerance. In the case of India Harish Khare (THE WIRE A Dangerous Arrogance of Power Is Setting In By Harish Khare on 14/07/2017) apprehends that in the absence of three other institutions of democracy- cabinet, bureaucracy and

media- stand emasculated with timidity and opportunism and with the change of guard at Rashtrapati Bhavan Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his advisers could not take Pranab Mukherjee as “rubber stamp”, an option Harish Khare feels is now open to the Prime Minister. It however remains to be seen how far such a fear would come to pass.

India with its long tradition of vibrant opposition and use of democratic rights from grass roots would be a different kettle of fish than many other countries. This divisiveness, a form taking the shape of nationalism, could be traced to religion as many have taken Samuel Huntington’s Clash of Civilization literally. As David Brooks wrote in the New York Times (NYT – Huntington’s Clash Revisited David Brooks March 3 2011) the Islamic civilization is the most troublesome. People in the Arab world do not share the general suppositions of the Western world. Their primary attachment is to their religion, not to their nation-state. Their culture is inhospitable to certain liberal ideals, like pluralism, individualism and democracy. Huntington correctly foresaw that the Arab strongman regimes were fragile and were threatened by the masses of unemployed young men. He thought these regimes could fall, but he did not believe that the nations would modernize in a Western direction... Even if decrepit regimes fell (the Arab governments) there would still be a fundamental clash of civilizations between Islam and the West.

The Western nations would do well to keep their distance from Muslim affairs. The more the two civilizations intermingle, the worse the tensions will be. Naturally Huntington’s thesis caused a fierce debate. In a critique late Edward Said (The Clash of Ignorance By Edward W. Said OCTOBER 4, 2001) WROTE “ In this belligerent kind of thought, he relies heavily on a 1990 article by the veteran Orientalist Bernard Lewis, whose ideological colors are manifest in its title, "The Roots of Muslim Rage." ...The carefully planned and horrendous, pathologically motivated suicide attack and mass slaughter by a small group of deranged militants has been turned into proof of Huntington’s thesis”.

Princeton Professor Charles Boix disagrees with the religious explanation for the lack of democracy. He points out that the large Muslim population in India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and till recently in Turkey who live in partly free (as described by Freedom House) democratic dispensation. Boix instead argues that poverty, corruption, bad governance and terrorism are responsible for the decline of democracy in many countries. No less important, in the views of Princeton Professor and co-editor of Dissent magazine Michael Walzer, is the absolute or periodic arrest of the rich and the powerful who become more powerful as they become richer under a façade of nominal democracy where money can buy votes. It would therefore be naïve to think that poor countries can suddenly be adorned with democracy just because of the end of colonialism (the colonialists being mostly developed democratic nations) without the requisite countervailing institutions supportive of democracy.

Though India for a variety of reasons have proved to be an exception, the world has to be on guard that the recent and yet to be unfolding events do not foretell a saga of decline of democracy in the future.

(The writer is a former Secretary and Ambassador of Bangladesh.)

Tags:

Democratization [1]

US National Security Strategy [2]

Donald trump [3]

Category:

Papers [4]

Countries:

United States [5]

Topics:

Strategic Affairs & Security [6]

Political [7]

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[2] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1721>

[3] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1589>

[4] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers>

[5] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/united-states>

[6] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/strategic-affairs-and-security>

[7] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/political>