

# Three challenges to the 2020 US election



BLACK, WHITE AND GREY

ALI RIAZ

**A**LTHOUGH the US presidential election is less than 90 days away, it is—unlike any other election year before—not at the centre of public discourse or media coverage. Summer used to be the time of party conventions

and nominations; campaigns used to kick off, with much fanfare, and media pundits used to slice and dice polling data and make predictions. But not this year. Surging deaths from Covid-19 and grim milestones being reached every day have created an unprecedented situation in the US. President Trump is still in denial about the scope of the pandemic. His description of the staggering death toll, more than a thousand a day, as “it is what it is” was another testimony of his lack of empathy. The US economy is in the doldrums. At least 30 million are jobless and layoffs are continuing. During the March-June quarter, the US economy contracted by 32.9 percent—“the biggest drop in the gross domestic product” since the government began tracking such data in 1947, according to the media. Both public health concerns and economic hardship are overwhelming.

While uncertainty about life and livelihood is ubiquitous, what is certain is that the election will be held on November 3, 2020. In the wake of his falling approval rating and dwindling support compared to the Democratic Party’s presumptive nominee Joe Biden, President Trump tacitly proposed to delay the election. But neither does the US constitution allow such a delay, nor does history suggest any precedents. Thus, his idea was pushed back. Vicious opposition came from Democrats and constitutional experts, and some Republican lawmakers joined them too. These developments notwithstanding, the 2020 election faces three major challenges.

The first challenge for the candidates is to campaign and reach out to the voters.

In 2016, around 138 million, roughly 58.1 percent of eligible voters, cast their ballots. The number of voters has grown in the past four years and this year the turnout is expected to be higher. Large conventions—a cornerstone of the electoral campaigns—are already scrapped. These conventions provided wall-to-wall coverage in all mainstream media for at least four days to each party and showcased their positions and debates. But now leaders of both parties are scrambling to find ways to have some sort of events to formally anoint their candidates. Large public gatherings maintaining social distance are now in the realm of impossibility, although this is something President Trump relishes.

Two reasons preclude such events: health risks for the participants and the risk of a poor showing. The rally organised by the Trump campaign on June 20 at Tulsa, Oklahoma was poorly attended, even though the campaign had trumpeted that hundreds of thousands would flock to the venue. Besides, the death of Herman Cain from Covid-19, a one-time Republican presidential candidate who attended the rally, has made everyone wary. Bus trips, a familiar feature of US elections, will be somewhat irrelevant this time around. Door to door campaigns may be conducted, but only to deliver printed materials. In previous elections, robust “knock-on-the-door” operations not only allowed campaign workers to reach the voters, but also were an indication of how a candidate may fare on election day. The scale will be limited this year.

These make the campaigns extremely dependent on reaching voters via media—mainstream and social. Electronic media, particularly television, has always played a key role in the US presidential campaigns. Since 2008, social media has gained salience. It was a key to the victory of Barack Obama. But the 2016 election revealed the darker side of social media. The machination of Cambridge Analytica in 2016, the spread of fake news by dubious sources often connected to foreign governments, and the ongoing Russian intervention threat have all made the situation difficult. Differentiating



File photo of a voter placing their ballot in a curbside ballot drop box to help prevent the spread of Covid-19 during the Maryland US presidential primary election, as other voters stand in a long line waiting to cast their votes, on June 2, 2020. PHOTO: REUTERS/JIM BOURG

legitimate messages from fake news will not only be a task of the voters but also of the campaigns themselves. Evidently, these developments will make campaigning more like an “information war” than an election campaign. Campaign expenditures will increase, consequently the war chests of candidates may become a serious determinant to the success.

The second challenge is to make people vote. Considering the health risks associated with in-person voting, there is a growing demand for expanding the options for voting by mail. There are two ways of mail-in voting: universal mail-in voting, where all voters can vote by mail, and absentee balloting, where the voters can ask for a ballot via mail. Five states—Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington and Utah—have had the universal mail-in balloting system for a long time, while three states—California, Nebraska

and North Dakota—allow individual counties to conduct their elections by mail. Another 30 states as well as Washington D.C. allow voters to take advantage of absentee ballot without any excuse. Democrats are pushing the demand that all states adopt universal mail-in voting. Trump has already begun a concerted campaign to undermine the process making false allegations that mail-in voting is unsafe and plagued by fraud. There is no evidence to support Trump’s claim, as studies have shown that it does not benefit one party. Trump himself has voted via mail at least in three elections, including this year’s primary election. About 16 members of his family, campaign team, and top officials in his administration have voted by mail in recent years.

The mail-in ballot issue has brought the US Postal Service into the centre of the debate. President Trump has recently appointed a

Republican fundraiser as the postmaster general. Louis DeJoy has made several changes, including getting rid of overtime for hundreds of thousands of employees and requiring mail that arrives late to be delivered the next day. These are being considered as a way of the Trump administration to slow down mail delivery and influence the result. The Republican Party’s opposition to universal mail-in voting is nothing but a political ploy and part of longstanding efforts of voter suppression. While the party supports mail-in voting in Florida and Texas, states with Republican governors, it has challenged a similar decision by Nevada in the court. However, there are some concerns whether states are ready to handle a large number of mail-in votes. In 2016, nearly one-quarter of votes were cast by mail.

The third challenge is whether the results of the election will be delayed, and the integrity of the election will be questioned. Except for a tightly contested election, the result of the election, particularly the Presidential one, is known by the early morning of Wednesday. However, if there are a large number of mail-in votes, it may not be “election night” but “election week”. The slow process of counting might add to uncertainty, unless there is a clear winner. If Trump does not lose decisively, it is likely that he will challenge the result in the court and hope for a rerun of the 2000 election. One may recall how on December 12, 2000—after a month-long legal battle following that election—the Supreme Court, in a 5-4 vote, ruled in favour of Republican candidate George W. Bush.

As the election day approaches, more problems and questions regarding the electoral process and counting will appear. However, these three challenges will remain at the front and centre until a clear winner emerges. This is a grim reminder that we are living in a different time, an era of Covid-19 which not only influences life and livelihood but political processes too.

Ali Riaz is a Distinguished Professor of Political Science at Illinois State University, and a nonresident Senior Fellow of the Atlantic Council, USA.

# Why the world needs a second Marshall Plan



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

**“L**ITTLE international aid is flowing to poorer regions to fight the epidemic.” That was the headline in a major news item circulating in early March, before the spread of Covid-19 was declared to be a “pandemic” and the virus had started

its devastating journey out of Wuhan and flattened the economic and geo-economic landscape, upending global commerce. It has been five months since then and, unfortunately, we have been getting the same dire assessment and pleas for assistance all around the world.

After World War II, the US launched an aid programme to help European countries recover from the ravages of the great war. The programme, known as the Marshall Plan, named after the US Secretary of State who played an important role in creating and marketing this plan, was instrumental in pushing the war-devastated countries like Germany, Britain, and France get back on their feet and helped accelerate post-war economic recovery. Today, as we try to undo the economic mayhem created by Covid-19, the international community must see the necessity of a concerted and coordinated effort to launch a second Marshall Plan to hoist up the hard-hit countries, and also to intelligently finance the new economy that will take shape in the post-pandemic era.

Economist Robert Shiller, a Nobel laureate, fears that the economic effects of the pandemic may take a long time to heal. Boston Consulting Group estimates the virus could obliterate as much as USD 16 trillion from global wealth this year, a 7 percent contraction, and stymie growth for five years going forward. By contrast, the 2008 financial crisis erased USD 10 trillion. Global debt, including borrowing by households, governments, and companies, has jumped to more than three times the size of the global economy, the highest ratio on record, according to

the Institute of International Finance. Mark Lowcock, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the Emergency Relief Coordinator, warned, “Covid-19 has now affected every country and almost every person on the planet.”

The question is, who will fund this new Post-Pandemic Plan (PPP)? The key contributors will have to be the US and the OECD countries, plus international organisations such as the World Bank, IMF, and ADB. Other sources could be SDG

announced initiative of EU leaders to assist their own member-states. The plan, announced on July 21, combines the multiannual financial framework (MFF) and an extraordinary recovery effort, Next Generation EU (NGEU), into a 1.824 trillion euro financial package for 2021-2027 to help the EU to rebuild after the Covid-19 pandemic, and to support investment in the green and digital transitions.

Unfortunately, some of the rich countries are dragging their feet when it comes to

World Food Program, sent out a strong message sounding the alarm by highlighting the possibility of 265 million people being vulnerable to a famine by the end of 2020. The UN appeals to wealthy nations for funding all the time, he said, but the pandemic is “a one-time phenomenon, a catastrophe we’re hitting,” so it’s not unreasonable to ask the wealthiest people and companies to give. He added: “I don’t mean just a few million. I’m talking about hundreds of millions of dollars, billions.”

The proposed PPP will offer loans and grants to countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America who have suffered a major downturn in their economy (i.e., 5 percent decline in GDP in the April-June 2020 quarter)—with no strings attached.

The “no strings attached” clause is important to remove any notion that only the market economies or US-allied nations will be the beneficiaries of the PPP. The United Nations or a newly created agency can be entrusted with managing this fund, which is initially proposed to be USD 100 billion—a mere .1 percent of the USD 8 trillion stimulus package rolled out by the world’s 20 richest countries to buttress their own economies.

Various ideas have already been floated to that end: a) enlist the legislators in the USA, the UK, and the EU to participate; b) promote equitable and sustainable economic growth; and c) strengthen the healthcare sectors to prevent future pandemics. It has been suggested that the WHO must be restructured to prevent recurrence of mishaps of the past, and countries must be transparent, communicate outbreaks of communicable diseases, and alert WHO, CDC, and regional health bodies with the utmost urgency.

There are several other precedents besides the Marshall Plan to guide this new global initiative. After WWII, the Soviet Union developed its own economic plan, known as the Molotov Plan, for the Eastern European countries that were liberated by the Red Army. In addition to the Marshall Plan, the USA also provided assistance to Japan during the occupation period and, between 1946 and 1952, the magnitude of the transfer was roughly USD 15.2 billion (in 2005 dollars),

of which 77 percent was grants and the remaining 23 percent was loans.

Last month, more than two dozen international aid agencies have told the US government that they are “increasingly alarmed” that “little to no US humanitarian assistance has reached those on the front lines”. Failure to help will result in delays in economic recovery and even potentially trigger a resurgence of the virus.

Tedros Adhanom, the WHO chief, said that more funds will be necessary in the coming months to meet the global demand for personal protective equipment, medical oxygen in hospital care, and other essential supplies. He also said that less than two-thirds of health facilities globally have hand hygiene stations, while three billion people lack soap and water at home. “If we are to stop Covid-19 or any other source of infection, and keep health workers safe, we must dramatically increase investments in soap, access to water, and alcohol-based hand rubs,” he said. “The most devastating and destabilising effects” of the novel coronavirus pandemic “will be felt in the world’s poorest countries.”

Countries such as Bangladesh that are providing shelter to refugees have repeatedly pointed out that the Rohingya camps have minimal access to personal hygiene amenities, safe drinking water, sanitation, soap, sanitisers or preventive hygiene and protective measures. Unfortunately, millions elsewhere in some countries still do not have access to clean water and sanitation facilities.

What could Bangladesh do to bolster its claim to the resources destined for vulnerable countries? All the ministries, in coordination with the PM’s Coronavirus Task Force, and in partnership with the private sector, might want to do the following: 1) track the funding available for developing countries and go for it; 2) seek foreign direct investment (FDI) aggressively; and 3) train and assist the business community to reach out to international businesses and to get ready for the next business boom.

Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist and works in information technology. Currently, he is a Senior Research Fellow at the International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI), a think-tank in Boston, USA.



PHOTO: AFP

assistance, Global Environmental Fund, and the Gulf states. The UN has already issued an urgent solicitation to governments, companies, and the super-rich to contribute to a USD 6.7 billion fund for immediate humanitarian assistance. However, this amount is just a fraction of the hundreds of billions of USD that will be needed to fund the PPP.

The model for PPP could be the recently

stepping up to the plate and are hesitating to even come forward in response to the UN’s earlier call, in March, for the measly USD 2 billion included in the initial appeal. Only half of this money was raised, mainly from contributions by Great Britain, Germany, and the European Commission. Persian Gulf countries, Japan, and Canada are still but minor contributors to this fund.

David Beasley, executive director of the

QUOTABLE Quote

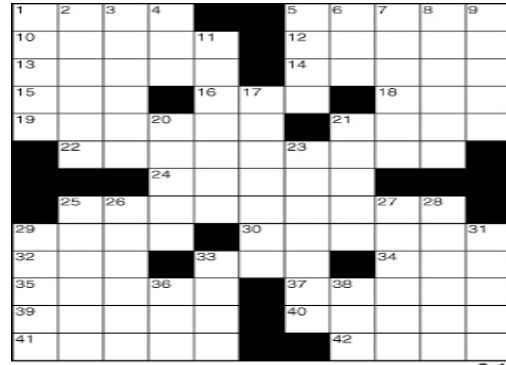


THOMAS MANN (1875-1955) German author.

All interest in disease and death is only another expression of interest in life.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Scheme
  - 5 Puts on ice
  - 10 Ancient Greek colony
  - 12 Let on
  - 13 Scale
  - 14 Note from the boss
  - 15 Kipling book
  - 16 Mamie’s mate
  - 18 Gloss target
  - 19 Horse house
  - 21 “West Side Story” gang
  - 22 Night prowlers
  - 24 Black cattle breed
  - 25 Unlikely winners
  - 29 Factual
- DOWN**
- 1 Chooses
  - 2 Nabokov novel
  - 3 Zoo resident
  - 4 Takeaway game
  - 5 Wine buy
  - 6 Horace creation
  - 7 Brunch choice
  - 8 Bounds
  - 9 Flight makeup
  - 11 Chisholm Trail end
  - 17 Movie set worker
  - 20 Sword part
  - 21 Argo skipper
  - 23 Blackjack’s cousins
  - 25 Illinois city
  - 26 Atom centers
  - 27 Demi Moore movie
  - 28 Kitchen fixtures
  - 29 Bulletin board items
  - 31 Reviewer Roger
  - 33 Aide: Abbr.
  - 36 Gents
  - 38 Put away



YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

CUBAN BAMBLIT  
 AMORE IMHITS  
 PLUME SPINER  
 EAR DRESSER  
 RUB SICKAN  
 STOP OTTER  
 NOR SAY  
 ASTER RIPS  
 ACT FOG SIT  
 FURRIER LEO  
 IMEAN OZARK  
 REEVE PENCK  
 ENTER ENDED

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinon@gmail.com.