

Donald Trump- using democracy to an autocratic future?

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

THE avalanche of Donald Trump's presidential campaign success reached new levels this Tuesday, after he bagged seven out of eleven state primaries for the Republican nomination. While his triumph thrilled his supporters to no end, it has shocked others, including the Republican Party old guards beyond belief. His straight wins in two Republican primaries before and continued dominance in opinion polls among Republican Party supporters has defied all predictions of political pundits about the early stumbling of his campaign. He is proving to their dismay that he is not a flash in the pan.

It seems that the more outrageous, scornful, and combative Trump is in his speech, the more popular he gets among his followers. He has spared no insult, no profanity, and no indignity in upbraiding and criticising his opponents, minority groups, the media, foreigners and foreign governments, and even the Pope. The more strident and offensive he becomes, the more his supporters cheer. The result is that among the remaining five Republican Presidential candidates, Trump rules the roost. And the irony is that Donald Trump is not the Party's choice, he is an outsider who foisted himself on it.

Early in his campaign, when Donald Trump attracted thousands to his political rallies who he thrilled with his blusters against Mexican immigrants (calling them rapists, and murderers) and threatened to stop them with his now famous wall, political observers explained these rallies of people, mainly lower and lower middle class whites, as disgruntled with the government and the failure of a dysfunctional Republican establishment to stem a perceived economic depression. When Trump expanded his rhetoric from illegal immigration to fighting terrorism in the wake of the Paris and California terrorist attacks, he found a new object to attack - the Muslims - his crowd liked him even more. As he started to win the primaries, political



PHOTO: NATIONALINTEREST

observers opined that he was winning because he was pandering to the base instincts of a populace, namely anger, hatred, and xenophobia. But now, with the once deemed impossible Republican nomination becoming more and more of a reality, Trump has launched his latest tirade, against the media, with threats to pursue them with new libel laws once he becomes president. He has targeted not only the print media but also electronic media. Their fault? They had the temerity to criticise him and surfaced questions that challenge his authenticity.

With the mindset that Donald Trump has and demonstrates, it will not be a surprise that he will be intolerant of any opposition

either to him or his speech. (Policies are out of question, since he has none). What bothers people is the enthusiasm with which his crowd receives his every utterance, defiance, and stick-it-to-you comments. In his rallies, he threatened and actually used his security guards to throw out people who dared raise a slogan against him, much to his supporters' delight. He simulated by gesture and action some of history's well known dictators.

There is nothing wrong in Donald Trump trying to attract votes. Nor is there anything wrong if he draws a lot of people to his rally who are charmed by his utterances however loathsome they are. Both Trump and his

supporters are exercising their democratic rights of freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. They are also following the Democratic right of voting for their chosen candidate in the elections. But what is scary to observers, in particular the press, is the way he is attacking the press for their criticism of him, and bringing out issues that apparently are not to Trump's liking. What is also alarming is the unrelenting cheer that Trump receives from his supporters who apparently are not bothered by Trump's bellicose declaration that he would bring new libel laws to punish the media when he is president.

In his latest threat to the media, Trump is

articulating a wish which is unfortunately a reality in many countries. A recent editorial write up in The Washington Post observed that history shows how some of the authoritarian leaders in the past achieved their powers using the ballot box. They used a democratic system to rise to power by manipulating people with xenophobia, ethnic and religious prejudices and finding scapegoats for their economic woes. Once in power, they shut out all opposition including freedom of speech, the very foundation of democracy. Uganda, Russia, Venezuela, and Turkey are some recent examples. Who knows if Trump is getting inspired by these examples?

It is said that democracy delivers power through the ballot box, but the ballot box can also become a tool to augment the rise of an autocrat who does not believe in the essentials of democracy. We do not have to turn to Hitler or Mussolini to illustrate this. In recent times, many democratically elected leaders have used their new found mandate to alter the Constitution, or to change the rules of the game to favor their continuance in power. In the world today, it has become commonplace for leaders to lock the door behind them once they achieve power. In some countries, the ballot boxes have been used as proxies to obtain the mandate to sustain the illusion of democracy. In other cases, a mandate to rule for a fixed term has been extended ad infinitum. Opposition has been muffled, freedoms curtailed, and the government has operated by fiat and rule of force.

It may be a long while before Donald Trump reaches his El Dorado where only he can rule with impunity, banish people he does not like, and punish people who oppose him. But even to reach his immediate target, the Republican nomination for presidency, he has many battles to win, reaching beyond the xenophobic and bigoted crowd he has generated so far. To do that, he has to win people with more than the approbrium he generates among the saner people of this country with his hateful speeches.

The writer is a political commentator and analyst.

Time Rahul stepped up to the plate

KALYANI SHANKAR

THERE were expectations that the aggressive Congress Vice President Rahul Gandhi might lead the attack on the Modi government in Parliament during the current budget session going by his aggressive postures outside on the JNU sedition issue as well as the death of Dalit student Rohith Vemula in Hyderabad University. But he remained silent during the debate.

Why was he silent? Rahul Gandhi claimed that the Modi government was scared and would not allow him to speak in Parliament. "The government said they are open to a discussion. Yes. But they will not let me speak in Parliament. I will speak (in Parliament) but they will not let me speak because they are scared of what I will say." If this is true, then how does Rahul propose to counter the government?

In past sessions, Rahul, a parliamentarian since 2004, had not distinguished himself for regular attendance. Nor was he known for participation in Parliament debates - his speeches in the house have been few and far between. Even after Modi took over, Rahul had not made a mark in the House until his aggressive speech on Modi's suit boot ki sarkar. He spoke for the first time from the opposition benches - on the agrarian crisis - after his much publicised return from a sab-batical on April 20, 2015. It was an aggressive speech which brought cheer to the Congress Party MPs expected him to repeat this performance.

There are some who feel that he missed an opportunity to counter the attack by the government on Vemula's death and the JNU sedition issues. In both these cases, he had shown a keen interest and expressed his solidarity by visiting Hyderabad and the JNU campus and had sat with the protesters. The

Congress wants him to be a youth icon, and he has been targeting this constituency since he joined politics in 2004. The Congress was not isolated on either issue as the entire opposition had taken it up.

Where Rahul failed was in speaking inside the House, the only place where ministers are held accountable. Perhaps it was a calculated strategy for the Congress to field Jyotiraditya Scindia who made an effective speech on these issues with Rahul sitting next to him. Even when he was attacked by BJP leaders for sitting with the JNU students, whom they called "Maoists", or during the frontal attack by HRD Minister Smriti Irani, Rahul did not offer a counter. Perhaps the Congress strategists did not want him to be at the receiving end of attacks, as they were already making him a party to the JNU agitation.

Moreover, Irani has been projecting herself as his main challenger by visiting Amethi many times while Rahul is pitting himself against Prime Minister Modi. He obviously decided not to get provoked when fingers were pointed at him as well as his family, including allegations by aggressive BJP leaders of the role played by Pandit Nehru in the Kashmir issue.

Congress insiders say that Rahul would intervene later but will that help? Had he initiated the debate on the Vemula and JNU issues in the Lok Sabha with the same vigour which he has shown outside the Parliament, it would have sent a very strong signal not only to his party leaders, but also to party workers, and added to his stature. A recent India Today poll suggested that his image was growing fast as a challenger to Prime Minister Modi and there is no doubt that his visibility has increased and he is getting more space in the media.

If Rahul means business, the first thing he has to do is to lead from the front. Where else



PHOTO: PRAVEEN KHANNA/EXPRESS

can he do this than in Parliament? Speaking in the House and playing the role of an "angry young man" could benefit him.

The second thing he has to take care of is the matter of regular attendance. Rahul's Parliament record so far is not much to speak of. When he comes to the Parliament, he gets the chance to interact informally with not only the opposition but also the treasury benches. His great grandfather was said to be a regular in the Parliament, who would never miss important speeches.

The third thing he needs to do is mobilise the opposition and prove that he can lead. Sonia Gandhi did that by making senior politicians like Jyoti Basu and Karunanidhi accept her leadership of the United Progressive Alliance in 2004. The time is ripe for Rahul to seize this opportunity and show his mettle.


The fourth thing he needs to keep in mind is that instead of giving a television bite here and there, he should have more media and public interaction, particularly when the

party is in the opposition. This will benefit in the long run.

The problem for both the Congress and the BJP is that the Congress continues to behave as if it is the ruling party while the BJP has not been able to get out of its opposition mode. So they both end up playing the wrong role. This mindset has to change.

The writer is a political commentator and founder member of the Indian Women Press Corps. Copyright: The Statesman/ANN

QUOTABLE Quote



NOAM CHOMSKY

Changes and progress very rarely are gifts from above. They come out of struggles from below.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Some statutory
- 6 Pushovers
- 11 Fluttery tree
- 12 Exemplary
- 13 Plow pioneer
- 14 Eccentric
- 15 Tooth coating
- 17 Purpose
- 19 Reunion group
- 20 Retired plane
- 23 Wreckage
- 25 Mayberry kid
- 26 Plane's relative velocity
- 28 Former senator Bayh
- 29 Mean
- 30 Determined
- 31 --Tome and Principe
- 32 Calendar box
- 33 Poise
- 35 "Superman" star
- 38 Music's Abdul
- 41 Brother of Moses
- 42 Bugs bugs him
- 43 Endowment
- 44 Train stop

DOWN

- 1 Naughty
- 2 Purpose
- 3 One might tow a skier
- 4 Small seabird
- 5 Enter like a burglar
- 6 Make broader
- 7 Fan's favorite
- 8 Got together
- 9 Butter bit
- 10 Cuffy
- 16 Get a wrong number
- 17 Borders
- 18 Audacity
- 20 Driver's slower
- 21 Tuscan city
- 22 Negligee buy
- 24 Use the track
- 25 Choose
- 27 Was nosy
- 31 Wasn't thrifty
- 33 Stratford river
- 34 Like a gander
- 35 Cloth scrap
- 36 Stirrup setting
- 37 Pitcher's number
- 39 Summer sign
- 40 Museum stuff

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S	M	I	L	E	S	T	A	B	
C	O	V	E	S	T	K	E	L	I
A	V	A	S	T	E	L	I	A	S
R	E	N	T	S	N	E	E	Z	E
A	S	H	G	O	T	D	E	S	
B	O	O	T	E	D	U	P		
N	E	A	R	C	O	A	T		
F	I	B	N	A	Y	D	E	E	
O	N	E	H	I	T	V	E	S	T
I	D	I	O	M	L	I	N	D	A
L	I	N	G	O	P	E	D	A	L
S	A	G	S		S	W	A	Y	S

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

YOU LOOK VERY PLEASED WITH YOURSELF. WHAT'S UP?

THERE WAS A ROBBERY IN THE DRESS SHOP

AND THE HUNKY COP LISTED ME AS A "PERSON OF INTEREST!"

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

WHEN SWEETHEART, YOU CAN'T CALL YOUR PUPPY THAT NAME.

YES, IT'S NOT A NICE WORD.

LET'S THINK OF A NEW NAME LIKE BINGO OR BORO.

I GIVE UP. WE'RE GOING TO NEED A BIGGER SWEAR JAR.