

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF DEMOCRACY

# Can democracies around the world be resuscitated?



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Day of  
Democracy



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

**THE OVERTON WINDOW**  
**T**HE United Nations General Assembly agreed to observe September 15 as the International Day of Democracy in 2007. The overture of the resolution asserted that: "...democracy is a universal value based on the freely-expressed will of people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems, and their full participation in all aspects of life."  
 It also states: "...while democracies share common features, there is no single model of democracy and that democracy does not belong to any country or region."  
 Despite that, it will not be wrong to say that the modern form of liberal democracy that we commonly see around the world today has its roots in the west. Political theorist Sheldon S Wolin in his book, "Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism", attributes its creation to the framers of the US constitution and describes it as "modern managed democracy".  
 This managed democracy relies largely on secrecy and deception to regulate the will of the populace. But not everywhere. As in some countries, there is still not enough need for that. And its managers are able to more overtly control the people through the sheer use of force. Still, even there, we see the existing power structures try to portray themselves as democratic to a certain extent. The underlying reasons why they do so, along with the fact that people around the world are gradually beginning to question the legitimacy of these "so-called" democracies, does provide some hope for true democracy blossoming out of its currently "managed" cocoon.  
 In his much cited book, "The Third Wave", Samuel Huntington argued that after a first wave of democratisation in the nineteenth century and a second wave after World War II, a third wave of democracy started to sweep

through the world with the overthrow of dictatorship in Portugal in 1974, leading all the way up to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the fall of apartheid in South Africa. Around the same time, Francis Fukuyama and others too were talking about how the spread of democracy to every corner of the world was inevitable.  
 The belief that democratic politics was an indispensable element of modernity began to grow. As countries hit a certain economic, social, and technological threshold, it became increasingly evident that more educated and economically successful populations demand greater political participation as a matter of course.  
 Of course, democracy didn't simply arrive automatically on its own. Movements of civil society, often assisted by reformers in government, demands for free elections, etc., all contributed to the gradual establishment of democratic institutions, greater government transparency, equal rights, and so on.  
 However, somewhere along the line, things, it seems, started to fall apart. And the democracy that was promised and seen as inevitable, didn't arrive or started to get lost on its way.  
 Today, there are plenty of examples that illustrate the discontent people have for their respective democracies—according to a 2018 Pew research, a majority of people—out of 27 at least formally democratic countries polled—are dissatisfied with democracy. The gradual rise of those who have been described as "populist" leaders in more advanced democracies, along with large scale protests in countries around the world like France, where the Gillet Jaunes have been marching for 40 straight weeks now, are also demonstrative of this.  
 And while there are obvious reasons for their discontent, such as inequality, questionable elections, increased intolerance towards free speech and dissent, why are populations becoming more and more agitated and pessimistic about the democracy itself that they have? And what explains the rise of such conditions?

There are, of course, numerous causes that are leading to the decline of democracy worldwide. But the ones that once gave rise to it, sadly too, have become some of the prime responsible for its fall.  
 For example, over the years, we have seen a gradual decline in the impact of civil society in nearly all countries—at least when it comes to its contribution in moving society towards greater democratisation. Today, we no longer see as many towering, principled figures from within civil society, stepping up and speaking out as boldly for the rights of their fellow men or women, as we had in the past.  
 One reason for this could be the fact that it is much more profitable (socially, economically, etc.) to serve the existing power structure from within civil society today, than it ever was previously. But that alone cannot be the reason. As those civil society members who had spoken up in previous generations, too, had to overcome similar (although not in scale) temptations, which they did. However, for whatever reason, the number of civil society members who overtly or covertly support unjust power establishments today, relative to the number that opposes them, seems quite high—thereby, they in general have substantially distanced civil society as

a whole from the masses. This has caused the masses to lack any sense of direction or roadmap, which they can use to dig themselves out of their current circumstances.  
 Another reason that has led to the decline of democracy is increased government opacity accompanied with the deployment of more and more sophisticated surveillance tools that are used to constantly monitor the masses, as well as manipulate people's behaviour. Naturally, people who are continuously under surveillance refrain from saying what they truly believe, in fear of what might happen to them as a result—especially when they are aware they are under surveillance.  
 But for democracy—which is essentially rule by the people—to function, people *have to get involved* in the governance process, which is being hampered by them not participating in dialogues and governance related discussions, as they are no longer free to speak their minds because of the fear that arises from always being listened to and watched.  
 Also, for people to make decisions that are most in their interests, they must be informed about what is really going on. But the manipulation of individuals made possible by information gathered through

mass surveillance, often gets them to make wrong choices.  
 Moreover, increased secrecy when it comes to government decisions means people lack the necessary information in regards to government institutions which, as a result, are becoming less democratic. The capture of these institutions by undemocratic forces such as various forms of special interest groups, as is becoming evident by the day—including in our own country, where the law and different forms of regulations apply to some, but not to others—means that the undoing of whatever democratic progress was made, is now quickening.  
 This de-democratisation has been ongoing for quite some time now. It is only because of this quickening that people are now noticing it more. But here, perhaps, lies hope.  
 One of the main reasons why democracy has been in decline is because people en masse started to believe it inevitable that democracy would triumph all around the world, like Fukuyama and others—but that it would triumph automatically. That, however, has never happened. And it never will.  
 Because ultimately, democracy refers to "rule by the people". It doesn't mean the disappearance of government or no governance. It simply means people get to choose the form of government they have and what type of governance they are under.  
 And frankly, people have always had that choice. As they do now.  
 The problem is that, once the "we are a democracy" drum has been beaten enough times, people tend to forget what a democracy means, and get distracted by all the bread and circuses—that, to be fair, are increasing in numbers and spectacularity every day—and stop participating in the governance process as a result.  
 And every time that happens, whatever democracy a society enjoys, inevitably dies—to inevitably rise again, but only after the people have woken up to the reality of its death, which exactly is what seems to be happening at the moment.

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# Donald Trump's Afghanistan Strategy

**ASM ALI ASHRAF**  
**I**N a self-styled twitter message, on September 8, 2019, US President Donald Trump claimed he had cancelled a secret talk with the Taliban leaders and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani that was due to be held at the historic Camp David presidential retreat. Trump also tweeted that his decision came in response to a recent terrorist attack in Kabul that killed 11 people including a US soldier.  
 Media pundits opine that the attack was part of a negotiating strategy of the Taliban leaders, who preferred a bilateral deal with the United States first, before working out an intra-Afghan reconciliation process with the incumbent Afghan government. But the Trump administration was insistent on a trilateral deal that would allow the United States to withdraw more than one-third of 14,000 US troops from Afghanistan in less than six months in exchange for release of Taliban prisoners in Afghanistan and Taliban's assurance for counterterrorism cooperation.  
 The tweet from US president raises two questions for students of security studies: is Trump's effort to negotiate with the Taliban a cheap tactic for improving his approval rate or part of a much larger counterterrorism strategy in Afghanistan? How much does Trump's strategy in Afghanistan resemble the strategies pursued by his two immediate predecessors—George W Bush and Barack Obama?  
 Despite the familiar characterisation of Trump as an inexperienced dealmaker in foreign policy, Trump appears to be quite serious about secret talks with the Taliban, partly because he would like to capitalise on this for boosting up his re-election possibility; and partly for concentrating on America's geopolitical competition with China and Russia.  
 This is precisely why in September 2018 he appointed Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-born American diplomat, to serve as a special envoy on Afghanistan. Over the past year, Khalilzad facilitated nine rounds of negotiations in Qatar with the senior Taliban leaders to establish peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. The negotiations have so far focused on four issues: Taliban assurance that Afghanistan would not be used again as a terrorist sanctuary; complete withdrawal of US and NATO forces; intra-Afghan reconciliation; and a permanent ceasefire.  
 Trump's efforts to talk with the

Taliban may seem by many as an aberration because when in 2012 the Obama regime planned for secret negotiations with the Taliban, Trump did not hesitate to criticise the move. However, a careful reading of Trump's Afghanistan and South Asia strategy, unveiled in August 2017 at a major foreign policy speech delivered from Fort Myer military base, clearly indicates that he had considered dialogue with Taliban to complement US military strategy in Afghanistan.  
 At Fort Myer, Trump highlighted three pillars of US strategy in Afghanistan: (a) conditions-based troops withdrawal; (b) comprehensive strategy comprising diplomatic, economic, and military power; and

has also prioritised direct negotiations with the Taliban, something Obama regime did not consider very seriously fearing public backlash and assessing the risk factors. Third, Obama's Af-Pak strategy recognised the value of Pakistan's military offensives in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan and made strategic dialogue with Pakistan to achieve significant progress in Afghanistan.  
 Trump departs from Obama's policy by tilting the balance in favour of India: he condemned Pakistan for playing a dangerous double game by extending support for violent extremists which target the US and coalition forces in Afghanistan. In the end, Trump called for abandoning

and toppled the Taliban regime by December 2001. The debate concerns whether the US should focus only on a narrow counterterrorism strategy or venture into a much ambitious nation-building task. This question has real life implications for the US military forces and the diplomatic community.  
 Counter-terrorism is an enemy-centric strategy focusing primarily on capturing or killing terrorists, whereas nation-building is a population-centric strategy that privileges securing population centres and long-term investment in infrastructures and institutions. The first requires a small military footprint and limited resources whereas the second requires a large military footprint and huge resources.  
 Trump has decisively chosen the first and least-cost option, and whether it will produce the desired outcome in the form of a military victory remains a big question. At Fort Myer he wanted to re-assure the American public: "We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists." This is absolutely why there is little chance for the United States to increase its troops level in Afghanistan by reversing the course. This is primarily because the expansion of the American troops' mandate in Afghanistan from counterterrorism to counterinsurgency to nation building has already cost a trillion dollars, and 2,450 soldiers in the past eighteen years. A further troop surge would put the burden on to the shoulders of American taxpayers.  
 As the United States observed the 9/11 anniversary, military commanders in Afghanistan confronted some stark realities about the threat dynamics: Taliban militias now control more than half of Afghan territory, a few hundred al Qaeda terrorists are still active in the country, and the Islamic State Khorasan is seeking to expand its support base in Afghanistan.  
 Leaving Afghanistan at the mercy of the Taliban may not lend the United States an effective exit strategy. An Afghan power-sharing deal must be complemented by engagement of regional actors like India and Pakistan, and long-term support of the international community. The enemy-centric counterterrorism strategy also needs to be replaced by a larger post-conflict reconstruction process designed and managed by the Afghan people.

Pakistan and building strategic partnership with India.  
 Despite these divergences, Obama and Trump appear to converge on the points that they both inherited a "long war" and wanted a rapid exit strategy. Yet, they were convinced to increase the troop level—under Obama presidency, US troops level almost doubled up from 60,000 to 110,000. Although Trump did not order an Obama-style big troop surge, he did authorise the deployment of an additional 4,000 troops making the total US troop level in Afghanistan 14,000.  
 Despite ordering a small troop increase, Trump has revived an old debate, first confronted by the George W Bush administration, when it started the Afghanistan War in October 2001



Afghan security forces pass near a crater from a Taliban bombing in Kabul on Sept. 3. At least 16 people died. PHOTO: AFP/GETTY IMAGES

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**ALBERT CAMUS**  
 1913–1960  
 French philosopher, author, and journalist.

*In order to understand the world, one has to turn away from it on occasion.*

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott

**ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY**

**15 September, 1928**  
**ALEXANDER FLEMING**  
 DISCOVERS PENICILLIN

Scottish bacteriologist Alexander Fleming discovers penicillin while studying influenza

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