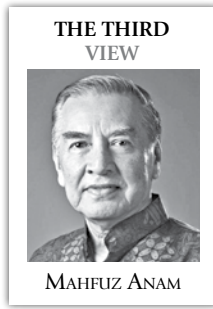


Democracy's mistake, democracy corrects

Institutions were the key



THE THIRD VIEW

MAHFUZ ANAM

AMERICANS exercised their democratic right and elected Donald Trump as president in 2016. Four years later, they exercised the same right again

and corrected what had turned out to be a disastrous mistake. In the interim, they suffered for their mistake but did not disrupt the system. They waited for four years and then used democracy to "right" the wrong.

There are three important lessons here.

One, the American people did not lose faith in democracy and in the electoral system.

Two, the self-correction that they eventually brought about could only have happened because of the institutions of democracy that they had built, namely the judiciary, the legislature, the administrative system and the media.

The third lesson, and most important, is that democracy can err and people's verdict can be fallible. Due to populism, ultra-nationalism, religion-based campaigns or even predominance of prejudice and hatred, people may end up electing charlatans for whom democracy is only a weapon to climb to power, not a system to practise once having gained it. The only guarantee of self-correction in such cases is to build and empower the aforementioned institutions of democracy that can withstand any onslaught on freedom, rule of law and personal and collective rights.

Imagine the comfort we can derive from the knowledge that for every arbitrary measure of a government, we can always count on the courts to stand up for justice; that however difficult the situation, a public representative will always uphold the rights of the people; that regardless of the pressure of the powers that be, public bodies will function only by abiding by established norms and practices; and that whatsoever insurmountable the obstacle may seem, the media will always uphold facts and the right to free speech.

Through one judgement after another, the US judiciary negated the disastrous impact of "democracy's mistake" as shown by many of Trump's decisions. Most importantly, it protected the "people's will" as expressed through the November 2020 elections. Sixty-one courts, spread all over the country, each with their own political preferences, threw out the petitions of Trump supporters due to lack of evidence that widespread fraud had occurred in

voting. Just imagine what would have happened to a smooth transfer of power if only one of the courts upheld any one of the myriad of petitions for hearing. The courts were not only decisive and unambiguous but also extremely prompt to ensure the election process was not hampered or delayed.

The role of the two Houses was a real demonstration of the judiciousness of separation of power in the political system of the US. Through repeated hearings and the impeachment process—though the Senate and the House had opposite goals—executive arbitrariness was greatly curbed. Trump always knew that he couldn't get away with everything he did. His second impeachment, unprecedented for a president in US history, stands as a damning indictment of Trump's rule even if ultimately he is not convicted by the Senate. A conviction cannot be totally ruled out, however, because of the grievous nature of his involvement in the mob attack on the Capitol and the widespread indignation that it generated among the legislatures of both sides.

Because of the strength of the administrative system, even after getting elected and with the enormous executive power in his command, Trump could not stop the appointment of a special prosecutor and the subsequent carrying out of an independent investigation on his actions with regard to Ukraine. All these actions were carried out by the Justice Department which is an integral part of the executive branch of the government that comes under the president. So strong is the norm and the weight of precedence—as exemplified by the independent probe against Richard Nixon in the Watergate scandal—that Trump could not influence, let alone stop, the Mueller investigation although it was completely directed against him.

The media played a seminal role in convincing the American public about the dangers the US democracy faced under Trump. This is again an example of how institutions of democracy helped the American voters to make up their mind. It is not that the US media spoke in unison—CNN and Fox News were like night and day—but it was in their great diversity that the US voters found ways of making up their mind. Imagine the state of US democracy without the free press. Trump was challenged in every step of the way and his lies revealed within minutes on every occasion. Though he called journalists all sorts of names and termed their investigative stories as nothing but fake, yet in the end, it is the free media that came out on top, and with it, the "people's will" and the American democracy.

The whole world waited with bated breath to see Trump go. Every minute's delay seemed too long and too dangerous. Whether he will do

something to jeopardise the Biden inauguration—perhaps through a domestic incident, or a foreign adventure—was a question probably in everyone's mind. It was almost to the minute that Americans and those of us around the world were counting to see the Trump era end. I never thought that I would ever say this of a departing American President but I am doing so—good riddance to bad rubbish.

Seldom, if ever, did a departing president leave such a wreck of an administration as Trump did, which will require so much damage control on the part of his successor. As promised, President Joe Biden, within hours of his inauguration, signed 17 executive orders discarding some of the most controversial of Trump's decisions and

freedom, most of them tried to emulate the very same values in their own freedom struggles and later incorporated them while framing their respective constitutions. (Our own declaration of independence and constitution were greatly inspired by the American example). It was as if he was determined to wipe clean the core attraction of the United States—the world's greatest, shiniest and most effective melting pot, its most successful and living celebration of diversity.

Regrettably, to the 70 million-plus people who voted for Trump, he appears to have succeeded, at least to an extent.

As we happily leave behind the Trump era, we need to ask what happened to a country of freedom and diversity, rule of law, individual rights and decency

power. According to her, "The white power movement in America wants a revolution. Its soldiers are not lone wolves but highly organised cadres motivated by a coherent and deeply troubling worldview made of white supremacy, virulent anti-communism and apocalyptic faith." On how it all began, the author says, "Returning to America ripped apart by a war (in Vietnam) they felt they were not allowed to win, a small group of war veterans and active-duty military personnel and their civilian personnel concluded that waging war on their own country was justified. They united people from a variety of militant groups, including Klansmen, neo-Nazis, skinheads, radical tax protesters and white separatists to form a new movement of loosely affiliated independent cells to avoid detection. The white power movement operated with discipline and clarity undertaking assassinations, armed robbery, counterfeiting and weapons trafficking."

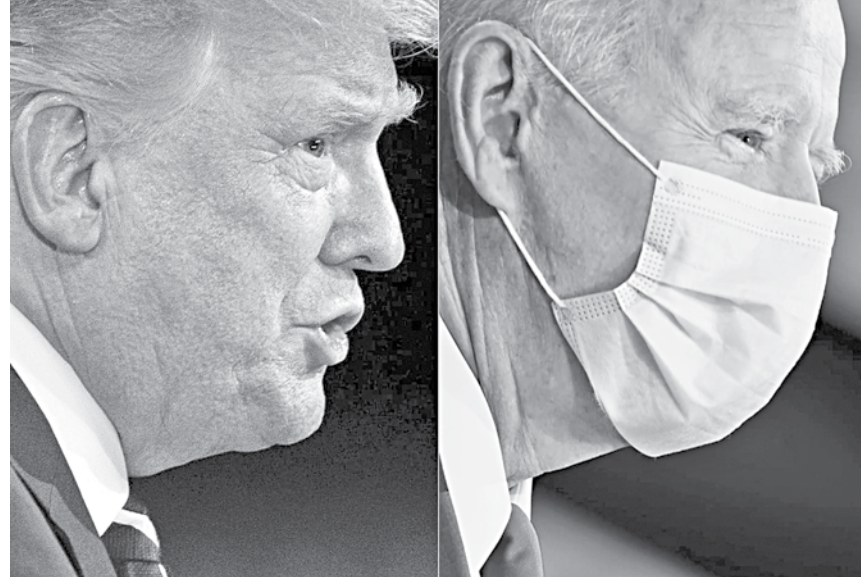
A most worrying prognosis for the US and the rest of the democratic world.

As for how this tragic drama of US politics will play out is an open question. Biden-Harris victory does not really seem to signal its end. People thought that the election of the first Black president, Barack Obama, signalled the coming-of-age of American liberalism and that it was the final nail in the racist coffin. The reality turned out to be the very opposite. It triggered a severe backlash from white supremacists that brought Trump to power. It is an open question whether Biden's election victory will energise the liberals to work harder to truly win their country for democracy, or they will become complacent and be caught unprepared, as had happened when Trump sailed through, when the hydra-headed monster raises its head again. The fact that 70 million or more people voted for Trump should always serve to remind us of the enormity of the task ahead for the American people.

As for us, aspiring to build democracy in our societies, the lesson from the US experience is that just exercising our right to vote is not sufficient for democracy to prevail. We also need to establish and empower institutions of democracy like the parliament, judiciary, statutory bodies, oversight institutions, civil society and the media to nurture and help grow democracy and protect it in times of need, as the US institutions did through every attempt by Trump to subvert it.

As for now, and for us in the rest of the world, after four years of "Make America Great Again", we would be happy if Biden and Harris just "Make America Normal Again".

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'Seldom, if ever, did a departing president leave such a wreck of an administration as Trump did, which will require so much damage control on the part of his successor.'

PHOTO COLLAGE: AFP

launched a massive and urgent Covid-19 response programme, including steps to return to the Paris Climate Accord, cancel the travel restrictions on some Muslim countries, return to WHO, etc.

Trump took us to a US that we did not know of and never thought existed, and which Joe Biden and Kamala Harris will have to extricate their country from and restore to being a world leader that they want to be.

The man who came to the Oval Office promising to "Make America Great Again" has left that office in shambles, bringing the greatest shame to the US by disavowing the fundamental values of the US Declaration of Independence and its constitution, which served to gamer pride for Americans over the centuries. Given Trump's disdain for history, he probably had no idea that after the Second World War, when Europe was rebuilding itself and when most of the colonies were gaining their

that we thought we knew. The US has now revealed its horrendously ugly underbelly of white supremacist ideology that incorporates racism, violence, prejudice, myopia and ignorance. Their disdain for facts and science as well as hatred for people of other races and cultures have shocked the world, and more so the majority of Americans, who are now wondering when and how their country got derailed from their founding principles.

Trump couldn't have just fallen from the sky. It is now being discovered that the politics he represents has been simmering under the veneer of American liberalism for a long time, and that the roots of white power movement are strong and widespread and will likely survive Trump's departure from office.

In her book "Bring the War Home", published in July 2019, Kathleen Belew, a historian at the University of Chicago, tries to explain the rise of white

THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE PROJECT

Is BCS creating a mismatch and imbalance in the job sector?

The Academic Experience Project is a faculty-student collaborative work aimed to glean insights about the experiences of tertiary-level students. Each Friday, The Daily Star publishes an op-ed highlighting its findings. This is the twelfth article of the series.

IQRAMUL GAFUR and SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

IT is 8.30 in the morning. Suman, a fourth-year student of one of the well-reputed universities of Bangladesh, walks towards the central library of his university. A wave of students is approaching the library at the same time. It may be a heartening sight for many, unaware of the reason behind the crowd. They are likely to assume that it's natural for university students to congregate daily at the library—an important place on campus where learning is shared, strengthened and enhanced.

But the reason for the congregation is not a class project, or to learn from the latest journal articles, or to conduct research. They are gathering there to prepare for what is now one of the most lucrative jobs that many students crave: Bangladesh Civil Service.

The scenario inside the library is bewildering: MP3, Oracle, Assurance, and Confidence publications' books and materials are strewn everywhere, occupying every imaginable space and study table of the library. These books and materials are specially designed for government job aspirants to help them prepare for the BCS examination. Some use the partition board of their table to stick a world map. Floor space is also scant. All the while, a layer of dust gathers on the classic books, reference materials, and research journals on the library shelves as they remain untouched even out of curiosity.

This scenario plays out not just in Suman's university; most universities in Bangladesh, including the technology-focused ones, are also overwhelmed by the BCS fad. Dr Muhammed Sadique,



File photo of students queuing in front of the central library of Dhaka University, waiting to get in.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

former chairman of Bangladesh Public Service Commission, said in an interview that reformation in salary structure has attracted many graduates to compete for a government job. Even many engineering students from BUET as well as medical students, with their extraordinary training and opportunities, who can usually get a job just after graduation with nearly twice the salary (or more) of a BCS cadre, are also preparing to sit for the BCS examination in large numbers. This is indeed a trend.

Social status, prestige, power, economic benefit, and a stable job are becoming critical issues for many graduates. Moreover, the current socio-economic and political trends seem to provide signals for most students to lean towards government jobs. According to some, salary is not

the only reason behind the trend; the perks of the job fashioned by one's imagination, network, and skilled craft are also driving many to seek the lucrative BCS job. In less than six years, the number of applicants has doubled—from 244,000 applicants in 35th BCS to 475,000 applicants in 41st BCS (with the exception of 39th which was "special")—and surpassed all previous records. The curve continues to reflect a rising trend.

No one can underestimate the importance of recruiting skilled civil servants for the proper functioning of a state. Their skills in administration, due process, fairness and justice can be a boon for the citizenry. But is a biology, medical or engineering student, vying for an administrative position, placed in the appropriate technical position (agriculture, health services,

or infrastructure development)? Are they contributing in the areas in which they may have developed core skills? Or are they going to the police, income tax, or some other government service that is misaligned with their basic area of training, never again to be used? If the investments made in training our human resources in certain sectors are diverted to sectors in which they must be retrained, the initial training becomes useless and the investment loss can be colossal.

The current trend may in fact be placing the private sector on a precarious edge. According to a report by the Transparency International Bangladesh, every year USD 3.1 billion are being officially drained from Bangladesh's foreign exchange coffers by expatriate employees simply because the industry is unable to recruit locally. The real drain is likely more serious than what the TIB report portrays. Lack of skilled people required to work in the private sector has paved the way for foreign workers to come in and command lucrative salaries, despite there being millions of local unemployed graduates.

A survey by the Academic Experience Project on students' satisfaction provides additional insights by focusing on whether a university degree relates to future careers: more students than one can imagine believe that university education and job prospects are simply not related. And with students now aiming straight for the BCS, will it be possible for the universities—their faculties and curriculums—to satisfy them with subject-specific knowledge? Let alone research, a big chunk of students does not even focus on their

area of academic studies. They just want a certificate attesting their completion of a four-year graduation degree to compete for the BCS.

The desire for government jobs, which are limited in numbers, may have also made many graduates jobless. With the age limit to apply and obtain a government job being thirty, many keep trying multiple times while avoiding seeking a job in their majors. And if they fail to manage a government position within the age limit, there is a high likelihood that they will remain jobless for a considerable period of time. The private sector, it is generally understood, recruits fresh graduates within one year of their graduation.

The mismatch between a student's area of study and the jobs they are seeking cries out for a need to coordinate academic studies with employers across the board, including the government. The time is ripe for a serious reconsideration to rethink ways of encouraging students to pursue careers in their respective academic fields. This is not only for academia to tackle and address—it's about government policy regarding job creation in a variety of fields and the involvement of the private sector in partnership with academia to build appropriate supply chain linkages which will assure remunerative and meaningful jobs for the large pool of graduating students. The trend to obtain government jobs, driven by its incentives, must also be re-evaluated.

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