

Biden's Internal Challenges

For America to reclaim its position globally, its democracy must work at home first



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING
BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

THE tumultuous departure of Donald Trump from office has left an awful lot of wrecks in its wake, both internally and externally. The former president of the United

States has the dubious distinction of facing the double disgrace of being impeached twice, the latest one for inciting an insurrection. The second impeachment will not be without its social, racial and political fallout.

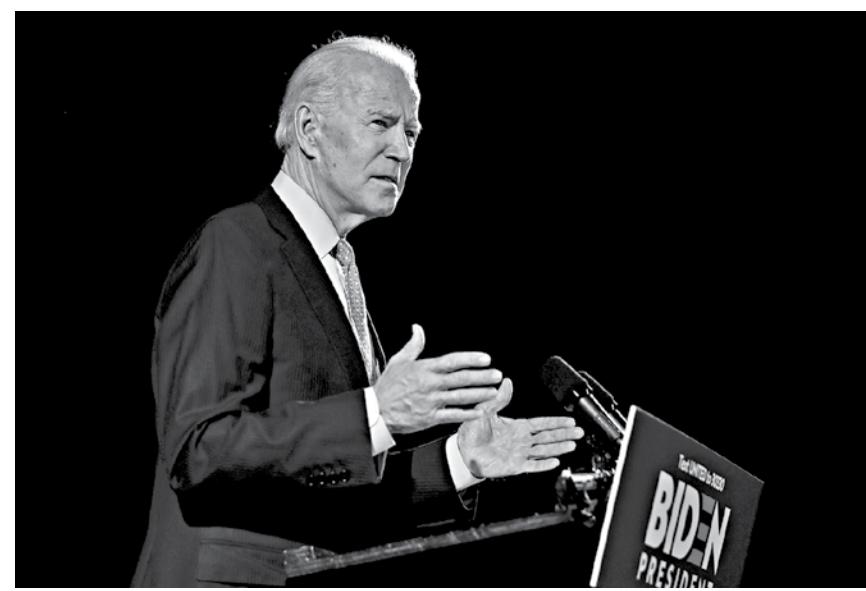
Right after the November 3, 2020 presidential election, we had asked in these very columns whether Joe Biden would be able to regain America's soul once he gets to govern the country. One of the consequences of four years of Trump has been the reduction in the threshold level of credulity of Trump voters as well as degradation of democracy in the US. The first moment of his presidency started with lies, euphemistically called alternative facts, and his last moment as president also concluded with lies. As per a Washington Post article carried on January 24, 2021, Trump made 30,573 false or misleading claims as president. Nearly half came in his final year. Most of the lies, sadly, are believed to be true by his hard-core followers.

Scholars opine that for America under Biden to reclaim its position globally, its democracy must work at

home first. The underlying message of it is that Trump's authoritarian inclinations—transgressing the well-defined line of separation among the three branches of the state, influencing various agencies and departments for his personal gains, kowtowing to autocrats, and disregarding the rule of law at home—had given a green signal to many world leaders who were disposed to such inclinations as well as pseudo-democracies where autocratic rulers with a veneer of democracy as a garb rule with iron fists by dispensing with the rule of law and human rights.

Dr Leslie Vinjamuri encapsulates these thoughts very well in a Chatham House paper, where she writes, "In the years ahead, the global balance of democratic and authoritarian values will be shaped not only by US leadership abroad but especially by the ability of the Biden administration to fix America's democracy." This assumes even greater significance given that there has been a backsliding in democracy index generally across the globe over the last several years.

There has perhaps never been a time in US history—except for the period of its Civil War—when the American republic was under a greater threat than it was during the deadly insurrection into the Capitol on January 6, 2021. That democracy endured eventually speaks highly of the state of US democracy and its institutions that helped it survive. The lesson for us, our polity in particular, and for those who are entrusted with the onerous task even if some of them are not up to the position they have



US President Joe Biden.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

been thrust in—of not only running but also retaining their integrity—is the importance of the well-defined line of separation and independence for the three branches of the government, which should be upheld despite one's political leanings, inclinations and preferences. Democratic institutions and those who head them accord strength to a country's democracy.

Apart from deepening the extant large cleavages in American society, Trump has left behind an America that will be difficult for Biden to govern. Some 75 million Americans voted for the former president who lost by seven million votes, and a majority of them still believe that victory was

stolen from their candidate despite no evidence to support that claim. A great majority of their representatives in the Congress voted to oppose Biden's victory. And a vast majority of Republican members of Congress do not believe that Trump bears any responsibility for the storming of the Capitol.

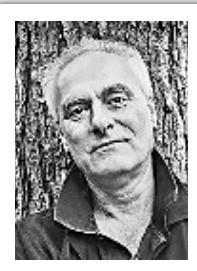
How does Biden bridge the rift of such a highly polarised society? How does he get these people on board to turn them into a coherent entity when a vast number of them consider him a usurper? Repairing the social damage should be on top of Biden's list of "things to do". How that can be done is to be seen. Internally,

it means rebuilding the nation by addressing the impediments that keep the rift widening—which Biden mentioned during his inauguration speech—such as systemic racism and white supremacy, racial inequality, economic disparities, etc. He also needs to repair the criminal justice system and the institutions ruined by Trump. A daunting task for the Biden administration is to deradicalise those pushed to extreme actions by Trump which we saw manifest in the attack on the Capitol. These tasks along with that of tackling Covid-19—for nothing substantive can be achieved unless the pandemic is defeated—remain the most formidable internal challenges for Joe Biden.

Internationally, while it will not be "America first" of Donald Trump under President Joe Biden, will there be much difference between the policy pursued by Trump in general and the policy of the new administration? Admittedly, the new US administration will discard the unilateral nationalism of Trump and move quickly to reassert its weight to fill the void left by Trump's willing abdication of its role in international diplomacy and politics, but experts see very little hope for a substantive change in US foreign policy, except for a change in nuances in its approach compared to the Trump administration's knee-jerk reactions to strategic developments abroad. More on the foreign policy challenges of Biden next week.

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (Retd), is a former Associate Editor of *The Daily Star*.

Iranians move into front line of Middle East's quest for religious change



JAMES M DORSEY

A recent online survey by scholars at two Dutch universities of Iranian attitudes towards religion has revealed a stunning rejection

of state-imposed adherence to conservative religious mores as well as the role of religion in public life. Although compatible with a trend across the Middle East, the survey's results based on 50,000 respondents, who overwhelmingly said they resided in the Islamic republic, suggested that Iranians were in the frontlines of the region's quest for religious change.

The trend puts a dent in the efforts of Iran as well as its rivals, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, that are competing for religious soft power and leadership of the Muslim world.

Among the rivals, the UAE, populated in majority by non-nationals, is the only one to start acknowledging changing attitudes and demographic realities. Authorities in November lifted the ban on consumption of alcohol and cohabitation among unmarried couples. Nonetheless, the change in attitudes threatens to undercut the efforts of Iran as well as its Middle Eastern competitors to cement their individual interpretations of Islam as the Muslim world's dominant narrative by rejecting religious dogma and formalistic and ritualistic religious practices propagated and/or imposed by governments and religious authorities.

"It becomes an existential question. The state wants you to be something that you don't want to be," said Pooyan Tamimi Arab, one of the organisers of the Iran survey, speaking in an interview. "Political disappointment steadily turned into

religious disappointment... Iranians have turned away from institutional religion on an unprecedented scale." In a similar vein, Turkish art historian Nese Yildiran recently warned that a fatwa issued by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Directorate of Religious Affairs or the Diyanet, declaring popular talismans to ward off "the evil eye" as forbidden by Islam, fuelled criticism of one of the best-funded branches of government. The fatwa followed the issuance of similar religious opinions banning the dying of men's moustaches and beards, feeding dogs at home, tattoos, and playing the national lottery as well as statements that were perceived to condone or belittle child abuse and violence against women.

Funded by a Washington-based Iranian human rights group, the Iranian survey, coupled with other research and opinion polls across the Middle East and North Africa, suggests that not only Muslim youth, but also other age groups, who are increasingly sceptical towards

Sixty-eight percent said they opposed the inclusion of religious precepts in national legislation. Seventy percent rejected public funding of religious institutions while 56 percent opposed mandatory religious education in schools. Almost 60 percent admitted that they do not pray, and 72 percent disagreed with women being obliged to wear a hijab in public.

An unpublished slide of the survey shows the change in religiosity reflected in the fact that an increasing number of Iranians no longer name their children after religious figures. A five-minute YouTube clip allegedly related to Iran's Revolutionary Guards attacked the survey despite having distributed the questionnaire once the pollsters disclosed in their report that the poll had been supported by an exiled human rights group.

"Tehran may well be the least religious capital in the Middle East. Clerics dominate the news headlines and play the communal elders in soap operas, but I never saw them on the street, except on billboards.



Changing attitudes towards religion and religiosity threaten to undercut the efforts of Iran as well as its Middle Eastern competitors to cement their individual interpretations of Islam as the Muslim world's dominant narrative.

PHOTO: REUTERS/AHMED SAAD

religious and worldly authority, aspire to more individual, more spiritual experiences of religion. Their quest runs the gamut from changes in personal religious behaviour to conversions in secret to other religions—because apostasy is banned and, in some cases, punishable by death—to an abandonment of religion in favour of agnosticism or atheism.

Responding to the Iranian survey, 80 percent of the participants said they believed in God but only 32.2 percent identified themselves as Shiite Muslims, a far lower percentage than asserted in official figures of predominantly Shiite Iran. More than a third of the respondents said that they either did not belong to a religion or were atheists or agnostics. Between 43 and 53 percent, depending on age group, suggested that their religious views had changed over time, with six percent of those saying that they had converted to another religious orientation.

Unlike most Muslim countries, the call to prayer is almost inaudible... Alcohol is banned but home delivery is faster for wine than for pizza... Religion felt frustratingly hard to locate and the truly religious seemed sidelined, like a minority," wrote journalist Nicholas Pelham based on a visit in 2019 during which he was detained for several weeks.

The survey's results as well as observations by analysts and journalists like Mr Pelham stroke with responses to various polls of Arab public opinion in recent years that showed that, despite 40 percent of those polled defining religion as the most important constituent element of their identity, 66 percent saw a need for religious institutions to be reformed. The polls suggested further that public opinion would support the reconceptualisation of Muslim jurisprudence to remove obsolete and discriminatory concepts like that of the *kafr* or infidel.

Responses by governments in Iran,

Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Middle East to changing attitudes towards religion and religiosity demonstrate the degree to which they perceive the change as a threat, often expressed in existential terms.

In one of the latest responses, Mohammad Mehdi Mirbaqeri, a prominent Shiite cleric and member of Iran's powerful Assembly of Experts that appoints the country's supreme leader, last month described Covid-19 as a "secular virus" and a declaration of war on "religious civilisation" and "religious institutions."

Saudi Arabia went further by

defining the "calling for atheist thought in any form" with terrorism in its anti-terrorism law. Saudi dissident and activist Rafi Badawi was sentenced on charges of apostasy to ten years in prison and 1,000 lashes for questioning why Saudis should be obliged to adhere to Islam and asserting that the faith did not have answers to all questions.

Analysts, writers, journalists, and pollsters have traced changes in attitudes in the Middle East and North Africa for much of the past decade. Kuwaiti writer Sajed al-Abdali noted in 2012 that "it is essential that we acknowledge today that

atheism exists and is increasing in our society, especially among our youth, and evidence of this is in no short supply." Pooyan Tamimi Arab argues nine years later that his latest survey (on Iran) "shows that there is a social basis" for concern among authoritarian and autocratic governments to further their geopolitical goals and seek to maintain their grip on potentially restive populations.

Dr James M. Dorsey is an award-winning journalist and a senior fellow at Nanyang Technological University's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore and the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute.

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Directorate General of Drug Administration

Ministry of Health and Family Welfare

Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212

Invitation for Tender (National)

1	Ministry/Division	Ministry of Health and Family Welfare/Health Services Division.
2	Agency	Directorate General of Drug Administration, Aushad Bhaban, Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212.
3	Procuring entity name	Director (CC), Revenue Budget.
4	Procuring entity code	1270301-3258106
5	Procuring entity district	Dhaka.
6	Invitation for	Repair and Maintenance of Equipment of Drug Testing Laboratories (including Validation of the lab equipment).
7	Invitation Ref. No.	Memo No. DGDA/Tender-13/2018/76
8	Date	26.01.2021
KEY INFORMATION		
9	Procurement method	National Open Tendering Method (NCT).
FUNDING INFORMATION		
10	Budget and source of funds	Revenue Budget (GoB).
11	Development partners (if applicable)	N/A.
PARTICULAR INFORMATION		
12	Project/programme code (if applicable)	N/A.
13	Project name (if applicable)	N/A.
14	Tender package No.	GGP-01
15	Tender package name	Repair and Maintenance of Equipment of Drug Testing Laboratories (including Validation of the lab equipment).
16	Tender publication date	28.01.2021
17	Tender last selling date	10.02.2021
18	Tender closing date and time	11.02.2021, 11:00am
19	Tender opening date and time	11.02.2021, 11:30am
20	Name & address of the office(s)	Directorate General of Drug Administration, Aushad Bhaban, Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212.
	Selling tender document (principal)	Directorate General of Drug Administration, Aushad Bhaban, Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212.
	Selling tender document (others)	N/A.
	Receiving tender document	Directorate General of Drug Administration, Aushad Bhaban, Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212.
	Opening tender document	Directorate General of Drug Administration, Aushad Bhaban, Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212.
INFORMATION FOR TENDERER		
21	Eligibility of tenderer	(a) Technical capability to perform the contract (evidence to be submitted). (b) Additional details are available in the tender schedule.
22	Brief description of services	Repair and Maintenance of Equipment of Drug Testing Laboratories (including Validation of the lab equipment).
23	Price of tender document (Tk)	Taka 2,000/- (two thousand) only per set (non-refundable), to be submitted with tender document.
	Package No.	GGP-01
	Identification of package	DGDA/Tender-13/2018/76 Date: 26.01.2021
	Location	Directorate General of Drug Administration, Aushad Bhaban, Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212.
	Tender security amount (Tk)	2,55,000/- (two lac fifty-five thousand Taka only)
	Completion time in weeks/months	To be completed within 08 (eight) weeks after issuance of work order.
24	Name of official inviting tender	Md. Ayub Hossain.
25	Designation of official inviting tender	Director (CC).
26	Address of official inviting tender	Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA), Aushad Bhaban, Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212.
27	Contact details of official inviting tender	Phone: 02222280831, E-mail: dgda.gov@gmail.com
28	The procuring entity reserves the right to reject all tenders or annul the tender proceedings.	

Md. Ayub Hossain

Director (CC)

Directorate General of Drug Administration
Mohakhali, Dhaka

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