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PHOTO: MAHJABEEN HAIDER

Visiting the spirits of the Maya



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One of the best ways to understand the social structure, distinctive religious practices, elaborate hieroglyphics, sophisticated calendar systems, and extraordinary achievements in the areas of astronomy and architecture of the Maya, who ruled a large part of Mesoamerica for more than 2,500 years, is by visiting their ruins in the Yucatán Peninsula.

Over the course of a week in December 2022, my wife and I stepped back in time and walked the footsteps of those who lived in the Mayan era at Chichén Itzá and Chacchobén in Mexico, and Nim Li Punit in Belize.

Chichén Itzá

Recognised as a Unesco World Heritage site, Chichén Itzá, meaning “mouth of the well of the Itzá,” is a jewel of the Mayan empire in the Yucatán Peninsula. It was inhabited between the sixth and 12th centuries AD, but fell into a rapid decline from 1200 AD onward.

The most iconic structure at Chichén Itzá is El Castillo – an imposing pyramid-like temple built to honour the feathered serpent deity Kulkulcán. Considered one of the seven wonders of the modern world, it was built on top of a cenote – a deep, water-filled sinkhole – because cenotes held great religious significance for the Maya. It has 365 steps, one for each day of the year, and is oriented to mark the solstices and equinoxes. During equinoxes, the setting sun casts shadows on the steps of the pyramid that resemble the body of Kulkulcán.

The Maya were masterful astronomers whose knowledge of the celestial bodies – of Venus, in particular – led to the creation of the Mayan calendars. To them, Venus is a deity and a companion of the sun. From the nearby observatory called El Caracol (“The Snail”) and the well-preserved Platform of Venus, they tracked the planet carefully and calculated with amazing accuracy its orbital cycle of 584 days. They also used Venus to determine the length of the year, as well as to schedule various

religious rituals.

Flanked by hundreds of columns with carved figures of Maya warriors is the Temple of the Warriors, a massive structure that was used for ceremonial gatherings. Historical documents indicate that the greatest minds of the time met here to accurately predict the dates of eclipses by using the Mayan calendars.

Another interesting structure is the Platform of the Eagles and Jaguars, displaying images representing the course of the sun across the sky during the day and its descent to the underworld at night. The eagles and jaguars on the walls of the edifice are deemed to symbolise two warriors who captured victims and offered them as sacrificial gifts to the gods.

Near El Castillo is the largest ancient ball court in the Americas, where the Maya played Pok-Ta-Pok, a game considered to be metaphorical for the constant battle between the forces of good and evil, and the cycle of life and death. Pok-Ta-Pok involved shooting a rubber ball through a small stone hoop that was incredibly high on a wall using only one’s hips, knees, or elbows, without ever using their hands, feet, or head.

The Maya were ahead of their time in many other ways. Their system of numbers and mathematics looks distinctly modern. They invented the concept of zero some 500 years before its introduction in the Eurasian world by Hindu mathematicians, around 600 AD.

Chacchobén

Also known as “The Palace of Red Corn,” Chacchobén is an ancient place of Mayan pilgrimage characterised by large temples and massive platforms. Evidence collected during excavations date the earliest human settlements in Chacchobén at around 1000 BC. The site seems to have been abandoned around 1000 AD.

Many temples are still in their natural condition, covered with vegetation and awaiting to be restored to reveal their

secrets. Soaring above the canopy of the tropical forest, the stairs of the Gran Basamento (“Great Basement”) – leading to a sacred plateau where religious rituals and human sacrifice were enacted – expresses the grandeur of Chacchobén’s sophistication.

Nim Li Punit

Nim Li Punit is a small but architecturally unique ancient Mayan site in southern Belize. It flourished from the fifth through eighth centuries AD. In the Maya Kekchi language, Nim Li Punit means “Big Hat,” so named due to the depiction on a stela (stone column) of one of its rulers wearing a large hat.

A small museum at the site houses an impressive collection of carved stelae that tell the story of the sovereigns of the city-state in the Maya hieroglyphic script. The largest of them, featuring the eponymous “Big Hat,” is one of the biggest stelae ever discovered at Nim Li Punit. A well-kept ball court is also located within the complex.

According to archaeologists, the city was deserted suddenly in the ninth century AD, probably because of area-wide overpopulation exceeding the region’s supporting capacity for the then prevalent intercropping farming system. Nevertheless, more than just a pile of rubble, the ruins of Nim Li Punit tell the story of its glorious past.

Despite the punishing heat, humidity, and arduous trek, it was an educational trip for us. We were transported to the past, and witnessed how the Mayan civilisation looked centuries ago. We learned that the Maya deeply believed in the cyclical nature of life: nothing was ever “born” and nothing ever “died.” This belief inspired their view of the gods and the cosmos, which, in turn, encouraged their imaginative efforts in the arts and sciences, mathematics, astronomy, and engineering.

Finally, although their cities were abandoned and their culture was subsumed by the Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century AD, the Maya have not vanished.

Today, they farm the same lands, travel the same roads, navigate the same rivers, speak the same indigenous languages, practise the same rituals, and still carry forward the traditions of their great ancestors.

Biden to Democrats: Nominate me, whether you like it or no



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NORMAN SOLOMON

With 2023 underway, Democrats in office are still dodging the key fact that most of their party’s voters don’t want President Biden to run for re-election. Among prominent Democratic politicians, deference is routine while genuine enthusiasm is sparse.

Many of the endorsements sound rote. Late last month, retiring senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont came up with this gem: “I want him to do whatever he wants. If he does, I’ll support him.”

Joe Biden keeps saying he intends to be the Democratic nominee in 2024. Whether he will be is an open question – and progressives should strive to answer it with a firm “no.”

The next presidential election will be exceedingly grim if all the Democratic Party can offer as an alternative to the neo-fascist Republican Party is an incumbent who has too often served corporate power and consistently serves the military-industrial complex.

The Biden administration has taken some significant antitrust steps to limit rampant

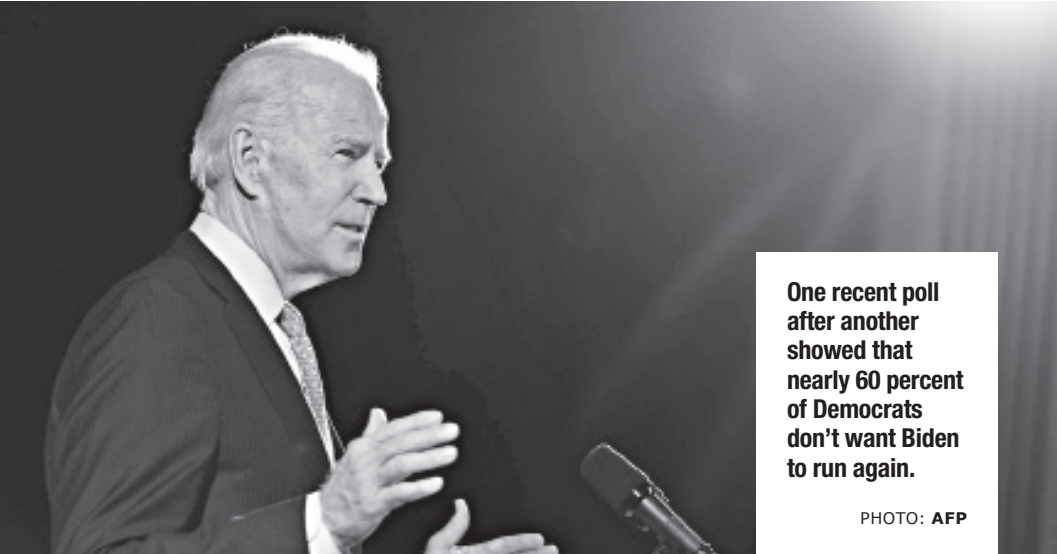
Biden seems unable or unwilling to articulate a social-justice approach to such issues. As for the continuing upward spike in Pentagon largesse while giving human needs short shrift, Biden was full of praise for the record-breaking, beyond-bloated USD 858 billion military spending bill that he signed in late December.

While corporate media’s reporters and pundits are much more inclined to critique his age than his policies, what makes Biden most problematic for so many voters is his antiquated political approach.

Running for a second term would inevitably cast Biden as a defender of current conditions – in an era when personifying current conditions is a heavy albatross that weighs against electoral success.

A Hart Research poll of registered voters in November 2022 found that only 21 percent said the US was “headed in the right direction” while 72 percent said it was “off on the wrong track.”

As the preeminent symbol of the way things are, Biden is all set to be a vulnerable standard-



monopolisation. But overall realities are continuing to widen vast economic inequalities that are grist for the spinning mill of pseudo-populist GOP demagogues.

Meanwhile, President Biden rarely conveys a sense of urgency or fervent discontent with present-day social conditions. Instead, he routinely comes off as “status-quo Joe.”

For the future well-being of so many millions of people, and for the electoral prospects of the Democratic Party in 2024, representing the status quo invites cascading disasters. A few months ago, Bernie Sanders summed it up this way: “The most important economic and political issues facing this country are the extraordinary levels of income and wealth inequality, the rapidly growing concentration of ownership, the long-term decline of the American middle class and the evolution of this country into oligarchy.”

Interviewed days ago, Sanders said: “It pains me very, very much that we’re seeing more and more working class people voting Republican. Politically, that is a disaster, and Democrats have to recognise that serious problem and address it.”

But President Biden doesn’t seem to recognise the serious problem, and he fails to address it.

During the last two years, domestic policy possibilities have been curbed by Biden’s frequent and notable refusals to use the power of the presidency for progress. He did not issue many of the potential executive orders that could have moved the country forward despite Senate logjams.

At the same time, “bully pulpit” advocacy for workers’ rights, voter rights, economic justice, climate action and much more has been muted or non-existent.

bearer in a country where nearly three quarters of the electorate say they don’t like the nation’s current path.

But for now anyway, no progressive Democrat in Congress is willing to get into major trouble with the Biden White House by saying he shouldn’t run, let alone by indicating a willingness to challenge him in the early 2024 primaries.

Meanwhile, one recent poll after another showed that nearly 60 percent of Democrats don’t want Biden to run again. A poll by *The New York Times* last summer found that a stunning 94 percent of Democrats under 30-years old would prefer a different nominee.

Although leaning favourably toward Biden overall, mass-media coverage has occasionally supplied the kind of candour that Democratic officeholders have refused to provide on the record. “The party’s relief over holding the Senate and minimising House losses in the midterms has gradually given way to collective angst about what it means if Biden runs again,” NBC News reported days before Christmas.

Conformist support from elected Democrats for another Biden campaign reflects a shortage of authentic representation on Capitol Hill. The gap is gaping, for instance, between leaders of the Congressional Progressive Caucus and the constituency – the progressive base – they claim to represent. In late November, CPC chair Pramila Jayapal highlighted the gap when she went out of her way to proclaim that, “I believe he should run for another term and finish this agenda we laid out.”

Is such leadership representing progressives to the establishment or the other way around?

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Cashew family tree
6 Milk buy
11 Naples' nation
12 Korean or Thai
13 Reserved
14 Act the siren
15 Crowd scene players
17 – Mahal
19 That woman
20 Enraged
23 Kind of reactor
25 Rani's gown
26 Disturb the peace, in a way
28 Begged
29 Set straight
30 Green and Gore
31 Big snake
32 Fork over

33 Orchestra clasher
35 “Aladdin” villain
38 Fuming
41 San Antonio mission
42 Dance's de Mille
43 Like fake fruit
44 Rocket parts

DOWN

1 Use pews
2 Hagen of acting
3 Get people laughing
4 Baseball's Rodriguez
5 Nixon of “Sex and the City”
6 Persian Gulf nation

7 Calls on
8 Target
9 Cardi B's music
10 Booming stuff
16 Place for play
17 Lightning home
18 Even a little
20 Think ahead
21 Sporting site
22 Song
24 Dr.'s field
25 Biol. or geol.
27 Speedy horse
31 “Darkness” poet
33 Arrived
34 Jason's ship
35 Moolah mover
36 Imitating
37 Long distance copy
39 Palmer's peg
40 Curry letter

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41 42 43 44 45

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

UGH! THESE BUGS! I WISH I HAD A BUG COLLAR LIKE OTTO HE DOESN'T NEED A COLLAR...
GROWL!
THEY WOULDN'T DARE BITE HIM
GREG + MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

CAN I SIT BY YOU ON THE BUS? FORGET IT. COME ON. ZOE! LET ME SIT HERE! I CAN'T. I'M SAVING IT FOR SOMEONE. WHO?? ANYONE WHO ISN'T YOU.