

BIDEN DROPS OUT OF 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

# A historic decision, but can Kamala Harris beat Trump?



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Few weeks ago, even after Joe Biden’s disastrous presidential debate, it didn’t seem that his need to drop out of the race would become inevitable. Then things changed overnight, as it happens with politics: an unprecedented assassination attempt on former President Trump, and a viral picture of his blood trickled face with a fist held up high fuelled widespread speculation: “Did Trump just win the election?” It was followed with a loud Republican National Convention, a recharged MAGA cult and the altogether deification of Donald Trump: “a man impeached, convicted, almost killed but chosen by God to lead the United States of America,” according to Trump supporters.

The pro-Democrat, liberal US media who want Donald Trump to lose—from CNN to ABC News—ran rigorous reporting, or rather a campaign, to get Joe Biden to step down. Just two days before Biden announced the historic decision, CNN reported that Biden was “seething” at all suggestions to step down, including from former President Obama and Nancy Pelosi, when they tried to explain that his chances at winning were becoming untenable. Each passing day, it seemed like the Democrats were playing a losing game with a defiant old Joe stubbornly holding onto power.

It was becoming increasingly clear that the party needed a jaw-dropping, shocking moment to turn the tide against the surging popularity of Donald Trump. The clock was ticking, and the party delivered on the desired drama on Sunday, July 21, when Joe Biden announced that he is dropping out of the race, two weeks ahead of the Democratic National Convention. Biden has now undoubtedly sealed his legacy, for the good and the bad. He has had one of the longest political careers in US history—the

youngest to become a senator, and the oldest to become a President.

Joe Biden will be remembered as the politician who let go—when veteran politicians in power rarely do—by choice. The step Biden took will domestically restore at least some of his tarnished image, especially in regard to his foreign policy blunders since last year. While there’s a lot to learn from Joe Biden’s wrongs, there’s also a lot to learn from his best

decision yet: a reminder for leaders around the world that even as heads of state, it is the country, the people, that matter first in every democracy.

The Republican Party’s vigour will be overshadowed by Biden’s decision and the overall respect for Biden, for at least the next two weeks till the DNC. The Republicans chose to stand behind a convicted felon, milking the

party that has democracy internally within its ranks. The message this will send to voters is that unlike Trump and the Republicans, it is the Democrats who are “the true patriots and public servants.”

Biden endorsed his Vice-President Kamala Harris right away. After being widely unpopular, she’s risen more to the spotlight in the last year,



Kamala Harris breaks the wheel of Vietnam War-era politicians which voters are frustrated of seeing.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

demographic of 65 years and older.

His endorsement doesn’t mean that she automatically becomes the nominee—the party has to nominate her in the DNC. Endorsements are flooding in from prominent Democrats, but the party so far seems sincere to hold a competitive race, and a proper transparent process with other contestants. The logistics for Harris to run a successful presidential campaign is a lot easier; she has the funds that has been raised so far for the “Biden-Harris” campaign. It is highly unlikely that Kamala Harris will not be the nominee, even if there are surely better candidates out there—as that would reveal cracks within the Democratic Party, which they wouldn’t want to risk against a united Republican Party. But showing that she has “earned” it through an open convention will legitimise her candidacy.

There is a lot favouring Harris, by luck mostly; she does have a shot at defeating Trump if she plays her cards right. She offers a face of change and breaks the wheel of Vietnam War-era politicians which voters are frustrated of seeing, while Trump is now the oldest presidential nominee. And policy-wise, she has the accomplishments of the Biden-Harris administration in her resume to maintain Biden’s base voters. As vice-president, yet a new candidate, she could also cleverly deflect Biden’s shortcomings—though that will remain to be seen, especially with Arab voters.

As exciting as this new horizon appears, this doesn’t mean the Democrats are no longer in crisis. The battle against Trump is still uphill. Polls conducted by CNN show Harris is lagging behind Trump, but not as much as Biden was. If Harris is going to be the Democratic nominee, she will still need to win the key battleground states like Pennsylvania, Michigan,

and Minnesota. While talks have already begun of her running mate, her most strategic decision to have a chance at winning, would be to have a governor from a key battleground state, such as Governor Josh Shapiro from Pennsylvania who has already endorsed Harris.

The Trump campaign will come at Harris with their full wrath and their vintage sexism. The fact that she defended Biden’s mental acuity and chose loyalty over the country, will surely be a point to poke at. It’s also well-known that Harris had a disturbing track record as a harsh prosecutor, especially for the Black community, and that could hurt her. But it’s also worth noting that many Democrat research groups recently found—just before Biden dropped out—that she can mobilise young Black, Hispanic voters, which Biden could not. She has been vocal and precise on re-establishing reproductive rights, which are projected to galvanise the younger female voter base to vote.

At the end of the day, debates and campaigning leading up to November shape the election outcome. Trump’s 90-minute speech—the longest acceptance speech in RNC history—veered off the teleprompter and showed that the xenophobia in Trump has not changed an iota. Kamala Harris, a seasoned prosecutor, is fiery at debates and as many commentators have projected, she has the ability to attack Trump and call out his lies. A lot of people feel nervous with a woman, especially of colour, running against Trump—reflecting some sort of post-traumatic stress from 2016—when Hilary Clinton lost to Trump. Gender and race do play roles in US elections, and that is undeniable. Everything is still up in the air, but just because that other woman could not, does not mean this woman cannot.

## Teesta is no longer a bilateral issue



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During former Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh’s visit to Bangladesh in 2011, a deal on the sharing of transboundary river Teesta’s water was supposed to be signed, sealed and delivered. But all such expectations were sadly dashed when West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee backed out at the very last minute. This was not just an embarrassment for both sides—it took the wind out of such an important visit and left a bad taste here in Bangladesh. The event even prompted the highly respected Indian prime minister, a perfect gentleman, taking the blame and even offering a public apology for the failure to deliver. Since then, the Teesta deal has been stuck in a limbo, with the central and the West Bengal state governments in India blaming each other for any lack of progress as public disappointment on the Bangladesh side continues to gain traction.

It has been customary, especially in Bangladesh, that during any bilateral visit at the highest level between the two neighbouring countries, the burning issue of sharing the waters of transboundary rivers, especially the Teesta, would feature prominently at the talks between the two sides, with the hope that an acceptable solution would materialise. While the issue has featured in the discourses over the years, nothing concrete has yet appeared on the horizon.

However, things took a dramatic turn during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s two-day official visit to New Delhi in June this year, with India agreeing to dispatch a technical team to work on developing a comprehensive project covering

conservation and management of the Teesta River inside Bangladesh, within a mutually agreed time frame. This was a major move forward. This, taken with an announcement of discussions at the technical level on the renewal of the Ganges Water Treaty, due in 2026, and a basket of other measures on key issues—such as exponential enhancement of multimodal transport and electricity connectivity; increased defence cooperation; extensive collaboration in frontier technologies including civil nuclear, oceanography and space technology; India partnering in the development of a small satellite for Bangladesh and its launch using Indian launch vehicle; and the decision to commence early negotiations for a

**While there is no denying that the Teesta is of strategic importance, a significant issue of great geopolitical value was the joint reiteration of a shared commitment to a ‘free, open, inclusive, secure, and rules-based Indo-Pacific region.’**

Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) aimed at promoting bilateral trade and investment—gave the visit major substance. All this was covered in a Shared Vision statement for the future course of relations between Bangladesh and India, bound as they are by shared history and geography.

To observers here, though, it was the signal of a positive development on the

India, including former diplomats, made no secret of the concern. This is when Teesta ceased to be just a river; it assumed a status of strategic importance.

Just days after her return from New Delhi, the Bangladesh PM, while responding to a question at parliament, clearly stated that she had asked the relevant ministries to look at the Chinese proposal on the Teesta. And yet, exactly 10 days later, the

diplomacy,” she said.

Realistically, in the end, it is the Indian offer that will see the light of the day. The mention of the words “within a mutually agreed time frame” in the Shared Vision statement is a signal to set the right pace for its implementation. It is a win-win outcome for both sides.

While there is no denying that the Teesta is of strategic importance, a significant



The Teesta issue has now become a diplomatic issue of strategic importance.

FILE PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

Teesta issue that understandably drew major attention. However, it is not without a context. With little to no visible progress in finding a mutually acceptable solution to sharing Teesta water until then, there emerged talks of a Chinese study on developing a project on the Bangladesh side of the Teesta, which would include conservation and management of the river. Given the geographical location of the Teesta—so close to the Indian border and not far from the strategically important Siliguri Corridor, commonly known as “the Chicken’s Neck”—even the thought of China getting involved in a project of such magnitude presented the possibility of raising serious security concerns for policymakers in New Delhi, more so when there have been limited armed skirmishes between the militaries of the two Asian giants recently. Political commentators in

Indian decision of sending a technical team to prepare a comprehensive project, one that would include conservation and management of the Teesta River inside Bangladesh with Indian assistance, was announced in New Delhi and in the presence of the two heads of government. Reference was also made on finding an interim arrangement on water-sharing, although no details were given how this sharing would be executed.

That the Teesta issue has now become a diplomatic issue of strategic importance was made abundantly clear by a confident Sheikh Hasina at a press conference after her return from an official visit to Beijing. While the prime minister made it known that she would “give priority to India for the Teesta project,” at the same time, she made reference to the Chinese proposal, implying Bangladesh has options. “This is

issue of great geopolitical value was the joint reiteration of a shared commitment to a “free, open, inclusive, secure, and rules-based Indo-Pacific region.” Such a commitment from Dhaka would not only be welcomed by New Delhi, it would also please listeners in Washington, Tokyo and Canberra, where the terms “open,” “secure” and “rules-based Indo-Pacific” have become an integral part of the geo-strategic lexicon. At the same time, the insertion of the word “inclusive” should give some comfort to Beijing.

In sum, the overall outcome of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s back-to-back official visits to New Delhi and Beijing served to reinforce the point that relations between Bangladesh and other key Asian players are no more confined to the bilateral frame alone; they play out on a much broader regional and global canvases.