

Former US President Donald Trump and Democratic presidential nominee and US Vice-President Kamala Harris during a presidential debate on September 10, 2024. FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

# Kamala rattles Trump, but how much will it matter?



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Democratic Vice-President Kamala Harris locked horns with Republican and former US President Donald Trump in a debate on September 10, peppered by occasional fireworks. Following the debate, a CNN instant poll gave her an almost 2-1 edge.

A note to Democrats: do not uncork the champagne just yet. Just how much the debate performance will matter in the November presidential election is quite another question.

For starters, a huge swathe of the US voting public tends to give these debates a pass, and who can blame them? Substantial parts tend to be soporific, as candidates wriggle out of tough questions and often prefer the comfort of opaque platitudes.

The interesting thing about US political debates is that they are more significant when a participant makes a big mistake.

Take the first televised presidential debate in 1960 between Republican nominee Vice-President Richard Nixon and Democratic candidate Senator John F Kennedy. Kennedy looked impressive on television. Nixon, on the other hand, looked tired, with a five o'clock shadow on his face. TV watchers said Kennedy won the debate, yet radio listeners thought Nixon won. In reality, Kennedy won that election by a whisker. Just this year, US President Joe Biden made such an unholy mess of his debate with Trump that he had to bow out of the presidential race.

Harris and Trump are very different candidates. Harris is more of a typical US candidate, brimming with enthusiasm and ever-ready to regale listeners with the pabulum of US exceptionalism. Lately, she has improved her performance and appeared sharp in the debate. She was nimble in marshalling facts and arguments, though not as quick to call out Trump's lies as her supporters would have liked. Her attempt to

needle Trump by talking about folks leaving his rallies was a masterstroke—and it worked.

Trump is something else again. As a political animal, he is *sui generis* in the US, perhaps in the world. His true calling might well have been to be a carnival barker (unkind critics may say a used-car salesman). For Trump, the goal is to sell—in this case, himself—and like the ultimate salesman that he is, he feels utterly unencumbered by such niceties as facts and truth.

Untethered from reality, Trump's lies came tumbling thick and fast like water gushing out of a fire hydrant: there was no inflation during his presidency, millions of illegal criminals are entering the US raising crime there and lowering crime outside the US, Trump rebuilt the military, crime in the US is going through the roof, etc. To be sure, Harris made false statements too, but they were much fewer and far between.

I saved Trump's most delightful morsel until now. Trump claimed—I kid you not—that undocumented immigrants in a small town in Ohio were catching dogs and cats and eating them. Not only is there no evidence of this, but true to Trumpian form, it is also unconscionably racist. The immigrants are Haitian.

I reacted with shock. Had US political debate reached such a nadir where a candidate can get away with this?

Well, Trump can. Such is Trump's Svengali-like grasp on his supporters that he has created a separate right-wing ecosystem where an alternate reality exists. His outré remarks and conduct are baked into public opinion, and his core supporters are unfazed.

This is why I am not sure how much Kamala Harris will benefit from this debate, electorally speaking, despite her impressive performance. Remember, in 2016, polls suggested former US Secretary of State Hillary

Clinton won all debates handily when she ran against Trump. A fat lot of good it did her come November.

Trump's mannerisms are right out of vaudeville, his vocabulary that of an irate high school juvenile delinquent. He says whatever comes to his mind. But analysts dismiss him at their peril. He has an uncanny feel for the pulse of the nation's disaffected.

Take his stance on abortion. He has been twisting himself into a pretzel trying to wriggle out of the abortion debate, because he instinctively senses that the broader public—even many Republicans—are not where the Republican Party and its passionate anti-abortion activists stand on the issue.

On foreign policy, while Harris backs Ukraine unconditionally, I feel Trump's stand on wanting to end the war may resonate with a substantial part of the voting public in the rural hinterland, which is tired of billions of dollars going down another boondoggle.

Harris faces an uphill task also because the US presidential election system favours Republicans. Instead of a popular vote, candidates must win state by state. Most states are overwhelmingly Democratic (California, New York) or Republican (Texas, Louisiana), so the battle comes down to a handful of competitive states.

The city where the debate happened—Philadelphia—is in one such battleground state, Pennsylvania. Analysts say that the road to the White House goes through Pennsylvania. That's a challenge for Democrats. Areas around Philadelphia and Pittsburgh are Democratic, but the rest of the state is rural and deeply conservative.

Americans need to feel comfortable with the president. Analysts often say it's almost as if American voters ask themselves if they would like to have a beer with the candidate.

Are Americans ready to elect an African-South Asian American woman as a president? It is true that once they stunned the world and elected America's first African American president, but there has been a substantial backlash after that.

Most of rural America, I worry, is not ready either to buy Kamala Harris a beer or elect her president. Goodness knows I would like to be proven wrong.

## MASS WEDDING AT DU A new kind of 'taboo-breaking'



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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I thought it was a joke, one of those social media pranks. But when mainstream media picked it up, the reality struck: students at my university are organising mass wedding ceremonies on September 20. The poster proclaims that the event commemorates Liberation 2.0, hoping that the initiative will break down the "taboos" associated with marriage. The provosts of the concerned residential halls, however, are quick to deny any link between this celebration of collective uprising and the mass marriage initiative. They are unaware of the nuptials taking place under their roofs.

The calculus of knowing and unknowing defines the taboo that is planned to be "broken" through this tying of the knots. The known poster is merely the tip of the iceberg, surrounded by unknown columns. Marriage is not taboo. As we delve into the plethora of comments underlying the news, it becomes evident that those supporting the actualisation of romantic relationships on campus welcome them on religious grounds. We have previously heard of mass weddings without dowries taking place during the annual Ijtima prayers, but the idea of hosting such an event at the apex academic institution of the country is new. I assume someone took the wordplay on BA *Shomman* (BA Honours) quite literally to pursue "biye with dignity."

One hopes that these consensual adults will engage in holy matrimony with the proper presence and consent of their parents and family members. After all, marriage is a social contract.

allow married students to rent a limited number of on-campus flats, given their inability to live in traditional dormitories. This can be especially beneficial for graduate and postgraduate researchers who must continue their education well into their late 20s and early 30s. Indeed, we need to discuss this less-talked-about issue to find a solution.

We are preparing a roadmap to resume regular academic activities. Currently, we are engaged in a series of dialogues aimed at resolving the issues that prevented us from returning to classes after the sudden shutdown that overthrew a government. During one such town hall meeting, a student of mine reminded us of the post-ideological phase that we are experiencing. The traditional narratives of hierarchy and political profiling are no longer applicable. He was implying that teachers often use arrogant rhetoric to intimidate students, trapping them in a cultural appropriation of the "us and them" binary.

Post-ideology challenges traditional social organisation, which upholds belief or faith base as a necessary "civilising" mode for the masses to integrate into society. It challenges people's vertical subordination to the truth of god, king, priests, nation, party, parents, or even department heads. The traditional norm demands a power pivot. What do you do when you don't have a centre to draw your circle of truth? You literally "go through the motions" and create your own norms. The retail version of individualised and personalised

The focus is on action, not actors. I remember teaching my students Freud's idea of the uncanny, where the unhomely become home; the strange becomes familiar. The post-ideological world, which became popular after the publication of Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), signals the death of all dominant ideological frameworks. The vacuum will cause cultural, social, and political life to become more fragmented, with various groups and individuals pursuing their own interests without a unifying vision.

There is much to learn from this Generation Z as they navigate through these fragments. Some of them are standing on pillars of faith that appear like apparitions. Their arguments are both familiar and unfamiliar. For instance, when you hear the logic of taboo associated with marriage, you may recall the growing trends among independent women who prioritise their career growth over raising a family and fostering an in-law relationship. On the flipside, you can associate the taboo with the idea of a male and a female pursuing an academic goal that traditional religion may not approve of. You decide which pillar to explore.

This is the generation that is upending known ideologies: the utopian socialists who promoted communal living, the liberalist Western concept of free mixing or living together, or the conservative idea of segregating the male from the female altogether. Is it going to be the death of all known ideologies? Will some ideologies become more influential than others? The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind.



VISUAL: STAR

The organisers need to be aware of the possibility that their attempts to break the taboo associated with premarital relationships will codify new norms. An institutionalised mass wedding will replace one form of social regulation with another. It could be symptomatic of the post-ideological world that is unfolding all around us.

There has never been any restriction on students marrying young, except for the convention of forbidding married or pregnant students from living in residential halls. This has been an age-old policy, presumably for the students' safety and to protect their roommates from unnecessary hassles. The hall authority required new students to sign an undertaking, committing them to inform the hall authority of any changes in their marital status and to vacate the hall if they became pregnant. The High Court challenged the issue and overturned the clause, and Dhaka University revoked the decision in 2021. The same happened with Jagannath University in 2023.

The mass wedding has brought to light the issue of housing for married students at public universities. Perhaps the reformed scheme could

opinions replaces wholesale convictions. A similar concept can be utilised to comprehend this mass wedding. Universities cannot segregate education in terms of gender. However, orthodox religious beliefs prohibit a system that could transform a smile or flirtation into something more serious. The mass wedding will institutionalise such unions. Maybe I am overthinking. The whole thing can turn out to be a joke. Alternatively, it could serve as a test for alkaline or acidic elements on campus, with the expectation that the chemical reaction will help us detect pink or blue. The chemical reagents are known; the outcome is unknown.

During the parley, the student raised another important issue. Can we refer to a collective demand as "mob justice" if we are familiar with all the individuals involved in the process? Sure enough, we know the students who asked for disciplinary action against those who supported the previous regime or participated in direct or indirect violence. These familiar faces have presented us with a list of legitimate demands. Are they mobs? Interestingly, mob justice refers to a situation that exerts pressure to yield results in its favour.

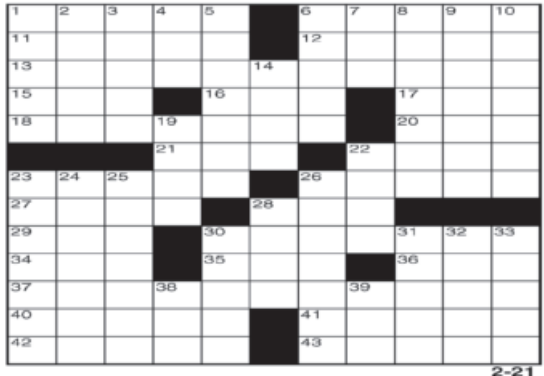
### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

#### ACROSS

- 1 Rot
- 6 Played a role
- 11 Wed in haste
- 12 Baseball's Joe
- 13 Ladder company's base
- 15 Greek vowel
- 16 Crooner Tormé
- 17 Curvy letter
- 18 Set free
- 20 Conk out
- 21 Scoundrel
- 22 Sweater material
- 23 Sacred song
- 26 Ron Weasley's sister
- 27 Finish last
- 28 Chips buy
- 29 Band blaster
- 30 Monarch's spouse
- 34 Maiden name label
- 35 Unoriginal
- 36 Aussie hopper
- 37 Planting of trees
- 40 Beginning
- 41 Not tight
- 42 Stagers
- 43 Layout choices

#### DOWN

- 1 Put off
- 2 Best of the best
- 3 Reef material
- 4 Gorilla, for one
- 5 Polite answer
- 6 "— of Two Cities"
- 7 Guest's bed
- 8 Checked for fit
- 9 Canyon creator
- 10 How some areas are populated
- 14 Exam
- 19 Writer — Stanley Gardner
- 22 Costume parts
- 23 Anticipate
- 24 Unnamed person
- 25 Malign
- 26 Tolkien wizard
- 28 Nut's partner
- 30 Sells for
- 31 Stellar hunter
- 32 Perch
- 33 Phone sounds
- 38 Long fish
- 39 Overly



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