

Trump’s victory and why the Democratic Party failed



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The American people have spoken this time to turn their country back to the Trump-era—the lesser of the two evils for the majority of Americans who voted in this election. The president-elect has outperformed himself compared to his runs in 2016 and 2020 and made history by being the first convicted felon to be elected to the highest office in the US. Regardless of what the post-mortem analysis reveals, there is one clear thesis that emerges out of this election: a star-studded, billion-dollar campaign cannot suffice for the lack of moral and ethical leadership at the top, and history has repeated itself so soon after the 2016 loss of the Democratic Party because the party elites refuse to learn lessons. Their dismissiveness frankly cost them the election. Harris’s concession speech may be the best message the campaign delivered; the humility might have helped the party this cycle if it had been part of their messaging. The other part of the story is that in its 248 years, the US has never had a

Kamala Harris, a qualified, seasoned politician with a robust track record in public service as a prosecutor, senator and a vice-president, may have offered a promise for some. But it was a change in appearance and not substance, and that alienated voters who vote based on principles. The Clintonian politics of refined rhetorics and compromised principles has failed the Democrats time and again. Harris, unfortunately, is a prodigy of the same brand. She may not have been a figure as polarising as Hillary Clinton, who evoked strong disdain among opponents, but she was clearly seen as a candidate who would carry Biden’s legacy with the ongoing economic woes and genocide in the Middle East on her shoulders—enough to throw off voters whose advocacy for peace have fallen on deaf ears. Harris’ campaign also failed to build on Biden’s support base. A party loses credibility among voters when there is no clear stance or direction; not that the current Republican

equipping and protecting the police, lowering prices, increasing energy production, imposing tariffs to make domestic products competitive, and bringing the “American dream” back. This time around, Trump was able to court prominent Muslim and Arab community leaders in key battleground states like Michigan with his promise to end war in the

without communicating their policy stances. People vote based on issues, not identity. The Democratic Party has long been out of touch with the everyday socioeconomic realities of the people it claims to represent. Ordinary citizens care about gas and grocery prices. They do not study the mechanics of inflation and what causes it; they do not see the

up of people being considered for key positions, such as Robert F Kennedy, Jr, known for his anti-vaccination and controversial healthcare-related advocacy, to have substantial authority over federal health agencies. We should not forget about the Fauci days in the White Office, when misinformation triumphed over expert guidelines.

weapons permits, removing the US from Paris Agreement, implementing work requirements for Medicaid beneficiaries, and making federal workers at-will employees thereby removing civil service protections for federal employees. Now, with the Republican Senate majority, the House leaning red, the court packed with conservative judges, with the checks and balances tilting in one direction, the pathway to accomplish these policy goals lies open. One factor that may have surprised the pundits is how fast the outcome of this election became clear, and that is because of the wide margins of gain and loss. Clearer victory also signals a peaceful and orderly transition of power—which should not be taken lightly given the January 6 attack on democracy during the last transitional period. Allan Lichtman, a historian and political analyst renowned for his accurate predictions of the US presidential elections since 1984, predicted that Harris would win this election based on his 13-point predictive model, which assesses factors such as short-term economic challenges, policy changes, social unrest, foreign and military successes and failures, and other issues that determine electoral outcomes. Even analysts overlooked hard economic realities. The Democratic Party’s wobbly stance has deactivated the voter base the party usually relies on. Fewer women, fewer communities of colour showed up for Harris compared to their turn out for Biden and Clinton.

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woman president, which is reflective of the broader unyielding social order and persistent racism and sexism that have now acquired a new dynamic with the resurgence of conservative leanings in younger population, particularly Gen Z men who are concerned about the economy.

Party or the Trump campaign has a strong suit in gaining credibility, but Trump’s two-word promises are direct and blunt and delivered in sizeable bites. Trump 2.0 promises a new golden age for the US, which begins with closing the southern border, mass deportation of migrants,

Middle East. He did broker the 2020 Abraham Records for a normalisation of relationship between Israel and several Arab nations, but he also ordered the “Muslim Ban” upon taking office in 2017, and recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and announced plans to relocate the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. So, it is unclear how, when and if Trump will act on his promise to the Muslim voters who supported him. The blue party has lost mid-western industrial counties, along with college towns in the battle ground states that went for Clinton and Biden in the previous election cycles. The past three US elections should drive this point home: political parties cannot capitalise on identity politics

time it takes to form and implement policies and the time it takes for them to have an impact. Inflation during the previous Trump administration was averaging 1.9 percent, while the US experienced one of the highest inflation rates since early 1980s during Biden’s presidency. But we seem to forget that Biden inherited the Covid economy with major disruptions in global supply chains and energy price hikes. The US is not taking an uncharted path by choosing Trump. The upcoming Trump administration will be tethered to the ideas and rhetoric on which the previous Trump administration ran. The epoch of political scandal, chaos and quick turnovers may be back, especially given the line-

Climate concerns that are global will also receive pushback due to erosion of environment legislation and advocacy agencies. In his victory speech, Trump highly praised X and Tesla CEO Elon Musk, who is also rumoured to be playing a key role in the upcoming Trump administration. While the clout of the radical Project 2025 has declined, a new organisation has appeared on the scene with a policy agenda for the new administration: The America First Policy Institute, a right-wing think tank with direct links to Trump’s official transition team. Some of the key policy goals of the organisation include defunding Planned Parenthood, establishing nationwide reciprocity for concealed

Kamala Harris said as she conceded, “This is not a time to throw up our hands; this is a time to roll up our sleeves.” While the election outcome is sealed, she affirmed that the bigger fight is not over. But the question is: which fight is the right one? The Democratic Party needs to grow beyond quick fixes and have a bold, progressive agenda based on principles. The party cannot have its foot in two different boats. The ethos of strong moral compass and clear vision that Biden’s acknowledgement letter states in relation to Harris’s run for president needs to be more than just rhetoric if the Democratic Party hopes to craft a bold and unified progressive agenda and truly represent the people.



President-elect Donald Trump gestures during a campaign rally at PPG Paints Arena in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, US on November 4, 2024. PHOTO: AFP

Will Trump’s return change Bangladesh-US ties?

In the aftermath of Donald Trump’s victory in the 2024 US presidential election, Michael Kugelman, director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center, speaks to Ramisa Rob of The Daily Star about the implications of this win for Bangladesh at large.

What does a second Trump administration and the change in US leadership mean for Bangladesh—in both the short and long terms?

There won’t be any notable implications in the immediate term when Trump takes office in January. But I do recognise that in itself is an implication and change for Bangladesh, because the country is experiencing significant challenges, especially on the economic front, and it won’t really have the US to check in on them.

There are several things to remember. For one, the relationship between Bangladesh and the US, during the first Trump administration, saw many strategic partnerships. It was during that period that the Trump administration launched the Indo-Pacific policy, and considered Bangladesh to be a big part of that. Trade between Bangladesh and the US went up as well. Now, the question is: what do those experiences tell us about what could happen over the next four years?

Here, one has to acknowledge that a lot has changed in Bangladesh; there’s now a new leader, Dr Muhammad Yunus, who was quite critical of Donald Trump previously. But now he’s leading the interim government so his reaction is obviously very different: a cordial letter was issued to congratulate Trump. I also think the question we should be asking is how Trump would look at the state of the relationship and whether he would want to refashion the current relationship, which I think he will as I don’t think he will prioritise the US robustly embracing development assistance, and so on.

How exactly would he refashion the development assistance?

The current messaging that the US wants to help Bangladesh in strengthening its economy and engaging in reforms and with that new agreements, including a USAID agreement that commits new funding to Bangladesh, would probably change. The way Trump looks at foreign policy is very transactional and pragmatic, and he also takes an approach of burden sharing with allies and partners. So I don’t think Trump would be interested in continuing the current dynamic. But now, if we are to



Michael Kugelman

contemplate the possibility that the Trump administration would want to pull back on the commitments that have been made so far by the current Biden administration, I don’t think we should overstate the deleterious impact that it could have on Bangladesh, because it is a country that has a lot of friends, partners and multilateral donors around the world.

Just days before the election, Trump posted an incorrect, incendiary tweet about Bangladesh. Can we anticipate the rhetoric to continue?

My view is that it doesn’t necessarily reflect his actual positions, but rather the US electoral politics at play. There have been several prominent Hindu American activists who have said publicly that Trump’s statements were a product of their advocacy, and these activists are essentially Modi supporters as well. The comments that Trump made were not only directed at Bangladesh—he did mention he looks forward to working with his good friend, Narendra Modi. But yes, the Bangladesh-US relationship will have a tricky start when Trump takes office because his comments must have left a bitter taste in the mouth for the Bangladesh government. From a public diplomacy standpoint, there has been a pushback against this disinformation about Bangladesh since August, and Trump embracing that rhetoric would have affected

it. But it’s something that can be worked through. It’s clear to me that Dr Yunus wants this relationship to work and the onus will be on him and the interim government to get through to the Trump administration that it wants this to work. I don’t expect to see initiations from the Trump administration towards Bangladesh.

What is the current relationship exactly, and how will that tangibly change, especially in the context of Bangladesh-India relations as well?

Well, it is very clear that Dr Yunus’s politics don’t align with that of Donald Trump. For his work as an economist and pioneer of the microfinance industry, many Western liberals and members of the Democratic Party respect Dr Yunus. We know when Yunus took office, the Biden administration

don’t think that would affect Bangladesh as the US and Bangladesh have a trade partnership—the US being a top destination for exports—and that does not concern India. Regarding the great power competition, Trump’s ideologies—given that he doesn’t change it—would very much align with what India would like to see: the Bangladesh government does not get closer to China. On the other hand, the new reality is that you’re not going to have a US president who would go out of his way to strengthen the relationship with the current interim government. In the context of the current state of Bangladesh-India relations, that would be more reassuring for India.

Given Trump’s hardline position on China, how would that affect the relationship between Bangladesh and the US?

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responded very positively, which was significant given that we had seen tensions creep into the Bangladesh-US relationship in the last few years of the Sheikh Hasina government. When the chief adviser was in Washington for the UNGA, he was hosted by the Clinton Foundation. So obviously, that will all be different now because Donald Trump embodies a very different type of worldview. But the personality differences between the two leaders in due course can be overcome when you look at the broader interests. Trump would recognise that there is a significant trade partnership between Bangladesh and the US, and based on geopolitical considerations, the US should not back away too much from Bangladesh, and drive the nation even closer to China.

Getting to the India factor, it’s very clear to me that Donald Trump and Narendra Modi have a good rapport, and their ideological views are in many cases convergent. But I just

If Trump takes a hardline position on US-China competition—he likely will do that, but you never know with him—he may try to push Dhaka to sort of move away from the Indo-Pacific Outlook, a document that was passed by the previous government in Bangladesh to balance the relationship between the US and China. He could be more direct that Dhaka has to work more with Washington. But Trump is a maverick. While you can make inferences based on what he’s done in the past, we can’t rule out the possibility that he could decide, after taking office, to reach some sort of understanding with President Xi Jinping. Let’s not forget that during his first year in office during his last term, he did suggest that he saw China as a friend. So if we were to have this sort of “black swan” development and Trump decided that he wants to tone down the US-China competition, it would be very helpful for Bangladesh-US relations

and Bangladesh’s geopolitical interests on the whole.

Trump’s campaign presented protectionist economic policies, so would that hamper the trade relationship with Bangladesh?

If you look at the data compared to 2022 and 2023, there has been a notable reduction in trade volume. Though not significant, there also has been a reduction in the US foreign direct investment (FDI) to Bangladesh. It is honestly because of the economic slowdown we’re seeing in Bangladesh. So if Trump starts making recommendations on tough tariff policies, it would certainly impact the Bangladesh-US commercial relations. But it’s important to know there are other ways to pursue commercial relations, through the development-finance corporation (DFC). If Bangladesh is able to strengthen its labour rights, then DFC theoretically would be able to provide support to its infrastructure projects and so on. Bangladesh is not authorised yet on DFC because of labour rights concerns that US officials have had, but if that were to change, it would be good for Bangladesh. And it could change, as I don’t know if a Trump administration would be as strict regarding labour concerns compared to a Democratic administration.

Regarding the Rohingya issue, how would Trump’s victory affect the mounting crisis in Bangladesh?

Given the situation in Myanmar, the Biden administration has been firmly behind Bangladesh in terms of committing and maintaining assistance, mainly for USAID. By contrast, the Trump administration probably won’t be as generous to disperse resources. But if Dhaka presented the issue less as a humanitarian issue, and more as security and stability concerns, it could get the Trump administration’s attention. Dr Yunus did try to get the world’s attention on the Rohingya issue, suggesting relocation but Trump would not be a supporter of relocating Rohingya to a third country, and certainly not to the US, given his politics on immigration. So that could be a challenge when you look at the possibilities of easing the burden on Bangladesh.