**Democracy or fascism?**

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Just in case you didn’t notice, authoritarianism was on the ballot in the 2022 midterm elections. An unprecedented majority of candidates from one of the nation’s two major political parties were committed to undemocratic policies and outcomes. You would have to go back to the Democratic Party-dominated segregationist South of the 1950s to find such a sweeping array of authoritarian proclivities in an American election. While voters did stop some of the most high-profile election deniers, conspiracy theorists, and pro-Trump true believers from taking office, all too many won seats at the congressional, state, and local levels.

Count on one thing: this movement isn’t going away. It won’t be defeated in a single election cycle and don’t think the authoritarian threat isn’t real either. After all, it now forms the basis for the politics of the Republican Party and so is targeting every facet of public life. No one committed to constitutional democracy should rest easy while the network of right-wing activists, funders, media, judges, and political leaders work so tirelessly to gain yet more power and implement a thoroughly undemocratic agenda.

This deeply rooted movement has surged from the margins of our political system to become the defining core of the GOP. In the post-World War II era, from the McCarthyism of the 1950s to Barry Goldwater’s run for the presidency in 1964, from President Richard Nixon’s Southern strategy, President Ronald Reagan, and Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich to Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell in its current Trumpian iteration, Republicans have long targeted democratic norms as impediments to establishing a neoliberal, race-based version of all-American authoritarianism. And that movement has been far too weakly opposed by far too many Democratic Party leaders and even some progressives.

Don’t think of this phenomenon as right-wing conservativism either, but as a more dangerous, even violent movement whose ultimate aim is to overthrow liberal democracy. The American version of this type of electoral authoritarianism, anchored in Christian nationalist populism, has at its historic core a white nationalist pushback against the struggle for racial justice.

Liberal democracy had failed generations of African Americans and other people of color, as, of course, it did Native Americans massacred or driven from their ancestral lands. It failed African Americans and Latinos forced to work on chain gangs or lynched (without the perpetrators suffering the slightest punishment). It failed Asian Americans who were brutally sent to internment camps during World War II and Asians often explicitly excluded from immigration rosters.

The benefits of liberal democracy – rule of law, government accountability, the separation of powers, and the like – that were extended to most whites existed alongside a racial authoritarianism that denied fundamental rights and protections to tens of millions of Americans. The Civil Rights reforms of the 1960s defeated the longstanding, all-too-legal regime of racist segregationists and undemocratic, even if sometimes constitutional, authority. For the first time since the end of the Reconstruction era, when there was a concerted effort to extend voting rights, offer financial assistance, and create educational opportunities for those newly freed from slavery, it appeared that the nation was again ready to reckon with its racial past and present.

Yet, all too sadly, the proponents of autocratic governance did anything but disappear. In the twenty-first century, their efforts are manifest in the governing style and ethos of the Republican Party, its base, and the extremist organizations that go with it, as well as the far-right media, think tanks, and foundations that accompany them. At every level, from local school boards and city councils to Congress and the White House, authoritarianism and its obligatory racism continue to drive the GOP political agenda.

The violent insurrection of January 6, 2021, was just the high (or, depending on your views, low) point in a long-planned, multi-dimensional, hyper-conservative, white nationalist coup attempt engineered by President Donald Trump, his supporters, and members of the Republican Party. It was neither the beginning nor the end of that effort, just its most violent public expression – to date, at least. After all, Trump’s efforts to delegitimize elections were first put on display when he claimed that Barack Obama had actually lost the popular vote and so stolen the 2012 election, that it had all been a ‘total sham’.

During the 2016 presidential debates, Trump alone stated that he would not commit himself to support any other candidate as the party’s nominee, since – a recurring theme for him – he could only lose if the election were rigged or someone cheated. He correctly grasped that there would be no consequences to such norm-breaking behavior and falsely stated that he had only lost the Iowa caucus to Senator Ted Cruz because “he stole it.” After losing the popular vote but winning the Electoral College in 2016, Trump incessantly complained that he would have won the popular vote, too, if the “millions” of illegal voters who cast their ballots for Hillary Clinton hadn’t been counted.

Donald Trump decisively lost the 2020 election to Joe Biden, 74.2 million to 81.2 million in the popular vote and 232 to 306 in the Electoral College, leaving only one path to victory (other than insurrection) – finding a way to discount millions of black votes in key swing-state cities. From birtherism and Islamophobia to anti-Black Lives Matter rhetoric, racism had propelled Trump’s ascendancy and his political future would be determined by the degree to which he and his allies could invalidate votes in the disproportionately Black cities of Atlanta, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia, and Latino and Native American votes in Arizona and Nevada.

The GOP effort to disqualify Black, Latino, and Native American votes was a plot to create an illegitimate government, an unholy scheme that took an inescapably violent turn and led to an outcome for which the former president has yet to be held accountable. Sadly enough, the forces of authoritarianism were anything but dispatched by their defeat on January 6th. If anything, they were emboldened by the failure so far to hold responsible most of the agents who maneuvered the event into motion.

Excerpted: ‘The MAGAfication of America Is a Prelude to Authoritarianism’.

Courtesy: Commondreams.org