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**System working**

The recent tight win of Joe Biden over Trump shows that the American system is working to absorb the forces that have been left marginalized due to populist politics since 2016. The American system had the capacity to self-correct itself and it did through a narrow victory margin.

Trump’s win in 2016 was not the only populist leader’s rise in the world: the wave of populism swept across most parts of the world: India, Turkey, Pakistan, Philippines, UK, Hungary, Brazil, and Poland to name a few countries. It seems as if a new era of ‘democratic backsliding’ has taken hold and the hard won gains on civil rights and democratization are being lost to racism, xenophobia, hatred and bigotry.

Joe Biden’s election has put at least a temporary stop to it. It remains to be seen whether it is the beginning of the end of populism in the US and elsewhere in the world. Trump still received the second-highest votes polled ever in the history of American elections. So the populist appeal is still very strong in the US. However, a better organized effort against the politics of hatred defeated these strong populist trends. Of course, Biden has won by securing the needed Electoral College votes; yet the popular vote indicates how the wind is blowing in the US.

Pankaj Mishra in his writings has analysed this phenomenon of anger that led to a rise in populism. He said that there is a contradiction between liberal democracy’s promise of equality with the deep-seated inequalities of capitalism. He explained how inequalities have grown in the US and elsewhere over time and led to resentment and rage that attracts voters to toxic leaders like Trump.

Acemoglu in his recent ‘Foreign Affairs’ article has further developed Mishra’s argument. Due to digitalization and automation, there has been loss of manufacturing jobs for workers who do not have college degrees. Imports from China to the US have further added to this phenomenon; though the inequalities were rising even before the trade with China. There is a clear chasm between skilled/educated workers who use digital technology and others who do not. Wages for non-degree holders have been stagnant or fallen in the last four decades. Life is hard for less educated workers and the resentment over falling standards of life has attracted them to Trumpism and its bigoted politics.

What is remarkable about Biden’s victory is that the opposition to populism has been mounted by working the system. There might still be many shortcomings and failures of the Democratic Party; yet it mobilized the alternative voices remarkably well. Democracy might be broken in the US and elsewhere; yet it auto-corrected itself with a more ambitious effort. Trump may not be the last populist that the US has elected; yet the temporary break on populist politics may usher in a better era in international cooperation over security, environmental, trade and socio-political issues.

There are lessons for Pakistan from the recent Biden’s victory in the US. The system in Pakistan must not lock the pressure cooker without any vent and should let the opposing forces space. The opposition’s alliance of 11 political parties – the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) – must be given space rather than suppressed. There are genuine grievances that the opposition has against the accountability witch-hunt of populist Imran Khan’s government. The rising inflation, hardships due to Covid-19 and the difficult economic times add fuel to the fire. The system must allow accommodation over politics of confrontation.

The PDM has the two main political parties in the country: the PML-N and the PPP. In addition, it also has the JUI-F, regional parties from Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It represents a kaleidoscope of political representation from the right-wing to left-wing and from Punjab, Sindh, and smaller provinces. The PTI government must not lightly brush the PDM off or try to suppress it. What the PDM shows is that the present system in Pakistan has not accommodated the concerns of the huge majority of people represented by these 11 political parties and they have been left out of it. The system must show flexibility and address their concerns rather than dishing out the traitor certificates en mass.

With the assassination of Akbar Bugti in 2006; the concerns of the Baloch have not been accommodated by the system, leading to the insurgency that is still raging 14 years after. It shows you when the system breaks down and fails to provide space for oppositional politics, it leads to adverse outcomes. The PDM should not meet the same fate. The system must allow it space within its parameters to vent anger and absorb the apprehensions; so that the forces that are opposed to the PTI’s populism in Pakistan also feel that they have stakes in the system that needs recalibration.

Biden’s win shows that democracy can spring back after being held hostage to hate-filled populist politics. The American system has accommodated those left out or opposed to the politics of populism. There is a dire need for structural changes to address the deep-seated inequalities in the US and elsewhere. Capitalism needs to be regulated by powerful public-interest driven governmental policies and checks and balances.

In Pakistan, there are structural fault lines between the power of the elected and unelected institutions. The intra-elite infighting needs to end to give way to the politics of accommodation, long-term planning and political stability and protect public interest and the vulnerable beyond the shocks of confrontation. The working socio-economic and political system must function for all and give space to everyone rather than being exclusive to some.

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