[**A ventilator for democracy**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1629433/a-ventilator-for-democracy)

[Jawed Naqvi](https://www.dawn.com/authors/280/jawed-naqvi)Published June 15, 2021

The writer is Dawn’s correspondent in Delhi.

WHEN Russian tanks bombarded the country’s elected deputies inside the besieged Duma, and Boris Yeltsin was declared a hero for ordering the assault, the Western world called it a triumphant moment for democracy. The states that spilled out from the demise of the USSR were flaunted as beacons of hope for democracy. They are anything but. Our expectations and even the definition of democracy seem to have shrunk with time.

The Knesset’s vote in Israel, for example, [ended the 12-year violence-filled rein of Benjamin Netanyahu](https://www.dawn.com/news/1629249) and brought in an even more far-right prime minister to replace him. The change of guard from one right-winger to another created a compelling reason nevertheless to heave a collective sigh of relief. Likewise, who could have thought that many Indians still tethered to the struggle for secular democracy would be forced by political circumstance to cheer for a notoriously right-wing Shiv Sena all because it leads a strident anti-Modi coalition in Maharashtra.

The fact that agreeable people find themselves in a desperate bind, reminds one of a comment Fidel Castro made to an Indian journalist. Asked if he found himself lonely or sticking out like a sore thumb when other communist countries had moved to the right, he said: “The more the world moves to the right, the more I move to the left by standing where I was.” It could be a lesson for the Israeli left or India’s who have become marginal onlookers in a political game they had once led.

US President Joe Biden is a beneficiary of a similar circumstance. He is at least better than Donald Trump, goes the familiar sigh of relief. And so he arrived in Europe last week. As the world gasped for oxygen and battled a steadily mutating coronavirus, Biden landed in Cornwall in southwest England with a focused mission: to resuscitate democracy and boost human rights where they are faltering. Coming from one involved in bombing Libya into a mangled wreck, it seemed a strange quest. Luckily, Syria managed to dodge him, not without a little help from Russia’s Putin, for which he must be made to pay.

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[In Cornwall](https://www.dawn.com/news/1629230), Biden’s cup of passion to do a good turn was overflowing but there were glitches in the script. He, however, ignored them. For all the talk of democracy, he was about to hand over Afghanistan to the Afghan Taliban come Sept 11 leaving its terrified ethnic minorities, its women and schoolchildren to the mercy of those whose religious bigotry was once fanned by the United States.

The [500 million free jabs](https://www.dawn.com/news/1628716) against Covid-19 Biden offered the poorer countries in the bargain fared badly against the trillion dollars his predecessors — including his own tenure with Barack Obama — had squandered for 20 years. The occupation was explained to the world as a worthy one with claims of working for women’s rights and democracy in Afghanistan.

It was of course a bold lie about a country where women were going to universities before US intervention destroyed their lives. Afghanistan was, after all, where Vilayat Khan had woven magic with the sitar for the discerning music buff that King Zahir Shah was. That’s where Mohammed Husain Sarahang honed his craft of classical singing even during the reviled communist rule. Biden can, of course, take comfort from the fact that at least Malala Yousafzai stood her ground and survived the Afghan Taliban’s soulmates in Pakistan.

Happily, several G7 leaders gathered in Cornwall to watch Biden pour venom on China and Russia seemed mostly unmoved by his enthusiasm. But India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi stepped in with firm commitment to defend “democracy, freedom of thought and liberty”. Biden has company. “As the world’s largest democracy, India is a natural ally for the G7 and guest countries to defend these shared values from a host of threats stemming from authoritarianism, terrorism and violent extremism, disinformation and infodemics and economic coercion,” Mr Modi declaimed.

**Read:** [*Biden vs Trump foreign policy*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1571365)

One thing has become clear. Not for no reason has Biden kept a low profile on [Kashmir](https://www.dawn.com/news/1573617) or over a range of human rights violations reported from across India. Western newspapers have catalogued many of them. Biden’s gaze is fixed on Xinjiang and Hong Kong. Don’t try to remind him of the rights and dignity for [Julian Assange](https://www.dawn.com/news/1475390) when the freedom of [Alexei Navalny](https://www.dawn.com/news/1605264) is being suppressed by Vladimir Putin.

Noam Chomsky has analysed Biden’s foreign policy succinctly, which is essentially not very different from Trump’s in most ways, barring perhaps the nuclear arms talks with Russia. It may be also true that Netanyahu would have survived as prime minister had Trump been around instead of Biden.

Hopes were raised in Kashmir and among human rights activists, many of them languishing in Indian jails, when [Biden defeated Trump](https://www.dawn.com/news/1589196) who was then considered close to Modi. It proved to be a false hope. India was a crucial part of Trump’s anti-China strategy and remains so under Biden’s watch. At least, when Trump was pressed to act against the Saudi crown prince for the brutal murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi, he was honest in admitting he didn’t want to lose a hundred billion dollars worth of military hardware ordered by Riyadh.

“What we generally find, I think, is that Russia and China sometimes deter US actions to enforce its global hegemony in regions on their periphery that are of particular concern to them,” says Chomsky. “One can ask whether they are justified in seeking to limit overwhelming US power in this way, but that is a long distance from the way the challenge is commonly understood: as an effort to displace the US global role in sustaining a liberal rule-based international order by new centres of hegemonic power.” Luckily, at least some at the Cornwall summit who came to hear Biden’s petition for democracy, seemed inclined to agree with Chomsky.

*The writer is Dawn’s correspondent in Delhi.*

**jawednaqvi@gmail.com**

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