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**The belated dawn**

The United States presidential elections were supposed to produce a sweeping victory for Joe Biden and a decisive win for the Democrats. The vote was supposed to signal a clear break with the past; ushering in a new morning after a dark night in America.

November 3 was supposed to be “judgement day” when, after four years of Donald Trump, Americans were finally seizing the chance to deliver a clear verdict befitting the crimes committed by President Trump against their democratic institutions and liberal values.

But the elections have been too close to call, two days after the vote, prompting a number of urgent questions.

What happened to the landslide victory the pollsters promised us, showing a months-long Biden lead over Trump? Were they simply mistaken! Again? Even after assuring us they had learned from their 2016 mistakes, improving on the conduct and interpretations of their polls.

More importantly, how is it that Trump continues to be so popular after his utter mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic, which led to a quarter of a million deaths, unprecedented economic decline and double-digit unemployment. How is it he remains a credible option after countless scandals and investigations into his suspicious record, from abuse of power to tax avoidance not to say evasion?

In short, why, despite all of that, have more than 68 million Americans cast their vote for Trump?

Contrary to conventional wisdom, this election was not only a referendum on the Trump presidency; it was also a referendum on America or perhaps more accurately a referendum on the Republican Party.

I suspect many centrist independents and Republicans voted for Trump despite his transgressions, which may go a long way to explaining why the pollsters got it wrong. These Trump supporters were probably embarrassed or even ashamed to publicly admit to supporting a candidate whose incompetence, deception, divisiveness and yes racial preferences have been widely and carefully reported.

Others, who were more cynical, voted for Trump because he plays dirty and is willing to do all and anything to win. Those people are so hostile to mainstream pollsters representing mainstream media, they probably refrained from engaging or sharing their views with them.

Meanwhile, mainstream evangelicals and social conservatives have long justified their unconditional embrace of the cheating adulterer as a “means to an end”, retorting that “God has chosen worse people”.

Trump did not disappoint.

As president, he has bulldozed his way through the entrenched bureaucracy and the formidable liberal establishment like no other, injecting more than 200 conservative judges, including three to the Supreme Court, cutting taxes, “bigly”, especially corporate taxes, doing away with economic and environmental regulations, supporting anti-abortion rights and other socially conservative policies, and demonising the mainstream media as the enemy of the people.

All these in addition to recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, demonising Iran, and banning countless Muslims from entering the US, all of which played like liturgical music to evangelical ears.

Indeed, populist Trump has had his thumb on the pulse of white America, knowing all too well how to pander to an increasingly alienated, bitter and angry white working-class and get their support in return.

He has openly, intently and intensely appeased white Americans like no other president in recent memory. He has restored, defended and rallied white nationalism, provoking anti-Black and anti-Muslim and Hispanic sentiments, demonising the likes of Black Lives Matter, which was established to defend Black victims of police abuse, and accusing its leaders of treason, sedition and insurrection. But when it came to white violence, Trump ignored and at times even inspired and defended the actions of white nationalist militias and armed thugs.

The elections have made it clear that for the absolute majority of conservatives and Republicans, the president’s agenda is more important than him cheating on his taxes or abusing his office. That Trump’s success in implementing the conservative agenda justifies his populist, hyper-nationalist, anti-democratic and even racist stances. And that these are more urgent than, say, 100,000 more Americans dying because of his mismanagement of the coronavirus crisis.

For these Trump voters, the enemy is first and foremost the liberal establishment and all its mutations in government bureaucracy and its demons in mainstream media and environmental and social groups and initiatives. And, of course, its current leadership as represented by Biden and his running mate Kamala Harris.

Admittedly, Biden is not the best alternative to Trump. He is neither an exciting nor inspiring leader. Moreover, I assume that many who hate Trump refrained from voting for Biden, who will soon be 78, because there is a good chance that Harris, a woman of colour, could take over before his term ends.

As brutal as it may sound, America is so terribly divided that today’s electoral politics seem like a continuation of the American Civil War by other means. That is why, for the majority of white conservatives, four more years of Trump is all they needed.

But for the majority of Americans, the past four years of Trump were four years too long.

The ‘American carnage’ Trump invoked in his inauguration speech has turned into a self-fulfilled prophecy.

That is why, despite the Republicans’ utter cynicism and their best efforts, the final vote-counting in the battleground states shows Biden winning, albeit with the narrowest of victories. But as expected, Trump is not giving up nor giving in so easily. He is accusing the Democrats of election fraud and promising to take the matter to the Supreme Court.

If, or rather when, Tsunami Trump passes, it is bound to leave behind much destruction, requiring years to clean up all the debris. As the dust settles and the national wreckage is clear, Americans are bound to discover that the damage to their country and its standing in the world is far worse than expected.

By no means does this mean the end of Trumpism, which is driven less by supply than by demand. It is more like a Hydra; cut off one head and two more take its place. But for most Americans, the worst may have passed, at least for the time being, even if the scars are too deep and too painful.

This last year has been particularly noir, but then, the darkest hour does come before the dawn. I can hear some of the sceptics scream “false dawn”, which may be true considering that Biden may prove a lame duck president unable to pass critical legislation he promised because of vicious opposition from the Republican-controlled Senate.

But a critical view of the challenges ahead can wait; there is a time to lament and a time to celebrate.

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