

ISAS Insights

No. 373 – 20 December 2016

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Trump, the Future of American Democracy, and the Developing World

There is a growing worry among academics and policy analysts in the United States that the rise of the movement that bestowed the presidency on Donald Trump may pose an existential threat to the country's political structure. If the system does get weakened, it will have worldwide consequences, including in South Asia. Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States was held as an example of a political system, the basic elements of which could be adopted by the politically underdeveloped parts of the world. That may not be the case any longer.

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Does the rise of Donald Trump pose a threat to American democracy? This question, it would appear, had been answered. From the way the American democratic system had developed over more than two centuries, it was taken for granted that democracy was not

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in danger in the country. It was a well-established system that would prove to be durable not only in the United States but would also serve as a model that the countries that were engaged in the process of political development could well follow. In his well-known work, *The End of History*, the sociologist Francis Fukuyama had argued that, with the end of the Soviet Union and the collapse of European Communism, ideological conflicts had ended. Liberal democracy would no longer be challenged and would, instead, prevail as *the* system of governance across the globe. While it would take different forms, its basic elements would be common to all. Among them are the rule of law; the selection of those who hold the reins of power through elections in which all citizens will participate without hindrance and fear; and the full accountability of those who occupy policymaking positions.² In his later works, Fukuyama began to recognize that political development is not a linear process. It may encounter problems, as adjustments are made to accommodate changes in environment.³ Given this, in which direction is Donald Trump likely to take the American political system?

“Is our democracy in danger?” ask Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt in a recent article based on their work on political development. Both are professors of government at Harvard University.⁴ “With the possible exception of the Civil War, American democracy has never collapsed; indeed no democracy as rich or as established as America ever has. Yet past stability is no guarantee of democracy’s future survival”. In their view, several warning signs that they noticed in their work on democratic developments in Europe and Latin America have appeared in the United States. “The clearest warning sign is the ascent of anti-democratic politicians into mainstream politics”. Donald Trump falls into this category of politicians whose main characteristics were defined by Juan J. Linz in his study of democracy’s demise in Europe in the 1930s.⁵ His indicators included unambiguous rejection of violence, willingness to curtail rivals’ civil liberties, and the denial of the legitimacy of elected governments. To these three a fourth could be added: failure to

² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, Free Press, 1992.

³ Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.

⁴ See Steven Levitsky and L.A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: International Linkage, Organizational Power, and Fate of Hybrid Regimes*, New York, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming, 2017.

⁵ Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarianism and Authoritarian Regimes*, New York, Lynne Reiner Publications, 2000.

promise, let alone grant minorities an equal status in society. Trump's temperament and his pronouncements during and after the elections leave little doubt that he meets these requirements for authoritarianism.

He encouraged his followers to use violence to express their unhappiness with the system he called "rigged". He suggested that those unhappy could express their "second amendment rights" to own guns. He was suggesting the use of weapons that people owned if their demands were not met. Then there was his treatment of Hillary Clinton, his opponent in the election. "Lock her up" became a favored slogan during the campaign, joined with enthusiasm by Lt. Gen. Michael Lynn in his speech at the Republican Party Convention in July 2016. Lynn was named as the National Security Adviser in the Trump White House. This slogan was aimed at the opposition candidate who was then being investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation for using personal computers for handling government correspondence.

Trump also questioned the integrity of the electoral system. He said during the campaign that if he lost it would be because of rigging. Even after the elections, he maintained that he would have won the popular vote – he lost to Clinton by 3 million votes – if fraud had not been used to swell the vote for his rival. And, he launched his election campaign by labelling Mexican immigrants into the United States as rapists and criminals. He promised that if elected he would build a wall along the long American-Mexican border and have the Mexicans pay for it. He suggested that the Muslims living in the United States and their communities should be subjected to surveillance to ensure that they did not pose a threat to security. At one point he suggested the ban of Muslims from entry into the country.

Could the institutions that underpin the American political system constrain Donald Trump once he wields the power of the presidency? Not necessarily so, wrote Levitsky and Ziblatt. "The institutional safeguards protecting our democracy may be less effective than we think. A well designed constitution is not enough to ensure a stable democracy – a lesson many Latin American independence leaders learned when they borrowed the

American constitutional model in the early 19th century, only to see their countries plunge into chaos”. “Could the United States be headed that way”? asked Levitsky and Ziblatt.⁶

Not only political scientists but also analysts from other social sciences begin to doubt whether the American system has the strength to withstand the pressure under which it has already come, as Trump makes his way to the White House. Paul Krugman, the Nobel Prize winning economist was worried about the future of the system. “But if there is any hope of redemption, it will have to begin with a clear recognition of how bad things are. American democracy is very much on the edge”, he wrote in a recent column. He dipped into ancient history to find a parallel to what he saw happening in his country. “Famously, on paper the transformation of Rome from republic to empire never happened. Officially, imperial Rome was still ruled by the Senate that just happened to defer to the emperor, whose title originally meant ‘commander,’ on everything that mattered. We may not go down exactly the same route – although are we even sure of that? – but the process of destroying substance while preserving form is already underway”.⁷

When the United States competed with the Soviet Union on ideological grounds, it was confident that it had not only the economic but also military strength to win that war. It was also confident of the power of its political structure that was held out to the developing world as something that they could emulate. In the new war of ideologies which the United States now faces, with not one foe but several opponents, it has developed weaknesses in its system. Europe, once an ally during the Cold War, has also lost institutional strength that was also held out as an example for the developing parts of the world. It had become a model of regional integration that the highly fractured emerging markets could follow to their collective advantage. But Europe has been hurt by more or less the same forces that have hit the United States. On the opposing side are the Russian and Chinese states and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. There are of course many differences among them. That said, they have one thing in common. They are all governed by strongmen. If the United

⁶ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, “Is our democracy in danger?” *The New York Times Sunday Review*, December 18, 2016, p. 5.

⁷ Paul Krugman, “How republics end,” *The New York Times*, December 19, 2016, p. A21.

States also establishes a structure under the total command of one man, it will have serious consequences for the rest of the world.

To return to Levitsky and Ziblatt by way of conclusion: “If ordinary circumstances prevail, our institutions will most likely muddle through. It is less clear, however, how democracy would fare in a crisis. In the event of a war, a major terrorist attack or large scale protests – all of which are entirely possible – a president with authoritarian tendencies and institutions that have come unmoored could pose a serious threat to American democracy. We must be vigilant. The warning signs are real.”

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