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2025: Whither Democracy?

By: Alok Sheel

The far right's rise globally threatens hard-won democratic institutions and Enlightenment values. To counter this, both liberal democracy and the left must address socio-economic inequality and prioritise individual freedoms, echoing the collaboration that curbed the far right a century ago.

As we enter the second quarter of the 21st century, the world waits with bated breath – and apprehension – for the second Donald Trump presidency in the US. This is the most powerful position in the world, capable of altering it for better or for worse. The question in many people's minds is whether liberal democracy will survive, along with the existing post-war multilateral system forged by and large through free trade backed by American military might and the US dollar.

For the purpose of this article, let us set aside, for the time being, the implications of the second Trump presidency for the international order, the complexities of which merit separate treatment, and focus on liberal democracy.

Both liberal democracy and the multilateral system survived the first Trump presidency. This survival is often ascribed to Trump's transactional approach on the one hand, and the inherent strength of American institutions on the other. Trump's extreme rhetoric is sometimes seen as opening gambits for deals he might have in mind. America's democratic institutions were created by the founding fathers who deliberated at great length on putting in place a system of checks and balances, attributed largely to James Madison, and inspired by the great French political philosopher, Charles Montesquieu. The system had to survive a popular demagogue with authoritarian tendencies – a Max Weberian “charismatic authority” – being voted to power.

This has long been the Achilles heel of democracy, putatively flagged by Plato in the wake of the collapse of Republican democracies in Greece and Rome. Trump's campaign speeches and rhetoric in recent months indicate that this time he comes better prepared to take these institutions apart. How might this play out, assuming he really means to do what he says and his presidency is not stymied by internal dissensions?

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The checks and balances of American democracy would be put to the ultimate test. There is a distinct possibility that it could fail this test if a demagogic tyrant is able to seize full control of all the important independent branches of the government. Madison, the chief architect of the US constitution, was however of the view that ultimately it was public opinion that “sets bounds to every government.” Indeed, the French observer Alexis de Tocqueville, after an extensive tour of the US almost two centuries ago, was of the view that much more than the Constitution it was the “habits of the mind” of American people that played a greater role in sustaining freedoms.

These ultimate bounds will now be tested, as they were in attitudes to slavery in the US more than a century and a half ago. It took a civil war to secure and advance American democracy at that point, and there is some talk of another one now. We recently saw in South Korea, where martial law declared by the president had to be quickly reversed, how democracy is ultimately underwritten by civil society.

The travails of democracy extend far beyond the US. Both liberalism and the left are now in retreat in Western Europe countries that lay at the very heart of modern social revolutions. While Trump is emblematic of the current triumphal march of the far right, he is not its only flag bearer. There is Marine Le Pen in France, Georgia Meloni in Italy, Viktor Orban in Hungary, and Alice Weidel in Germany. An intriguing feature of the resurgence of far-right parties in Europe is the emergence of women leaders of what are male-dominated movements. This anomaly no doubt merits socio-psychological scrutiny.

There is nevertheless a consensus amongst political commentators that democratic systems, which were in expansionary mode all over the world after the end of World War II and the collapse of European imperialism, and received a setback during the Cold War before resuming their march forward following the fall of the Berlin Wall and left-wing and authoritarian regimes, are now once again in retreat.

The period following the global financial crisis of 2008 has been one of continuing social and economic turmoil. It has not only seen a slowing of the democratic impulse as liberal democracy has been put on the back foot in Western countries, where modern democratic systems first evolved, by populist right-wing demagogues, but also in democracies elsewhere such as India, Israel, and in Latin America. Neither liberalism nor the left is in good shape anywhere in the world. Why might this be so, and do they need to reinvent themselves to push back? How might they do so?

There are now dangerous demagogues to be found spearheading this resurgence in major countries (US and Brazil in the two Americas, India in Asia, and in all the major countries in Europe) in four major continents.

It bears keeping in mind that both liberalism and socialism are children of the human Enlightenment that culminated in modern social revolutions, such as the British, American, and French. These revolutions espoused the modern Enlightenment values of liberty, human equality, fraternity, religious universalism and rationalism that put paid to the mediaeval world founded on inherited privilege, hierarchy, and dogma. While liberalism was more focused on individual liberties, the left was more focused on socio-economic equality.

Social democracy, that underscored both individual freedoms and socio-economic equality in the same breath, emerged as some sort of meeting point between the two as the central point of a continuous political spectrum that extended from liberal democracy on the right and socialism on the left. Conservatism, libertarianism, neo-liberalism, social democracy, socialism, communism, all children of the Enlightenment, lie along this spectrum as they all share the same basic values albeit in a different mix.

These pigeonholes are simply what Weber termed as “ideal-types” for conceptual clarity, distilled from manifestations in real life. Each manifestation deviates from the ideal-type to varying extents. Fitting actual regimes within these ideal-types may be a matter of judgement. For instance, while the Nazi and Stalinist states approximate closely to the far right and communist ideal-types, whether the Pol Pot regime is to be placed in the communist or far right pigeonhole is a matter of scholarly judgement. Was this regime a wayward child of the Enlightenment or did it, like Nazism, reject the values of the Enlightenment?

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Towards the end of the 19th century there emerged a counterrevolutionary response in the form of the far right that sought to set the clock back by rejecting the values of the modern Enlightenment, bringing it into conflict with both liberalism and the left. It has a backward-looking agenda that harks back to a past before these modern values – which it rejects – evolved. The far right therefore lies outside the political spectrum outlined above.

It underscores the importance of an all-powerful leader who is effectively free to limit and trample on individual freedoms for some supposed backward looking bigger cause. It rejects the principle of human equality and universalism by privileging certain groups – ethnic, racial, religious, and the like – above others. It appeals to the emotions, leveraging the communications revolution to spread and amplify false information rather than resorting to well-reasoned and rational argumentation for mobilising popular support.

The left played a major role in trying to resist far right-wing forces as only the far right and the left had mass-based parties that could confront each other on the streets. Far right parties sought to dominate through this, even as liberal parties relied entirely on argumentation and the ballot box for popular support. For reasons best discussed separately, the left and liberals could not resist the counterrevolutionary surge that culminated with bloody fascist regimes in the third decade of the 20th century. It took a disastrous world war, and an alliance of the left and liberal parties, to stem the right-wing tide.

The specific issues might vary from country to country, but civil society responses to their underlying concerns tend to get amplified during periods of slow growth and economic crises, such as happened during the 1930s.

Even as the dominance of both liberalism and the left was restored in the post-war era, they were being weakened internally. This was partly on account of a war of attrition between them, of which the Cold War was symptomatic, and partly on account of failing to keep abreast with the demands of their social base.

Liberalism failed to better incorporate popular concerns of growing socio-economic disparities under the influence of Thatcherism and Reaganism as liberal democracy effectively supplanted social democracy. On the other hand, the left largely ignored the basic urges of individual freedoms in pursuit of socio-economic equality under the influence of Leninism and Stalinism. These weaknesses have made sections of civil society disillusioned with both liberalism and socialism.

The left slipped into catastrophic decline with the Cold War, and liberal democracy appears to be now meeting the same fate with the sharp increase in socio-economic inequality that came to a head during the period following the global financial crisis of 2008 with the slowing of economic growth. The specific issues might vary from country to country, but civil society responses to their underlying concerns tend to get amplified during periods of slow growth and economic crises, such as happened during the 1930s. Thus, although the far right had emerged much earlier, it found fertile ground to spread during the Great Depression, as it is doing currently.

The growing influence of the far right with its dystopian counterrevolutionary views is not merely a threat to democratic institutions that took a long time and a bitter and bloody struggle to put in place in their present form, but also to the very values of the Enlightenment. There are now dangerous demagogues to be found spearheading this resurgence in major countries (US and Brazil in the two Americas, India in Asia, and in all the major countries in Europe) in four major continents. These demagogues are reminiscent of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse referred to in the Biblical book of *Revelation* (6:1-8), for:

*Hate they sow, tested institutions tear,
Liberties they trample, the poor they tease;
Mankind's darkest impulses they unbare,
As "others" they target to break the peace.*

*Seductive words from their mouth loudly ring,
People they divide, and science they deride;
Self-absorbed, no hopeful vision they bring,
And the innocent have nowhere to hide.*

*All arrayed against the Enlightenment,
Forces of counter revolution dark;
On reversing human progress intent,
And death, destruction, mis'ry spread their arc.¹*

If this threat is to be countered effectively, both liberal democracy and the left would need to reinvent themselves by incorporating concerns relating to growing socio-economic inequalities on the one hand and assigning a greater role to individual freedoms on the other. It would be well to remember that it was only through a collaboration of these forces that the surge of the far right could be pushed back a century ago.

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While some form of synthesis reminiscent of social democracy appears to be an option, the second quarter of the 21st century awaits visionary statesmen who can formulate such a synthesis and effectively communicate this to a disillusioned electorate and wean it away from populist far right-wing leaders.

The experience of East Asia is different. Liberals are wont to see these political systems as non-democratic and authoritarian, or at best as limited democracies. But these countries have also witnessed much more limited swings across the political spectrum running from left to right than Western democracies. They have by and large had a consistently secular outlook, growing scientific temper, and organisation of society based on rational principles, humanism, and greater socio-economic equality.

These are all outcomes expected from democratic systems even though these societies have been moulded more by Confucian values than those of the Western Enlightenment and this is reflected in differences in political systems. But except for the greater role assigned to hierarchy at some expense to equality, there does not appear to be an inherent conflict between the two systems. And Confucian hierarchy is tempered by its linkage to meritocracy and it has not come in the way of greater socio-economic equalities that liberal societies have struggled with. The experience of East Asian systems also merits a closer look while formulating any new synthesis.

This author has no ready answers beyond drawing attention to underlying issues, to the need for a new synthesis, and to some pointers to where one might look. It is for statesmen to formulate and chart the way forward. As we enter the second quarter of the 21st century, we will await these statesmen with a sense of hope, just as *Revelation* also ends on a hopeful note at 19: 11-21:

*Mounted on a white steed in garments red,
He rides out with the flaming Sun at dawn;
With eyes on fire and crowns on his head,
Truth, Justice and righteousness are reborn.*

*The four horsemen stumble and fall apart,
For freedom, love and reason still abide,
Deep and eternal in the human heart,
And humans have been lost before at night.*

Statesmen on their own cannot change the world, however. Each and every one of us has a role to play, for, as Sahir Ludhianvi repeatedly underscored in his poetry, a brave new world cannot of its own happen; it is people who usher it in.

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Footnotes:

1 The poetic passages in this essay are the author’s compositions, inspired by the cited chapters and verses of the Bible.