

POLITICS IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

What are some of the factors facilitating the rise of a 'new breed' of political leader?

On Thursday 26 May 2016, Donald Trump reached the number of delegates needed to clinch the Republican nomination for President, completing an unlikely rise that has upended the political landscape and sets the stage for a bitter presidency campaign.

From the start of billionaire businessman Donald Trump's campaign for the Republican candidacy and ultimately for the White House, many around the world viewed the unfolding events as something of a political anomaly, unique to the United States. However, other political developments in Europe and beyond have caused political analysts to evaluate what seems to be new trends that, for many, are a cause for concern.



Consider, for example, the election of **Rodrigo Duterte**, “**the Donald Trump of the Philippines**”, to the Philippines presidency on 10 May 2016. Nicknamed “Duterte Harry” (after the controversial movie antihero Dirty Harry, who defied conventions and crossed ethical lines), Duterte's electoral victory seemed to defy reason (how does someone who insulted the Pope win a majority vote in an overwhelmingly Catholic nation?).

During his campaign, Duterte vowed to kill tens of thousands of criminals, and said that he wanted those with double convictions to be hanged twice: “After you are hanged first, there will be another ceremony for the second time till the head is completely severed from the body. I like that because I am mad like that...”

Meanwhile, the very near defeat of **Norbert Hofer** – leader of Austria's far right nationalist Freedom party – in the country's recent presidential elections sounded the alarm for European political analysts (Hofer lost by just 0.6% of the votes).

Like it or not, the “Trump phenomenon” does not appear to be limited to the US. The fact that Donald Trump has come as far as he has in the race for the world's most powerful position – and that others around the world share some of his qualities and convictions– means that the world has changed. From Washington to China, the political playing field has shifted, and analysts are struggling to determine what the eventual outcome will be.

What are some of the factors that are allowing Donald Trump and others to gain the following that they have?

1. THE APPEAL OF A SHOWMAN

Kapil Sethi, in an opinion piece for *The Malay Mail Online*, argues that the nature of internet and social media has played some role in explaining the appeal of Donald Trump, and how both him and Duterte managed to “capture the popular imagination”.

Sethi believes that in today's culture, some aspiring leaders require “outrageous behaviour” in order to establish themselves. The ever-changing nature of instant communication – be it via mainstream news or social media like Twitter – means that attention spans are limited and attention needs to be grabbed again and again on a regular basis. “Every day is a new day where the past is irrelevant and the future is open to conjecture. All that matters is what is said now.”



Jonathan Freedland, writing for *The Guardian*, explained how he believes Donald Trump became “the star of the show” in the US:

“Part of it is sheer showbiz. Ever since he got himself a daily place in the New York tabloids in the 1980s, Trump has known that outrage sells [and] understood that people will always tune in to watch a taboo being broken. An underestimated part of the formula is humour. Trump is funny. His speech pattern is funny, his use of the word ‘so’ is funny – ‘It’s gonna be so great’ – his flamboyant self-love is funny, his mocking of his enemies is funny. But most powerful is the thrill Trump generates in the room, and in the audience watching on TV, when he dares reject the rules of the game. For those voters who feel the game is rigged – who feel that the game has turned them into perennial losers – the sight of someone prepared to defy its conventions is exhilarating. It signals the arrival of an outsider, a maverick unbound to the old order and ready to destroy it in favour of something entirely new. For his followers, Trump’s willingness to trample on the pieties of civic discourse is a sign of his bona fides, even a statement of intent... he’s clearly not fettered by the restraints that hold back the rest of [the] politicians.”

Anthony Faiola, in an article for the *Washington Post*, describes some of Europe’s rising nationalists as “purveyors of reality show-like entertainment” and sees the UK’s **Boris Johnson** (former London mayor, who is probably aiming for the prime minister position) as another “showman”. Faiola describes Johnson as “the king of political comedy”, who blends “blind ambition with buffoonery”. His tactics throughout his career are seen as “populist”, and ahead of the critical Brexit referendum, he has been “stoking nationalist sentiments in his bid to push Britain to exit the European Union – an institution he recently compared to Adolf Hitler”. Norway’s **Sylvi Listhaug**, a “rising star in her populist Progress Party” and the new Norwegian migration minister, is someone else who Faiola describes as having “reality-show-like aplomb”. As migration minister, her position towards migrants is considered harsh, and her “deporting [of] rejected asylum seekers to Russia in sub-zero weather... may have been a breach of international law”.

2. THE APPEAL OF A STRONGMAN



Merriam-Webster defines a political “strongman” as one who “**leads or controls by force of will and character or by military methods**”, or who “**uses violence or threats**”. The term is not generally equated with someone leading in a democracy.

Gideon Rachman, writing for *Business Day Live*, believes that Donald Trump’s rise signals the “return of the strongman leader in international politics”. However, he says Trump and Duterte are not the first – others elected to leadership in the past few years show similar leanings or qualities: Russia’s **Vladimir Putin** (whose forceful leadership is regularly a cause for concern in the Western world), China’s **Xi Jinping** (who has clamped down on some civil liberties and promotes patriotism), Egypt’s **Abdel Fatah al-Sisi** (who has been criticised for harsh sentencing of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood), Turkey’s **Recep Tayyip Erdogan** (who has shown increasing dictatorial tendencies), and India’s **Narendra Modi** (whose nationalist, authoritarian leanings and extremists ties have sparked concerns). According to Rachman, “all have promised to lead a national revival through the force of their personalities and their willingness to

ignore liberal niceties”. Trump is merely the first Westerner (aside from Putin) to exhibit such strong leanings.

Rachman writes that “strongman leadership” is often characterised by three things:

- a willingness to use violence as a tool,
- a deep dislike of criticism,
- and an exploitation of voters’ insecurity, fears and frustrations:

DEFINITIONS

Right/right-wing:
Traditional, conservative, values ‘survival of the fittest’

Left/left-wing:
Progressive, liberal, values equality

Centrist politics:
Balanced between liberal and conservative

Populist:
Someone who seeks to represent the interests of the ordinary people

Nationalist:
Someone who believes that it is in a country’s best interest to act independently, rather than focusing on international concerns

Demagogue:
Someone who appeals to people’s fears and prejudices more than rational argument

“In many cases, the promise of decisive leadership is backed up by a willingness — sometimes explicit, sometimes implied — to use illegal violence against enemies of the state. ‘Duterte Harry’ has played up his links with vigilante gangs. Putin’s use of brutal tactics in the second Chechen war was well-known to Russian voters. Modi’s alleged role in a 2002 massacre in his home state of Gujarat was sufficiently controversial to get him banned from the US for many years. Sisi secured his grip on power with a massacre on the streets of Cairo. And, even in the US, Trump has promised to torture terrorists and murder their family members.

Strongman leadership usually goes hand-in-hand with extreme sensitivity to criticism. Both Putin and Xi have cracked down on freedom of speech. In Turkey, Erdogan has sued almost 2,000 people for defamation. Trump misses few opportunities to insult the media, and has said that he would like to make it easier for politicians to sue the media. Typically, strongman leaders trade on feelings of insecurity, fear and frustration. Putin and Erdogan have portrayed Russia and Turkey as surrounded by enemies. Sisi has promised to rescue Egypt from terrorism. Xi and Modi have capitalised on ordinary people’s frustrations with corruption and inequality. The Trump campaign has incorporated elements of all these themes, promising to reverse national decline, and get tough with criminals and foreigners.”



Describing someone as a “strongman” leader automatically carries authoritarian connotations, and some studies have shown that increased authoritarian leadership is actually something that surprising numbers of US voters are wanting, due to their frustrations with the current democratic situation. Freedland writes that Trump has “deftly tapped” voters’ anger, and that he is “channelling a rage at the state of America’s political system”. Freedland sees different versions of this across the world – “populists and demagogues” making “extraordinary strides” as they claim to speak for the people and for democracy, but who, “in their most extreme forms... threaten to shade into something darker: a revolt against the norms, the agreed boundaries that make democracy possible”.

Freedland writes the following:

“This rage at the system – the fuming insistence that democracy is failing to deliver for the people it’s meant to serve, that the system that bears its name is no longer truly democratic – powers not just Trump but many of the populist movements now making waves around the world.

Think of Hungary, where Viktor Orbán rules as a strongman, unafraid to declare, as he did in 2014, that ‘the new state that we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state’, one that puts ‘national’ needs ahead of such liberal values as freedom. In Poland, the Law and Justice party stands accused of trampling on the country’s constitution to establish an ‘illiberal democracy’ of its own. One reason why Trump seems sinister rather than simply clownish is the hint that he is hostile not just to the current two-party system in the US, but to the very norms that underpin liberal democracy: the separation of powers that keeps elected leaders in check; the free and independent media that perform the same task; the reasoned, civil debate that makes collective, public deliberation possible.

The World Values Survey of 2011 included a stunning figure. It found that 34% of Americans approved of ‘having a strong leader who doesn’t have to bother with Congress or elections’, the figure rising to 42% among those with no education beyond high school. It means that one in three US voters would prefer a dictator to democracy. Those Americans are not repudiating this or that government, but abandoning the very idea of democracy itself.

These figures reinforce a pattern revealed by recent academic research that shows a body of US opinion predisposed toward liberal democracy’s polar opposite: authoritarianism.”

Freedland explains that, as a rule, most authoritarian sentiments or leanings “lie dormant” in a democratic society, but studies have found that they become “activated” when authoritarian-leaning voters face personal stress, especially when “the social order or hierarchy that they value is threatened by change... anything that seems to endanger the status quo that once offered those voters a secure place in society”. Shifts towards authoritarianism are exacerbated when threats to the status quo are “combined with a perceived external or physical menace – such as [the Islamic State]”.

Economic disappointment and financial challenges appear to be the primary factor causing dissatisfaction with the current system, therefore it is not all that surprisingly that a billionaire promising to turn things around for the United States holds such appeal. Beyond the US, similar trends can be seen in Europe. Freedland reports that “European disenchantment with the democratic system spiked after the [financial] crash of 2008, just as it did in the US”. 2009 studies showed that 45% of Europeans were unhappy with the democratic process in their country (compared to 39% in 2007), as people started to believe in the “powerlessness of their democratically elected leaders in the face of financial turmoil”.

3. THE APPEAL OF A SAVIOUR

Freedland writes that even if Trump loses in November, “he’s proved that he has deep appeal to a section of the US electorate that has come to regard him as their champion”. For many, the strongman leader has the ability to protect his people from danger, and in today’s climate of growing security threats (real or perceived), many of “the current wave of populist insurgents are all in the fear business”.



“Explosions in Paris or Brussels terrify voters, not least because there seems to be so little their governments can do to stop determined people murdering other people in social spaces: stations, airports, concert halls. It’s possible that a tyrannical government cracking down hard would fare no better, but the apparent powerlessness of the current, liberal democratic order to eradicate this threat surely feeds the fantasy of the iron fist that would scatter the terrorist enemy with a single blow. It’s this anti-democratic fantasy that Trump expressed in a characteristic tweet posted after the Brussels attacks: ‘I alone can fix this problem!’ It’s crass and megalomaniacal, but its appeal rests on a frustration with the slow, careful, laggardly

mechanics of democracy. And this surely is what Trump (and several other populists, [Nigel] Farage included) have in mind when they express their not-so-sneaking admiration for Vladimir Putin: now there’s a man who gets things done. For Putin is not held back. He does not bear the burden of democracy.”

Sethi writes that “it doesn’t matter in the least what the actual positions of the leader are, merely their ability to make us feel better, stronger, less afraid at any given moment... in a global environment of extreme insecurity, the radical choice provides an illusion of certainty, because they always have an immediate answer... to win today means a return to the primitive, to answer the call for a saviour in a world full of bad news every moment of every day”.

Europe’s refugee/migrant crisis, which exploded beyond all previous proportions in 2015, has played a big role in the increase of this fear-saviour rhetoric, and Ian Bremmer (*TIME Magazine*) says that “political opportunists are reaping the benefits”. Donald Trump is not the only one to call for a ban on Muslims entering his country – Faiola profiled some of Europe’s leaders echoing his tune:

- The Netherlands’ **Geert Wilders** (seen to be “one of the most divisive political figures in Europe”) has “capitalised on the refugee crisis, claiming that allegations of rape and abuse of European women by migrants is proof of the anti-Islam warnings he’s been issuing for years”. A January 2016 poll showed his Freedom Party was enjoying a surge in popularity.
- Denmark’s **Kristian Thulesen Dahl** (leader of the Danish People’s Party, now the second largest party in the Danish parliament thanks to massive gains in 2015) has “suggested there is no room in his country for more Muslims”.
- Austria’s **Norbert Hofer** (who recently lost the presidential elections by less than a percent) vowed to “fire the coalition government in charge if it didn’t control migration”, while his Freedom Party vowed “strict border control, faster deportations of rejected migrants and increased monitoring of Muslim institutions, such as mosques and schools”.



Owen Jones, in an article for *The Guardian*, writes that “not since 1945 have movements of the far right and xenophobic right had such support across the continent”, pointing to the growing popularity of France’s Front National (led by authoritarian-leaning **Marine le Pen**) and Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (that poses an increasing threat to Chancellor Angela Merkel’s centrist government). For these parties (and others), fears about the repercussions of widespread immigration (especially Islamisation) has fast become a key issue, and leaders who stand up in protest against these ‘threats’ are gaining more and more support.

CONCLUSION

A 25 May article in *The Guardian* warns that it is too soon to fear that right-wing, strongman politicians are going to rule Europe (and the wider Western world) in the near future. They may be growing in strength and popularity, but there is still a long way to go before they constitute majority leadership. It is also important to recognise that not all right-wing, strongman leaders share the same roots and ideologies: they range from “anti-establishment to neo-fascist, nationalist to anti-austerity, authoritarian to populist, libertarian to ultra-conservative”. Meanwhile, the far-left is also growing in popularity.

The article goes on to say that “what is undeniably happening... is that [Europe’s] traditional mainstream parties are in full retreat... across Europe, the centre-left social democrats and centre-right Christian democrats who have dominated national politics for 60 years are in decline... what is on the march across Europe may not be the far right, but distrust, disillusion, even full-scale rejection of the political establishment”.

Jeff Fountain, of the Schuman Centre (which promotes Biblical perspectives on Europe’s past, present and future), recently commented on the changing dynamics as follows:

“What does this all mean? Firstly, that unless leadership comes forward to capture the public imagination with (Biblical) values of human dignity, the common good, compassion, equality and freedom for all, we are heading down a long, bumpy, maybe even stormy road to no-one knows where. The populists are right in this sense: the current leadership has failed us, serving up a vision of European life based on material and economic prosperity. Robert Schuman [a leading Christian Democrat] warned us a long time ago that this European project was not just economic and technical. It needed a soul. It needed spiritual values. Secondly, it means that too often we Christians have also failed our fellow Europeans. We have offered too little towards the shaping of tomorrow’s Europe. Too often we have offered answers to questions people are not asking, but not to the questions they are asking. We have hard work to do.”

This holds true for all of the democratic world, from the US to the Philippines. Strongmen leaders like Donald Trump would not have gained such vast support if people were not desperate for a kind of hope and security that secular democracy does not offer. Would today’s political landscape have looked different if the Western Church had been more relevant and more pro-active about responding to the kinds of questions that people were [and are] asking? Two things we know are true: that the “age of Trump” has changed the political landscape, perhaps irreversibly, and Christians do indeed “have hard work to do”.

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mike@incontextministries.org