

After the Trumpian Deluge, What?



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The stunning invasion of the US Congress in Washington DC by a frenzied mob of thousands of President Donald Trump's loyalists was the culmination of a populist revolt based on individual charisma and iconoclastic rage. Shocking visuals of vandals running amok inside the legislative chambers of a sacred symbol of American democracy brought home the depth of the politics of resentment against the 'Establishment', which Trump has been stoking and inciting since 2016.

Through relentless slandering and tarnishing of the legitimacy of all key US institutions, Trump could forge an environment in which there would be no limits to 'the people' resorting to action on behalf of their messiah. For the rampaging mob on Capitol Hill, its daring takeover bid was justified by the belief that the elites had stolen the November 3 presidential election, and that they had to fight to keep

Trump in power. The idea was to violently 'take back control' and demonstrate that Trump was not yet finished.

That this attempted coup fizzled, and the US Congress went ahead to certify Joe Biden as the next president has gladdened optimists. After all, the far-right diehards of Trump were rounded up and the key pillars of US democracy withstood their assault. The institutions that Trump worked tirelessly to undermine survived a huge stress test. The judiciary, electoral authorities, the military and even several of Trump's own Republican Party bigwigs in Congress, swore allegiance to the US Constitution rather than to one man and his rebellious mission to overthrow the system.

But robust formal institutions cannot in themselves be a panacea in a fraught country on a razor's edge. The election results and their aftermath reconfirm that the US is socially polarised and broken down the middle. The combustible mix of class, race and ideological grievances, which Trump first exploited to win the 2016 election, has not disappeared. Had there been no profound mistrust and cultural insecurity in the heart of America, one would not see the hateful extremism that Trump's base manifes-



No, not Trump's Idea of Mexico

ted on Capitol Hill.

The anger and sense of exclusion that motivated many of the 74 million people who voted for Trump in the 2020 election cannot be dismissed as noise. The US' long capitalist crisis, which began with the 2008 financial collapse and matured in the last few years owing to the feeling of the 'have nots' being cheated by elitist globalisation, needs redressal.

What is clear from the disgraceful endgame of Trump's followers is that populism could not solve the underlying problems. The White working class in small towns and rural communities across the US once hoped that Trump would restore their dignity and pride in a

nation they could call their own. By 2021, these 'forgotten people' are still desperate and rudderless.

As the Covid-19 pandemic has ripped through blue-collar families and raised suffering levels, life continues to be dark and miserable for millions of Americans. If the old liberal order had deceived them, and now the 'Make America Great Again' radicalism centred on the larger-than-life personality of Trump has also crashed, who or what will anchor Ordinary Jane and Average Joe to safety and security?

Biden's promise of an inclusive liberalism cannot easily pacify and calm down a society in severe distress. Nothing short of another redistributive 'New Deal', like the one President Franklin Roosevelt unveiled in the Depression-era 1930s, can revive faith in the system and consensus about belonging to one nation.

It is a long hard slog ahead for the US. 'Trumpism', and its promise of one man-led redemption, could not deliver and almost upturned the democratic order. Expect more democratic fragility amid the search for a new equilibrium in the post-Trump period.

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