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Is Trump on the Path to Dictatorship?

By Abolhassan Banisadr

February 10, 2017



Dictators always need to justify the concentration of power within themselves. Josef Stalin, for example, argued that because political power belonged to the Soviet proletariat and that the Communist Party was its manifestation, as leader of the Party, he manifested (and could exercise) its power himself. This enabled him to establish a totalitarian regime. In Germany, Adolf Hitler argued that that political power belonged to a ‘superior’ Aryan race, and that its manifestation was the National Socialist party. Defining himself as the Führer, he declared himself its manifestation and assumed the right to exercise power on behalf of the ‘Aryan race’.

In Iran, Khomeini also argued political power belonged to God and that God had conferred this power upon the prophets and Imams, and through them directly to him. He argued that he exercised power on behalf of God.

In his inauguration speech, Donald Trump also revealed this intention when he said: “Today’s ceremony...has very special meaning, because today, we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another or from one party to another, but we are transferring power from Washington, DC, and giving it back to you, the people.”

Unlike rights which everyone has, power needs to concentrate in one person or privileged group. It was obvious that when Trump spoke about giving power back to the people, he was in fact saying “power belongs to me”. This is why after leaving the inauguration he went directly to the Oval Office and started issuing executive orders. He exercises power on their “behalf”. Furthermore, when he spoke about the “special meaning” of this transfer, in effect he was saying that as he is the manifestation of people’s power the administration and the power of the state has to be at his personal service. This is why when the acting US Attorney General disobeyed him he did not simply fire her but declared it an act of betrayal. As a leader who seeks total power and demands total obedience, anything short of either is a betrayal. Once, when Stalin was asked whether he demanded loyalty or obedience from Party members, he responded that as a dog is also loyal, he demanded obedience.

It also needs to be noticed that when someone gets a ticket to the White House through post-truth, it tells us that such language has become normalized for large numbers of people in American society. His declaration of war against the media is aimed to solidify and the normalization of deception.

We must also pay attention to Trump’s slogans about putting ‘America first’ and ‘making America great again’. The United States can only become ‘first’ in international politics if the rest of the world’s countries play a subservient role. This is unthinkable in the current state of affairs, and to attempt to ‘make America great again’ is in effect a the path to its demise that would inflict unimaginable destruction to both the US and the rest of the world. The factors which elevated the US to a dominant position, both domestically and internationally, have fundamentally changed. For example, when the US became a ‘superpower’, Asia was nowhere to be seen. Now, many of these country, like China, it is wealthier and more developed than the US, and without Chinese money the American budget deficit would sky rocket and inflict a body blow to the American economy (which is not the biggest debtor in the world). If Trump tries to reverse the situation with the use of military, it only can make things much worse.

As a rule, any country which constructs a “golden past” and tries to forcefully revive it will end up with bankruptcy and devastation.

Yet Trump has already started a war. Like any bully, he began by waging it on what he thinks are the easiest and are not able to fight back: the environment, the Mexicans, the American poor who benefit from the Affordable Health Care Act, immigrants and Muslims. If he is not stopped he will try to go for the “big boys” and that will be a river of no return.

If fact, Trump and his team present an existential threat not only to the US but to the world. History tells us that the path to democracy is not a one-way ticket and can be reversed. Now American democracy is facing its strongest test since the Civil War. It is not strong enough to protect itself against power partly because its bureaucracy is based on the principle of hierarchy. Therefore, the task of defending democracy is left to American civil society. If the parts of this society which it seem to have understood the danger, do not mobilize their forces to resist the fast-expanding power of it elected dictator, America's demise will be accompanied by the demise of democracy and the post-democratic age in which, more than fifteen years, the academics are talking about will be solidified.