

Europe and America's search for a benevolent dictator

The media is at it again calling Johnson's resounding victory in the 2019 UK general election some kind of shock. The reaction is similar to the kind that followed the election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States in 2016. The elite in both countries continue to feign surprise in a refusal to accept that the societies they imagine themselves to live in do not exist or that their societies do not exist in the way that they imagine them to be.

"I thought the US were delusional voting in Trump, but the UK voting in Johnson is equally mad," a UK voter tweeted, garnering a response, "Corbyn is the problem. It seems Johnson is the lesser of two lessers" This isn't unlike the situation in the American system where a significant portion of voters consider Trump to be "the lesser of the two lessers" in comparison to former Vice President and current presidential candidate Joe Biden.

"It doesn't make sense," a UK voter began his analysis implying racism, "Corbyn almost unseated May last time, and since then, Tories have done nothing but fail to deliver on their promises and screw over voters. These results don't make sense one bit." For this voter, if it weren't for racism, the previous results show that Corbyn should have won the election. However, life is complex; it isn't a linear curve.

A childhood friend was one of the people to contact me following the UK election. A Ugandan born British citizen, Mike, has lived in the United Kingdom since the 1990s and says he has all along been a member of the Labour Party, "We just woke up to Good news. Boris Johnson has won the general election," he wrote. "Get Brexit done. Jobs at least okay for blacks. I am labour but this was tactical. I didn't want to

remain in the EU because people from the EU were taking jobs. They were easily employed than blacks, Asians, or even British." A Nigerian born Briton also echoed Mike's sentiment.

His and Mike's views illustrate that the analytical framework of the elite that places premium of what is going on to racism is deficient. Indeed, it suggests that nothing short of an introspection and soul-searching will lead them to the real problem rather than to one of its manifestations, which is racism.

The claim of racism is escapist. Actually, it is better to continue to claim to be "baffled at what is happening" because "it doesn't make sense at all" rather than to conclude that the phenomenon of Trump and Johnson can be reduced to racism. If racism is treated as a cause rather than a consequence, an opportunity will be lost to recover whatever is left of Western democracy.

Denial as counterpoint to introspection

A crisis of democracy is underway in the Western world, as illustrated by the political situation in the United Kingdom and the United States. At the core of this crisis is the disconnect between the realities and aspirations of the elite class versus those of the majority of the voters; "the crisis that made Trump and now Johnson was the terrible capitalist meltdown of 2008. Both men played their servile role to divert workers' crisis-caused suffering and anger to scapegoat foreigners (immigrants, other countries, Europe). Nationalism serving a declining capitalism," according to Richard Wolf, Professor of economics at The New School and founder of Democracy at Work.

Nationalism has also been used as a euphemism for racism by the elite whose sophistication doesn't allow them to attach primordial instincts to their Keith and kin. Wolf seems unable

to overcome this urge, too. However, his analysis on the structural factors of the western meltdown is analytically sound and lacks the evasiveness that confuses symptoms for the cause.

Rather than address the factors that gave rise to Trump – the capitalist meltdown – the American political elite is attempting to circumvent and save neoliberalism through “democratic performance” of rituals in the mould of the opium of the poor. In the United States it has taken the form of an impeachment hearing that an Afro-American activist aptly referred to as “a sham meant to sheepdog you [Americans] back to the system,” he wrote on twitter, “Folks you are being played with this impeachment show.”

In the United Kingdom, the post-electoral demonstrations and violence calls for Boris Johnson to step down constitute a variant of the “democratic performance.” Indeed, as long as the elite in the UK fail to see the real factors that gave rise to Mr. Johnson, we should expect something akin to an “impeachment show” meant to “sheepdog” the British back to the system.

A commentator asked regarding this willful ignorance of the elite, “Is it really too much to ask Corbyn supporters to have a little introspection? Labour was not just defeated. It tottered on the verge of annihilation.” Another call for introspection came from the American political commentator Bill Maher who tweeted, “The apparent beating that Jeremy Corbyn led the Labour to in the UK election should serve as a cautionary tale to the Democrats as 2020 approaches.”

When the analysis of racism fails to convince, the elite’s dogmatic attachment to liberal democracy persists in conceiving the problem as the failure of one party rather than a systemic failure. This suggests that real cautionary tale is to stop treating what is happening as mere hiccups in western political systems, to stop feigning shock, and accept

one important factor: the elites are living in a world different from one that is experienced by the majority of voters, that they will continue to get shocked every electoral cycle until they reckon with this reality. The sooner the out-of-touch elite come to terms with this reality the sooner they can make adjustments to realign themselves with the aspirations of the voters. Otherwise, they can continue with the righteous indignation that contemptuously treats the voters as ignorant and stupid. Neither are black people stupid for voting for an openly racist politician, especially after an anticlimactic experience with a black president in the U.S.

At issue is that the two-party system that reproduces that variant of democracy has served its purpose and its time is up. The surface appearance that one of the two parties is being "tottered on the verge of annihilation" is misleadingly reassuring and meant to divert from the inconvenient reality that the system is tottering on the verge of annihilation, which explains why – for the time being – the people are operating from the logic of "the lesser of the two lessers" and are doing so only because they don't have an alternative.

Soon the alternative will be not to vote at all, which was W.E.B Dubois' cautionary tale in October 1956, "I believe that democracy has so far disappeared in the United States that no 'two evils' exist," he said. "There is but one evil party with two names, and it will be elected despite all I can do or say."

Only three decades later in February 1990 Noam Chomsky echoed Dubois, "There are two parties, so-called, but they're really factions of the same party, the Business Party." The Business Party is the oligarchy that entrenched itself and ended up overplaying its hand in the name of "democracy." Now, caught with hands in the cookie jar and unable to put in place a system of governance that reflects the aspirations of the people, the elite seeks to reinvent itself by convicting them that they are in need of fixing.

Not just Africans are in need of fixing

Not until the violence that swept Europe in the late 1990s, it was understood that ethnic violence only took place amongst Africans due to their atavistic instincts. The ethnic violence in eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union decentralized this view on primordial tendencies.

Similarly, the elite in Europe and America have for long implicitly or explicitly promoted the notion that Africans were in need of fixing if they are to function within the European institutions that they inherited at independence. The institutions that were not aligned to their aspirations were not the problem; it was the people. As the neoliberal institutions fail to serve the Europeans and Americans, they will discover that the people are never in need of fixing.

Europeans have never understood why Africans preferred an emotionally invested leader who they could count on to improve their lives, to address some of the most pressing needs they face, someone to show care by providing bread, sugar, salt, pay school fees and funeral costs. They disparagingly called such a leader a "benevolent dictator."

The dictator was said to be intrusive to the point that those benefits were worth foregoing. However, they failed to consider that even in their systems where such goods are provided by the welfare state, the programs – variously called food stamps – invite great intrusion into people's lives including dictating beneficiaries are allowed to purchase: salt, sugar, bread, etc.

Interestingly, the states with greater emotional connection to the people – the benevolent states – are the ones surviving the crisis of leadership in Europe (social democracies in Scandinavia) and North America (Canada). On the contrary, the emotionally deficient states are being challenged to develop some emotions or be prepared to bring the whole thing down and

start over. Meanwhile, aspiring benevolent dictators like Trump and Johnson will remain attractive everywhere there is this deficiency.

“In country after country, we’re witnessing an astonishing wave of attacks on the constitution, institutions, norms and values that have given democracy strength and meaning” said CNN’s Fareed Zakaria, following Johnson’s election. Zakaria, one of the decorated foot soldiers of neoliberalism, is equally “astonished.”

If denial was not part of the strategy, it would be obvious to all that the challenge that these states in the Western world face from their “new breed of leaders” is similar to the kind faced by Africans who are trapped by institutions that have no meaning in their lives: how to transfer the emotions from individuals to the state.

The challenge is for people to believe that their citizenship confers on them the right to get from the state support for most of the pressing needs they face rather than an outcome of the goodness (benevolence) of the leader, something that Europeans and Americans are increasingly seeing in Johnson and Trump, and others soon to appear on the political scene. For this reason, benevolent leaders whether in Africa or in the West will continue to perceive themselves like kings and will share the predisposition of ‘attacking the constitution, institutions, norms and values that have given democracy strength and meaning’ – at least for as long as the elite persist in defining democracy in their own imagination.

European and American citizenship has become disarticulated due to the collapse of the link between people’s aspirations and the institutions in place. Similarly, African citizenship has been disarticulated from the get go, at independence, with African leaders conceiving themselves as kings overseeing a non-monarchist state.

Much like Trump's tension with the American constitution, most African leaders exist in tension with the constitution because the modern tools that came with the republican state were not aligned with the self-conception of a traditional king. However, this is a conception that is also shared by the ordinary African: Africans and their leaders are yet to identify with the modern state and are yet to develop a consciousness towards it. For this reason, they prefer a leader in whom they identify goodness.

The paradox is that this desire by both the ordinary Africans and their leaders to engage in an emotional relationship is circumscribed by the modern state that is designed (through citizenship rights) to remove sentimental attachment between the ruler and the ruled. Consequently, the leaders and the led cannot have what they need: an emotional contract that is moderated by trust rather than a (social) contract that is moderated by an emotionally devoid relationship.

Americans and Europeans are learning to protest against an absentee state. However, Africans have for long resisted the limitations of the modern state, especially its structural inability to articulate their needs. Indeed, Africans have time and again dragged emotionally competent and popular leaders to confront these limitations together through, for instance, what Zakaria refers to as "attacks on the constitution."

However, emotionally deficient and unpopular leaders have also imposed themselves on the people by exploiting the void that is created by the structural contradiction between the aspirations of the people and the institutions in place to serve these aspirations. Where there is no emotional competence there is no trust, and neither are the constitution and institutions adequate to protect societies from the subsequent collapse.

No one is exempted from the consequences of a disarticulated

state. In the western world and in Africa, it is not the people that need fixing. An emotionally available leadership is what is needed.