The 2020 Elections in the United States: A Socialist View From Afar

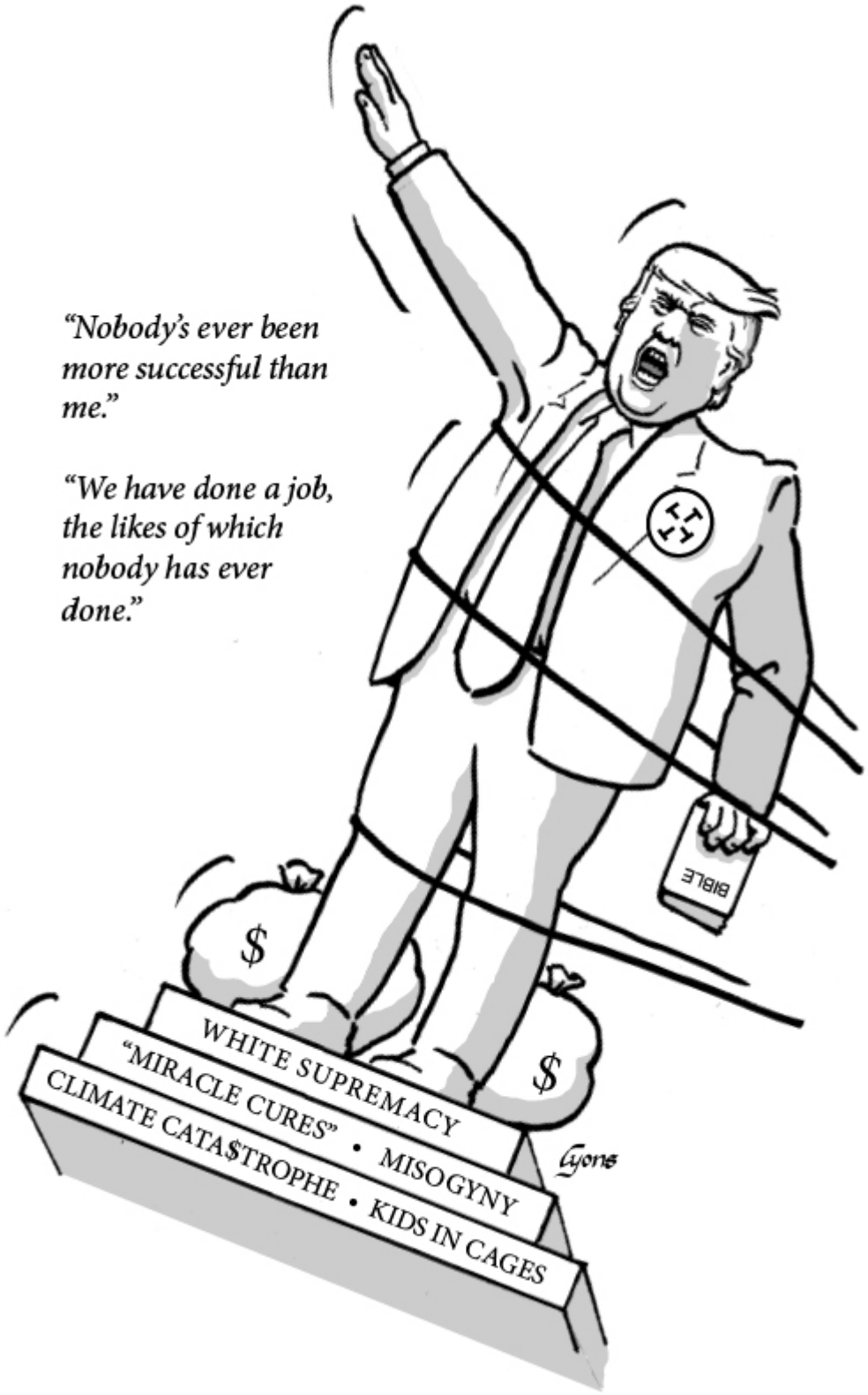
written by Rohini Hensman | January 14, 2021

While votes were being counted after the November 2020 U.S. elections, despots from around the world—in Iran, Russia, China, Venezuela, and Brazil—crowed over the delay in announcing results.[1] It is easy for rulers in countries where opposition leaders are disqualified, killed, or hounded into exile to mock the time taken to count votes meticulously. However, many of us watching with envy from afar—"envy" because the persecution of minorities, crushing of dissent, domination of the media, and destruction of democratic institutions has gone much further in our countries—have nothing but admiration for the way in which a would-be dictator has been peacefully overthrown.

But what about claims by the Trump campaign that the election was stolen? It is clear to us that there *have* been systematic efforts to steal this election … by Trump and his diehard supporters. That became evident well before the election when he declared, in the midst of a deadly pandemic in which many feared the risks of in-person voting, that he opposed extra funding for the Postal Service because mail ballots encouraged voter fraud. At the same time Republican mega-donor Louis DeJoy, who was appointed postmaster general by Trump on June 15, began making changes to the U.S. Postal Service—like a reduction in employee overtime hours and the elimination of postal sorting machines—that would sabotage the timely delivery of mail ballots.[2] We saw reports of polling locations being shut down and African Americans complaining about the long distances they had to travel in order to vote. With Trump instructing his supporters to come out and vote on election day, and several states counting mail-in ballots only after in-person ballots had been counted, the scene was set for his post-election claim that he had won. He expected the case to go to the Supreme Court and explicitly stated that he was nominating Amy Coney Barrett to the court because he believed she would vote in his favor.[3]

If this wasn't enough, there is evidence that the Republican Party's voter suppression efforts targeting minorities picked up after Obama came to power in 2009.[4] Greg Palast has provided plenty more evidence in a book entitled *How Trump Stole 2020*. Among his findings were that 16.7 million people were removed from the voter rolls between 2014 and 2016 and that you are 900 percent more likely to have your vote spoiled if you are Black than if you are white.[5] To an outsider, it seems incredible that Democrats are allowing Trump to dominate the narrative with his allegation that *they* are trying to steal the election when in fact it is he and the Republicans who are doing so. Palast's explanation? As Charlotte Dennett reports, '"The Russians-fixed-the-election story line,' he writes, 'is a lot more acceptable to Americans than explaining that Trump was elected by an endemic racial apartheid in America's voting system constructed by the GOP and made possible by their cringing enablers, the see-no-evil Democrats.'"[6] If this didn't work in 2020, it is only because grassroots activists, including laid-off workers, worked incredibly hard to register and bring out voters of color.

There is much that we in other countries can learn from this election. One thing is the importance of paper ballots. They can be checked and recounted if there is any question about their validity or the margin is small. Elections conducted with paper ballots can be rigged, but the rigging is more obvious. Not so with Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), which are becoming a favored tool of dictators who want to maintain a façade of democracy. Neither before nor after an election has it been possible to check every EVM for manipulation, even after random checks have shown that some machines are programmed to give every vote to the ruling party regardless of which button is pressed. Dictators may use crude methods (winning by huge margins) or more subtle ones (winning by slender margins), but the result is the same: They stay in power. Countries that have rejected EVMs on the grounds that they preclude transparency in elections are absolutely right: It is time to make it clear internationally that the integrity of elections using EVMs cannot be guaranteed and that the use of these machines entails a high risk of vote-rigging. Of course, an election can be rigged with any kind of ballots if election officials are under the thumb of the ruling party, and the U.S. electorate is lucky that their election officials have retained their independence.



The other lesson is the way in which, despite hard-fought primaries, everyone opposed to Trump came together to ensure he was defeated, with the Green Party, which helped Trump to win in 2016, failing to gain traction in 2020. In some of our countries, by contrast, a plethora of opposition parties and independents makes it almost impossible to stitch up an alliance. But the wrangling that broke out after the Democrats did less well in the elections than they had expected made it clear that there are at least two factions in the party—commonly referred to as "moderates" and "progressives"—and possibly a third faction on the right that are not easy to hold together. One complaint from the right was that left-wing members of the party had cost it votes by referring to themselves as "socialists"; another, that the party had neglected "meat and potatoes" issues in favor of "cultural issues" like

gun control, abortion rights, and the rights of LGBTQ+ people and other people the party "looks after";[7] support for Black Lives Matter and the Green New Deal was also blamed.

It was certainly Trump's intention to put people off from voting for Biden by his McCarthyite accusation that Biden is a Trojan horse for socialists and by his Cold-War rhetoric depicting socialism as totalitarianism. It is true that some socialists apply the term "socialism" to the ultra-authoritarian Stalinist state, and a few support Putin. There is also a more diffuse set of people who think socialism can be introduced by a political party claiming to represent working people rather than being built from below by working people themselves, although there is also a long tradition of "socialism from below." Today there is a growing consensus that democracy is intrinsic to the definition of socialism, and there are powerful arguments to that effect.[8] Popularizing this definition would surely be more fruitful than telling socialists to pretend that they are not what they are!

There was a strong reaction against allegations that support for gun control, abortion rights, LGBT+ rights, Black Lives Matter, and the Green New Deal cost the party votes. One objection was that a majority of the electorate supports these measures and that BLM alone brought a million new registered voters for the party. Another objection came from people who strongly contested the claim that the party "looked after" them, when they had won rights for themselves in numerous struggles; they pointed out that for them, these supposedly cultural issues were actually existential ones. They also made the point that support for human rights doesn't preclude campaigning on economic issues; it is entirely possible—and necessary—to do both. This is surely a matter of principle: A party that abandons human rights and equality issues, even if espousing them costs votes, cannot claim to be fighting for democracy.

The irony is that the same position finds an echo on the left. The language is different—identity politics versus working-class politics rather than cultural issues versus meat and potatoes—but the substance is the same, arguing that "particularist" demands of one section of the working class should be eschewed in favor of "universalist" demands of the whole working class.[9] In other words, a demand that doesn't directly benefit straight cis white male workers is not a demand worth fighting for, even if it's a matter of life and death for some other section of the working class. Such a stance contradicts the principle of "an injury to one is an injury to all." People with disabilities and indigenous peoples also suffer specific forms of exclusion and discrimination; are their struggles for social justice not worth supporting?

This position blurs the distinction between demands for human rights and equality on one side, and identity politics—based on the belief that people who have the same ethnicity, gender, or sexual preference all have the same interests—on the other; it ignores the fact that discrimination, exclusion, and violence can result in blocking the access of some sections of the working class to supposedly universal benefits; and it refuses to acknowledge relationships of oppression within the working class. People who have grown up accepting authoritarianism in their families and communities and believing that women must be subordinate to men, ethno-religious minorities to the majority, and that LGBT+ people shouldn't exist at all, do not automatically give up these attitudes if they get decent jobs and health care. Indeed, it seems that many white Trump supporters already have well-paid jobs and suffer less from economic distress than from anxiety about the progress of people they feel should remain subordinate to them.[10] Similar attitudes confront socialists in other countries, and they are undoubtedly difficult to tackle, but acknowledging them is the first step in doing so. Nor does supporting struggles for equality entail putting an intolerable burden on a small number of socialist activists, because there are *already* countless grassroots activists working on human rights and equality issues; all that is required is to work with them rather than pouring scorn on them as, for example, Melissa Naschek does on the Combahee River Collective.[11]

If it's a mistake to blame progressives—who played a stellar role in ousting Trump—for the failure of a "blue wave" to materialize, some on the left seem equally mistaken in blaming the nomination of Joe Biden as the Democratic presidential candidate for the same failure,[12] given that he polled more votes than any other U.S. president in history. Indeed, his reputation as a moderate might just have tipped the balance in some battleground states and enabled him to get enough Electoral College votes to make it difficult for a Trump-friendly Supreme Court to overturn the results.

The problem is not that the electorate failed to vote for Biden; the problem is that Trump won well over 70 million votes, many more than he polled in 2016. What does this mean? In 2016, Trump was relatively unknown to many voters, although the left should have recognized the threat he posed. In 2020, his white supremacism, misogyny, despotism, dishonesty, anti-science irrationality, and callous incompetence in handling the coronavirus pandemic were known to all. The millions who voted for him, like the millions who voted for Hitler, may not all be fascists (although some of them are), but if he had won, they would have enabled an increasingly fascistic ruler to consolidate his grip on power. And they may yet do so in the future, with his dedicated supporters believing the big lie (that he won the election) repeated umpteen times. In the 1930s, the German Communist Party's concentration of its fire on the Social Democrats while underestimating the danger posed by the Nazis allowed Hitler to consolidate absolute power. In the United States, a united front between moderates and socialists defeated Trump, but dismantling it now risks allowing him or a surrogate to come back to power. That doesn't mean reining in socialist activists or holding back on trying to push the Democratic Party to the left—not at all. But isn't it a case of skewed priorities to concentrate one's fire on Biden in the midst of an attempted coup by Trump, backed by much of the Republican Party and millions of supporters, some of them armed and dangerous?[13]

Many of us have learned from bitter experience that we can win a battle against a dictatorial far-right regime but then lose to an even more fascistic regime if the coalition that ousted the earlier regime falls apart. In some cases, this is inevitable—if, for example, a different far-right party jumps on the bandwagon of opposition to the dictatorial regime. Far more common is a united front between centrists/neoliberals and socialists/social democrats, where tensions are rife and may lead to disintegration. If socialists attack centrists too aggressively, the latter may not vote for the alliance (or vote at all) in the next election; conversely, if neoliberals are given a free hand, voters relying on social-democratic reforms could be so disgusted they don't vote for the alliance (or vote at all) in the next election. Trying gently but firmly to push the center to the left is the only way to avoid this.

Another reason why a center-left coalition may lose to a right-wing party it earlier ousted is if it is seen as ineffective, and this in turn is often due to sabotage from remnants of the far-right regime that remain in positions of power. This suggests that the Democrats would do well to remove Trump loyalists from public service posts, go all out to win the two Senate seats in Georgia in order to minimize roadblocks from the Senate, and expand the Supreme Court until it has a liberal majority. The mid-term elections too would be important.

The far right can also weaponize allegations of corruption, which may be deserved but are more likely to be wildly exaggerated or even fabricated. The response has to be absolute transparency—admitting wrong-doing or mistakes if there are any—and constant firefighting against disinformation. It is exhausting, and it feels like such a waste of time when there are more important things to be done, but neglecting this task can lead to a return of the far right.

Finally, leaving the crimes of an authoritarian regime unpunished is also a mistake. In some of our countries these include crimes against humanity and massive corruption, but even lesser crimes are worth prosecuting in order to prevent the criminals from coming back to power.

Despite manifold flaws in U.S. democracy, the melodrama after the elections has revealed that election officials and members of the judiciary resisted concerted attempts by the ruling party to make them discount valid votes, testifying to their integrity—a situation that doesn't exist in many of our countries. A section of the mainstream media consistently made it their business to debunk the ruling party's disinformation, again something we don't see in our countries. Perhaps this is partly because in the United States the investigative and law enforcement agencies cannot simply be used by the executive to threaten, frame, jail, torture, or kill anyone opposing it, as it can in many of our countries. This situation might well have changed if Trump had won a second term, making the path back to democracy that much steeper—as it is in many of our countries.

The U.S. elections have demonstrated yet again that so-called "bourgeois democracy" is *not* a gift of the bourgeoisie and that even one of the most basic democratic rights—the right to vote and have your vote counted—*has to be fought for and defended* by mass struggles, otherwise large swathes of the population will not have it. Liberal democracy, even if it is flawed, constitutes the terrain on which struggles against capitalism—defined broadly as private capitalism, state capitalism, and any combination of the two—can be successful. Without it, workers' struggles are pushed back, not least because their organizations are either swallowed up by the state or crushed. So Trump was right to say that his defeat would be a victory for socialists; it is, because it strengthens democracy. Of course, the idea that under Biden, U.S. democracy will become a shining example for the rest of the world is fanciful: There are still many serious flaws that will not be easy to address. But this is a step forward.

Since capitalism is international, the fight against it has to be international too, and therefore socialists who provide any kind of support for authoritarian regimes in other countries are guilty of pushing back the anti-capitalist struggle in those countries and thereby in their own. Instead, socialists should be providing solidarity in any way they can to pro-democracy activists in other countries. By the same logic, the defeat of Trump in the United States is a victory in the global struggle against authoritarianism and capitalism, and therefore a victory for socialists worldwide: something we can all celebrate, while extending our solidarity to U.S. pro-democracy activists in their struggles ahead!

Notes

[1] Andrew Roth and Tom Phillips, "'What a spectacle!' US adversaries revel in post-election chaos," *The Guardian*, Nov. 6, 2020.

[2] "Who Is Louis DeJoy? US Postmaster General in Spotlight Ahead of 2020 Election," *NPR*, Aug. 21, 2020.

[3] Noah Feldman, "Trump's Supreme Court Comments Put Barrett in a Bind," *Bloomberg Quint*, Nov. 6, 2020.

[4] Terry Gross, "Republican Voter Suppression Efforts Are Targeting Minorities, Journalist Says," *NPR*, Oct. 23, 2018.

[5] Charlotte Dennett, "How to Rig an Election: an Interview with Greg Palast," *Counterpunch*, Aug. 21, 2020.

[6] Dennett, "How to Rig an Election: an Interview with Greg Palast."

[7] Lauren Gambino, "Democrats left to sift through aftermath of 'blue wave' that never crested," *The Guardian*, Nov. 8, 2020.

[8] A good collection can be found in Gregory Smulewicz-Zucker and Michael Thompson, eds., *An Inheritance for Our Times: Principles and Politics of Democratic Socialism* (New York: OR Books, 2020).

[9] Melissa Naschek, "The Identity Mistake," *Jacobin*, Aug. 28, 2018.

[10] Benjamin Wallace-Wells, "Arlie Russell Hochschild's View of Small-Town Decay and Support for Trump," *The New Yorker*, Sept. 20, 2016.

[11] Melissa Naschek, "The Identity Mistake."

[12] Naomi Klein, "We were told Joe Biden was the 'safe choice.' But it was risky to offer so little," *The Guardian*, Nov. 8, 2020.

[13] Julian Borger, "Trump's coup failed—but US democracy has been given a scare," *The Guardian*, Nov. 25, 2020.