

OUR OPINION, THEIR OPINION

"The goal of social justice and all round development can't be achieved through ideas but actions."
Mchiel Albert

CHALLENGE TO RAHUL'S LEADERSHIP IN I.N.D.I.A

The growing support among regional opposition leaders for Mamata Banerjee as the leader of the I.N.D.I.A bloc has cast a shadow over the Congress's role in the alliance. Leaders such as Lalu Prasad Yadav, Sharad Pawar, and Uddhav Thackeray have openly backed the West Bengal Chief Minister, citing her strong leadership credentials and the Congress's underwhelming performance in recent elections. This development signals a shift in the opposition's internal dynamics, where regional satraps are asserting their influence over national politics. Banerjee's track record in consistently defeating the BJP in West Bengal and her mass appeal make her a compelling candidate to lead a united front. In contrast, the Congress, despite being the largest party in the bloc, remains plagued by its inability to revive its electoral fortunes across the country. The party's failure has brought Rahul Gandhi's leadership under scrutiny once again, with critics questioning whether the Congress scion can steer the opposition to electoral success in 2024. The party's failure to forge strong alliances and win elections has only deepened the skepticism. However, sidelining the Congress entirely could prove counterproductive for the bloc. As the only party with a pan-India presence, the Congress remains critical to challenging the BJP in states where regional parties lack clout. The I.N.D.I.A bloc must balance regional aspirations with collective strategy, ensuring that leadership debates do not derail its primary goal: presenting a united front to counter the BJP. The path forward demands pragmatism and compromise. Opposition unity is essential, but so is clarity in leadership. The Congress must analyse its weaknesses for an objective assessment.

Finding hope in an age of resentment

In 2002 and 2003, those of us who argued that the case for invading Iraq was fundamentally fraudulent received a lot of pushback from people refusing to believe that an American president would do such a thing. Who would say that now?

This is my final column for The New York Times, where I began publishing my opinions in January 2000. I'm retiring from the Times, not the world, so I'll still be expressing my views in other places. But this does seem like a good occasion to reflect on what has changed over these past 25 years. What strikes me, looking back, is how optimistic many people, both here and in much of the Western world, were back then and the extent to which that optimism has been replaced by anger and resentment. And I'm not just talking about members of the working class who feel betrayed by elites; some of the angriest, most resentful people in America right now — people who seem very likely to have a lot of influence with the incoming Trump administration — are billionaires who don't feel sufficiently admired.

It's hard to convey just how good most Americans were feeling in 1999 and early 2000. Polls showed a level of satisfaction with the direction of the country that looks surreal by today's standards. My sense of what happened in the 2000 election was that many Americans took peace and prosperity for granted, so they voted for the guy who seemed as if he'd be more fun to hang out with.

In Europe, too, things seemed to be going well. In particular, the introduction of the euro in 1999 was widely hailed as a step toward closer political as well as economic integration — toward a United States of Europe, if you like. Some of us ugly Americans had misgivings, but initially they weren't widely shared.

Of course, it wasn't all puppies and rainbows. There was, for example, already a fair bit of proto-QAnon-type conspiracy theorising and even instances of domestic terrorism in America during the Clinton years. There were financial crises in Asia,

which some of us saw as a potential harbinger of things to come; I published a 1999 book titled "The Return of Depression Economics," arguing that similar things could happen here; I put out a revised edition a decade later, when they did.

Still, people were feeling pretty good about the future when I began writing for this paper. Why did this optimism curdle? As I see it, we've had a collapse of trust in elites: The public no longer has faith that the people running things know what they're doing, or that we can assume that they're being honest. It was not always thus. In 2002 and 2003, those of us who argued that the case for invading Iraq was fundamentally fraudulent received a lot of pushback from people refusing to believe that an American president would do such a thing. Who would say that now?

In a different way, the financial crisis of 2008 undermined any faith the public had that governments knew how to manage economies. The euro as a currency survived the European crisis that peaked in 2012, which sent unemployment in some countries to Great Depression levels, but trust in Eurocrats — and belief in a bright European future — didn't. It's not just governments that have lost the public's trust. It's astonishing to look back and see how much more favorably banks were viewed before the financial crisis.

And it wasn't that long ago that technology billionaires were widely admired across the political spectrum, some achieving folk-hero status. But now they and some of their products face disillusionment and worse; Australia has even banned social media use by children younger than 16.

Which brings me back to my point that some of the most resentful people in America right now seem to be angry billion-

aires.

We've seen this before. After the 2008 financial crisis, which was widely (and correctly) attributed in part to financial wheeling and dealing, you might have expected the erstwhile Masters of the Universe to show a bit of contrition, maybe even gratitude at having been bailed out. What we got instead was "Obama rage," fury at the 44th president for even suggesting that Wall Street might have been partly to blame for the disaster.

These days, there has been a lot of discussion of the hard right turn of some tech billionaires, from Elon Musk on down. I'd argue that we shouldn't overthink it, and we especially shouldn't try to say that this is somehow the fault of politically correct liberals. Basically, it comes down to the pettiness of plutocrats who used to bask in public approval and are now discovering that all the money in the world can't buy you love.

So, is there a way out of the grim place we're in? What I believe is that although resentment can put bad people in power, in the long run it can't keep them there. At some point, the public will realise that most politicians railing against elites actually are elites in every sense that matters and start to hold them accountable for their failure to deliver on their promises. And at that point, the public may be willing to listen to people who don't try to argue from authority, don't make false promises, but do try to tell the truth as best they can.

We may never recover the kind of faith in our leaders — belief that people in power generally tell the truth and know what they're doing — that we used to have. Nor should we. But if we stand up to the kakistocracy — rule by the worst — that's emerging as we speak, we may eventually find our way back to a better world.

By-PAUL KRUGMAN

Here's how US is countering Islamic State group during Syria's upheaval

Massive US airstrikes on Islamic State militants in Syria were meant in part as a message to the group and a move to ensure that it doesn't try to take advantage of the chaos following the overthrow of President Bashar Assad's government.

The US and its partners want to make sure the Islamic State group, which still has a presence in Syria, can't step into the leadership void and once again exert control over wide swaths of the country, Pentagon spokeswoman Sabrina Singh said Monday. The US on Sunday struck about 75 IS targets in the Syrian desert.

The US has had troops in Syria for the last decade to battle IS. The tumult following a rebel offensive that toppled Assad has raised fears of an Islamic State resurgence. "ISIS will try to use this period to reestablish its capabilities, to create safe havens," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Monday, using another acronym for the group. "As our precision strikes over the weekend demonstrate, we are determined not to let that happen." So far, US officials are saying that they do not plan an increase in American forces in Syria but are focused on making sure those already there are safe.

Here's a look at the US fight against the Islamic State group: What's the US military presence in Syria? The US has about 900 troops and an undisclosed number of contractors in Syria, largely at small bases in the north and east, with a small number farther south at the al-Tanf garrison closer to the Iraq and Jordan borders.

US special operations forces also routinely move in and out of the country but are usually in small teams and are not included in the official count.

Islamic State militants seized large parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014, declaring a caliphate. The US gathered a coalition of allies and was able to defeat IS in Iraq in 2017. The US partnered with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, and after fierce fighting, ultimately declared an end to the caliphate in Syria in 2019. Remnants of the militant group remain, including as many as 10,000 fighters held in SDF-run detention facilities in Syria and tens of thousands of their family members living in refugee camps.

And IS fighters have been more active over the past year or so, including in attacks against US and Kurdish forces in Syria.

The country has been wracked by violence and competing interests. Russia has a naval port in the north, and while there have been fewer Russian forces in the area since the onset of the war in Ukraine, the US maintains a deconfliction hotline with Moscow to avoid any troop miscalculations on the ground or in the air.

Iran also has had a significant presence, often using Syria as a transit route to move weapons into Lebanon for use by Hezbollah militants against Israel.

The al-Tanf garrison in southeastern Syria is located on a vital road that can link Iranian-backed forces from Tehran all the way to southern Lebanon and Israel's doorstep. So troops at the US garrison can try and disrupt those shipments. Why is the US striking Islamic State targets?

The US has, over the past decade, routinely targeted IS leaders, camps and weapons in Syria to keep the group at bay and prevent it from coalescing.

In the past year, as Israel's war with Hamas widened into a broader conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon, attacks by Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Syria as well as by the Islamic State group have escalated.

As a result, the US has kept up a steady drumbeat of counterattacks against all the groups, including against IS camps in the desert, where fighters found safe haven.

Officials say that while the group is vastly weaker than in 2014, it still maintains thousands of militants in Syria.

On Sunday, the US launched one of its larger, more expansive assaults against IS camps and operatives in the desert, taking advantage of the Assad government's downfall. The US bombed at least 75 targets in about five locations using B-52 bombers, A-10 attack aircraft and F-15 fighter jets.

"Does it send a message? I mean, I think it absolutely sends a message that we use B-52s, A-10s and F-15s," Singh told reporters. She had no other details on the result of the strikes.

What's next for the US in Syria? The Biden administration insists the US will not get involved in Syria's war or the overthrow of the Assad government.

But the US and its allies have deep interests in Syria, including the efforts to defeat IS, disrupt Iran-backed groups and contain the remnants of al-Qaida and other terror groups that have found sanctuary.

By-Lolita Baldor

Trump promises to end birthright citizenship: What is it, could he do it?

President-elect Donald Trump has promised to end birthright citizenship as soon as he gets into office to make good on campaign promises aiming to restrict immigration and redefining what it means to be American. But any efforts to halt the policy would face steep legal hurdles. Birthright citizenship means anyone born in the United States automatically becomes an American citizen. It's been in place for decades and applies to children born to someone in the country illegally or in the US on a tourist or student visa who plans to return to their home country. It's not the practice of every country, and Trump and his supporters have argued that the system is being abused and that there should be tougher standards for becoming an American citizen. But others say this is a right enshrined in the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, it would be extremely difficult to overturn and even if it's possible, it's a bad idea.

Here's a look at birthright citizenship, what Trump has said about it and the prospects for ending it: What Trump has said about birthright citizenship During an interview Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press" Trump said he "absolutely" planned to halt birthright citizenship once in office. "We're going to end that because it's ridiculous," he

said. Trump and other opponents of birthright citizenship have argued that it creates an incentive for people to come to the US illegally or take part in "birth tourism", in which pregnant women enter the US specifically to give birth so their children can have citizenship before returning to their home countries. "Simply crossing the border and having a child should not entitle anyone to citizenship," said Eric Ruark, director of research for NumbersUSA, which argues for reducing immigration. The organisation supports changes that would require at least one parent to be a permanent legal resident or a US citizen for their children to automatically get citizenship. Others have argued that ending birthright citizenship would profoundly damage the country.

"One of our big benefits is that people born here are citizens, are not an illegal underclass. There's better assimilation and integration of immigrants and their children because of birthright citizenship," said Alex Nowrasteh, vice president for economic and social policy studies at the pro-immigration Cato Institute. In 2019, the Migration Policy Institute estimated that 5.5 million children under age 18 lived with at least one parent in the country illegally in 2019, representing 7 per cent of the US child population. The vast

majority of those children were US citizens.

The nonpartisan think tank said during Trump's campaign for president in 2015 that the number of people in the country illegally would "balloon" if birthright citizenship were repealed, creating "a self-perpetuating class that would be excluded from social membership for generations".

What does the law say? In the aftermath of the Civil War, Congress ratified the 14th Amendment in July 1868. That amendment assured citizenship for all, including Black people. "All persons born or naturalised in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside," the 14th Amendment says. "No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States." But the 14th Amendment didn't always translate to everyone being afforded birthright citizenship. For example, it wasn't until 1924 that Congress finally granted citizenship to all Native Americans born in the US.

A key case in the history of birthright citizenship came in 1898, when the US Supreme Court ruled that Wong Kim Ark, born in San Francisco to Chinese immigrants, was a US citizen because he was born in the states. The federal government had tried to deny him

reentry into the county after a trip abroad on grounds he wasn't a citizen under the Chinese Exclusion Act.

But some have argued that the 1898 case clearly applied to children born of parents who are both legal immigrants to America but that it's less clear whether it applies to children born to parents without legal status or, for example, who come for a short-term like a tourist visa.

"That is the leading case on this. In fact, it's the only case on this," said Andrew Arthur, a fellow at the Centre for Immigration Studies, which supports immigration restrictions. "It's a lot more of an open legal question than most people think." Some proponents of immigration restrictions have argued the words "subject to the jurisdiction thereof" in the 14th Amendment allows the US to deny citizenship to babies born to those in the country illegally. Trump himself used that language in his 2023 announcement that he would aim to end birthright citizenship if reelected.

So what could Trump do and would it be successful? Trump wasn't clear in his Sunday interview how he aims to end birthright citizenship.

Asked how he could get around the 14th Amendment with an executive action, Trump said: "Well, we're going to have to get it changed. We'll maybe have to go back

to the people. But we have to end it." Pressed further on whether he'd use an executive order, Trump said "if we can, through executive action." He gave a lot more details in a 2023 post on his campaign website. In it, he said he would issue an executive order the first day of his presidency, making it clear that federal agencies "require that at least one parent be a US citizen or lawful permanent resident for their future children to become automatic US citizens". Trump wrote that the executive order would make clear that children of people in the US illegally "should not be issued passports, Social Security numbers, or be eligible for certain taxpayer funded welfare benefits". This would almost certainly end up in litigation. Nowrasteh from the Cato Institute said the law is clear that birthright citizenship can't be ended by executive order but that Trump may be inclined to take a shot anyway through the courts.

"I don't take his statements very seriously. He has been saying things like this for almost a decade," Nowrasteh said. "He didn't do anything to further this agenda when he was president before. The law and judges are near uniformly opposed to his legal theory that the children of illegal immigrants born in the United States are not citizens."

By-REBECCA SANTANA