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A dictator in the White House?

Russia, Venezuela and Turkey show how autocratic leaders can turn democracies into their own playthings. US Democrats, be warned!

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Last year, New Year's Eve was full of foreboding. Despite our best attempts at predicting the future, none of us could be sure what 2017 might hold. We all knew that a man who is eminently unfit for political office was about to enter the White House.

Would Donald Trump soften his outlook, or become even more extreme? Would he learn respect for the rules and norms of the American republic, or inflict lasting damage on the political system? And would he try to deliver actual improvements for the blue-collar Americans who supported him most vocally in the campaign, or focus on enriching himself and a narrow band of plutocrats?

A year on, some of the answers are clear as day. Trump has clearly failed to moderate his behaviour. He disdains the most basic limits on his authority, as evinced by recent claims he may do as he pleases with the Department of Justice.

Nor is it plausible to believe he has the interests of blue-collar Americans at heart. 'You all just got a lot richer,' Trump reportedly told friends at his Mar-A-Lago estate in Florida, after his tax reform handed a lavish bounty to the richest Americans, while doing virtually nothing for the lower middle-class.

But even as the nature of Trump's administration has become increasingly transparent, the impact he is having on the political system is less clear.

Corrosion from the inside

Trump has consolidated his hold on the Republican Party. Congress has

failed to punish him for his most outrageous actions, like the firing of FBI Director James Comey. That said, Trump hasn't managed to restrict the judiciary's independence or the vibrancy of the mainstream media. He's also has suffered some humiliating electoral defeats.

You could view 2017 either as the start of an orgy of economic and institutional destruction, or as the helpless floundering of a deeply ineffective president. Political commentary has devolved for the large part into a shouting match between pundits who are confidently pronouncing Trump's political demise, and those who predict the end of the American Republic itself.

For all this uncertainty, I feel much more upbeat than I was this time last year.

There's good reason for optimism. Unlike last year, 2018 offers Democrats a chance to take back power. By winning the House or the Senate—or both—the Democratic Party can ensure Congress does the crucial job of checking the Trump administration.

There's a simple difference between populists who flame out after a few years in office and populists who end up consolidating their power: the former lose elections.

In countries from Venezuela to Hungary, Turkey to Russia, democratically elected heads of government with authoritarian tendencies were unable to transform their systems overnight. Though they started to attack the independence of institutions like the judiciary or the electoral commission early on, it took them many years to consolidate their hold on the levers of power.

By the time they first stood for re-election, the opposition retained a real chance of winning.

In each case, the opposition squandered that opportunity.

Weak opposition: an autocrat's dream

There are a couple of reasons for this. Firstly, Hugo Chavez, Viktor Orban, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin were skilled politicians who delivered real improvements for their own base and remained highly popular in their first years in office. Secondly, their opponents were divided and weak.

US Democrats should take these warnings seriously, and up their game. Trump has already consolidated his hold over the Republican Party and effectively neutered Congress's willingness to hold him to account.

If Democrats fail to win back either the House or the Senate in the upcoming mid-term elections, he will have at least two more years to weaken America's institutions. The consequences could be drastic.

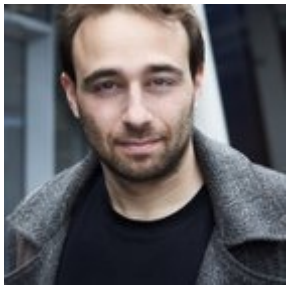
But comparisons with Venezuela, Hungary, Turkey and Russia also provide reasons to hope. Whereas the leaders of these countries were able to mobilise the masses behind successful flagship policies, Trump has shown himself deeply incompetent in his first year in office. He has sold out his own base. He is, at this point, deeply unpopular.

What's more, opposition to Trump is resolute and resourceful. So long as the cold war between liberals and leftists does not turn hot in the coming months, Trump will face a strong opposition party united by a righteous determination to oust him from power.

2018 will likely bring some shocking lows. There will be moments when Democrats will need to play defence, protecting the most vulnerable Americans from the administration's attacks and ensuring Trump fails to dismantle independent institutions like the FBI.

But this year, Trump's opponents will also have a chance to go on the attack. Their mission should be uncompromising and single-minded: everyone who cares about saving the American Republic from the Trumpists must do what they can to elect as many anti-Trump candidates as possible to state legislatures, to governors' mansions, to the House of Representatives, and to the United States Senate.

Bring it on, 2018.



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