

# Trump and Johnson: two peas in a pod

How the two men assumed power through different alchemies of chance, pusillanimity and mendacity



RUCHIR JOSHI

When Boris Johnson finally achieved his life-long ambition of becoming the U.K. Prime Minister, U.S. President Donald Trump described him as “a good man” who will achieve “tremendous things”. Mr. Trump also pointed out that many people call Mr. Johnson “Britain Trump, which they say is a good thing”. I suppose one should feel glad that Mr. Trump explained that because, left unexplained, that comparison could be seen as an insulting epithet. But let's leave aside the jokes and examine the very different routes by which each man has managed to capture the top political post of his country.

## Journey to the top

Donald Trump could never have occupied the top post leading a European style political party in government. That would have involved some kind of a career, politicking and manoeuvring within a party. It would have involved giving at least lip service to the idea of working in a team of equals, one or the other of whom at some point could be appointed leader of the team. It would probably have meant letting someone else have a go at the top job and waiting for him or her to fail before vying for the captaincy. All this would have been impossible for Mr. Trump. The only route he had to the presidency was from almost outside the Republican Party, by convincing a confused conservative conglomeration that it was a good idea for him to jump the queue. The only way he could do it was through a mixture of repeated monumental lies, luck, bluster, and the disgust that he had built up towards Hillary Clinton which allowed him to win despite getting three million fewer votes.

Boris Johnson could never have won a ‘presidential’ style election in the U.K. Even the Tory Party that has now inserted him into 10 Downing Street would never have had the temerity to present a man like Mr. Johnson to the larger voting public as their presidential candidate. Had



“The U.S. and the U.K. have never been morally irreproachable.” An artwork titled ‘Doris Borump’ depicting both U.S. President Donald Trump and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on a wall in east London. • REUTERS

they been foolhardy enough, Mr. Johnson's gloriously sorry record would have been torn apart by his opponents, not least his disastrous tenure as Mayor of London. The only way Mr. Johnson could move his way into the Prime Minister's post was by hunting down and killing every scruple and principle he could find, by taking shameless U-turns on positions, by back-stabbing almost every politician he allied with, and, like Mr. Trump, through luck, a matching lack of principle and moral courage on the part of his party leadership, and by constantly deploying a series of whopping lies.

Through quite different alchemies of chance, pusillanimity and mendacity, two wealthy white men, both fanatically devoted only to furthering their own ambitions, both with serious track records of espousing deeply racist, colonialist and misogynist views, both unbelievably blind and uncaring to the real problems facing their own people and the world, are now in charge of two of the most powerful countries on the planet. There are other men controlling other large nations who can run them very close – Vladimir Putin is certainly the current, long-standing champion – but there can be no two world leaders more dishonest, more anti-democratic and more contemptuous of human rights than Mr. Trump and Mr. Johnson.

Mr. Trump and Mr. Johnson are getting to paw the steering levers of nations that are not only rich and po-

werful, but that also claim leadership on democracy, human rights and social justice. So, do we now write off the U.S. and the U.K. in these terms? I think not. In fact, with Mr. Johnson's entry into Downing Street, things get really interesting. We must remember that the U.S. and the U.K. have never been morally irreproachable. The point about the two countries was never about who's in power but the checks and balances these flawed democracies managed to impose on their demi-despotic, skullduggery leaders and power systems, about how the people managed to effect the ouster of various Presidents and Prime Ministers.

## The obstacle course

Even as Mr. Johnson puts his Cabinet in place, former Special Counsel Robert Mueller underwent a grilling by the U.S. Congress. Though Republicans are trying to put a fantastical spin on his testimony, what has been made clear by the dignified and clearly spoken Mr. Mueller is that Mr. Trump has neither been cleared of collusion with agents of the Russian state or, equally damningly, of obstructing Mr. Mueller's investigation. Both are impeachable offences and Mr. Trump might yet be the first U.S. President after Richard Nixon to be forced to leave office for serious breaches of the law.

Mr. Johnson was greeted by a terse message from the president of the European Union who he will be dealing with over Brexit: “Dear Mr. John-

son, On behalf of the European Council I would like to congratulate you on your appointment as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I look forward to meeting you to discuss – in detail – our co-operation. Yours Sincerely, Donald Tusk.” Even before Mr. Johnson took over, members of the Cabinet resigned, stating publicly that they will not serve under this man, something unprecedented in British politics. Among those Cabinet ministers resigning are many who have made it clear they will work from the backbenches to fight a reckless Brexit.

Autumn elections in the U.K. look highly likely. Mr. Johnson has done nearly a clean sweep of previous ministers and appointed what one commentator has called “a hammerhead shark of a Cabinet”. We in the sub-continent should not be too enthused when we see names like Priti Patel and Sajid Javid in the Cabinet; this is a hard right-wing, pro-rich, racism-prone bunch of unelected reactionaries who have taken over from a barely elected and now self-ejected Theresa May. Mr. Johnson's booster rockets may be multi-coloured but they will combust in the same direction, propelling him to what he hopes will be an election victory in a presidential style contest against Jeremy Corbyn.

Across the Atlantic, Mr. Trump has already launched his own re-election campaign and he too will be hoping to overcome the obstacles he currently faces. We'll have to wait and see how American and British democracies react to these two men so nakedly bent upon dismantling the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity by the U.S. Congress. From the last few days: As Mr. Johnson drove to Buckingham Palace to be appointed Prime Minister, volunteers from Greenpeace including some children fanned out across the road, blocking his Jaguar and the police motorcycle outriders. The convoy stopped. The outriders came up to the activists and spoke to them. Other police appeared and pushed them aside. A few of the children came back, however, and the cars had to swerve to avoid them as they went past.

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# Not a ‘Right’ agenda

The BJP heavily leans Right on cultural matters, but still leans towards the Left on economic issues



PRABHASH RANJAN

The supremacy of the right wing in Indian polity was reaffirmed when the Narendra Modi government romped back to power with a colossal majority. But what is the real nature of the Indian Right? The Left often argues that the Right represents religious majoritarianism, combined with a neoliberal economic agenda. But is this true?

India has definitely witnessed a surge in majoritarianism in the last five years. Religious polarisation has increased; instances of lynching and violence in the name of religion have been on the rise; and brazen display of religious nationalism has become the new normal. However, the economic agenda has been anything but neoliberal.

Typically, a right-wing government is one that supports free-market capitalism – it has a doctrinal belief in a small government, privatisation, and low tax regime; looks at private (not public) investment and exports as key engines of economic growth; makes availability of land and labour easier and cheaper; and relies less on welfare doles and more on economic growth to help the poor.

## Not quite market friendly

The first Narendra Modi government was not quite market friendly if one evaluates its performance based on the above mentioned factors. Many examples prove this. The only engine of economic growth that was fired from 2014 to 2019 was public or government investment. Domestic consumption, private investment and exports remained sluggish. Despite the government enjoying massive political capital, land and labour laws were not reformed; neither were public sector undertakings privatised – only profitable PSUs were forced to buy shares of loss-making PSUs to make the fiscal math look good.

A hugely compromised GST with multiple tax slabs was adopted. Economic populism through measures like building toilets and providing gas cylinders, reminiscent of a patriarchal state, became the mainstay of governance. All this was a far cry from the promise of generating productive jobs in the private sector. Demonetisation was the biggest surgical strike on markets, on private property and on the integrity of money – all key tenets of free-market capitalism.

Even in the second term – if the recently presented general Budget is anything to go

by – the trajectory of the economic approach has not changed. To appear ‘pro-poor’, the government has hiked income tax rates on the ‘super rich’; import tariffs have gone up that makes ‘Make in India’ look like the dreaded import-substitution industrialisation of the bygone socialist era; a ‘super-rich tax’ on foreign portfolio investors has spooked the markets; nothing has been said on amending the Land Acquisition Act; and welfare populism has got more entrenched with PM-Kisan. All this would have made a statist government proud!

## Looking at the BJP's roots

This cleavage, between pursuing a social and cultural rightist agenda on the one hand and not pursuing an economic right-wing agenda on the other, can be understood by looking at the ideological roots of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP, formed in 1980 as a successor to the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, is the political arm of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The RSS's mission, best captured in the words of its founder K.B. Hedgewar, is “to organise the entire Hindu society from Kanyakumari to the Himalayas”. He had said that to protect Hindustan, Hindu culture has to be nourished. Thus, the agenda was always cultural and never economic.

This variety of Indian right-wing was very different from the right-wing politics that the Swatantra Party represented. Founded by C. Rajagopalachari and Minoo Masani, two secular icons, it was premised on a plea for a “market economy for India” because policies “based on the socialistic pattern of society would lead the country to bankruptcy”, wrote Masani. Cultural and religious goals were never part of their agenda. They too critiqued Jawaharlal Nehru, but for his economic socialism and not for his cultural syncretism or liberal, secular outlook.

The RSS considers both free-market capitalism and socialism as alien to Indian culture. Its focus has been on the *swadeshi* or the indigenous, with strong cultural overtones. While the BJP, being a political party, is compelled to have a more nuanced approach, it cannot cut itself away completely from its roots. This explains why, for the Indian Right, economics is an “incidental extra”, as MP Swapan Dasgupta writes in his book. Thus, though the government heavily leans Right on cultural matters, when it comes to economics, it still leans towards the Left. It may, for political expediency, adopt policies that suit select business houses. However, this cronyism should not be construed as ‘right-wing’ economic agenda.

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# No detente on the horizon

Just like in 2016, tensions with Iran will provide vital source material to Trump's campaign team

EJAZ AHMED

Recently, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that his country's warship had destroyed an Iranian drone in the Strait of Hormuz. The *USS Boxer*, an amphibious assault ship, brought down the drone reportedly after the latter came within its proximity despite multiple warnings.

The U.S. has since called for other countries to condemn this as an act of gross escalation in the region, an act that Washington sees as Tehran's way of disrupting oil trading routes.

Earlier, in June, Iran had shot down a U.S. drone that allegedly entered its airspace, an exchange that led to a major escalation between the two adversaries, so much so that the American security establishment was on the verge of taking retaliatory military action against three Iranian targets. The crisis appeared ready to explode until Mr. Trump stepped in to call off the attack.

Iran has been Mr. Trump's pet peeve for some time now. His remarks, ever since the campaign days, have regularly featured Iran and its alleged insidious tactics across the West Asian region. This pre-occupation with Iran has been a constant feature throughout his presidency and resulted in a U.S. pullout from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, despite certifications from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that Tehran was complying with the deal.

## A non-interventionist leader

However, it must be noted here that Mr. Trump is as much a non-interventionist as his predecessor Barack Obama – and this despite the massive difference in their respective rhetorical positions. Mr. Trump has pulled out a substantial number of American troops from Afghanistan and has shied away from direct military intervention in Syria.

Ironically, this approach of ‘no new interventions’ has been possible despite the presence of policy hawks such as John Bolton and Mike Pompeo in the administration. Perhaps

what the global security architecture is struggling to comprehend is that ‘Trumpian politics’ has a distinct style when it comes to foreign policy: escalate and then de-escalate with the aim of securing a deal, an approach consistent with Mr. Trump's projected image of being the “ultimate dealmaker.”

## Projection of strongman image

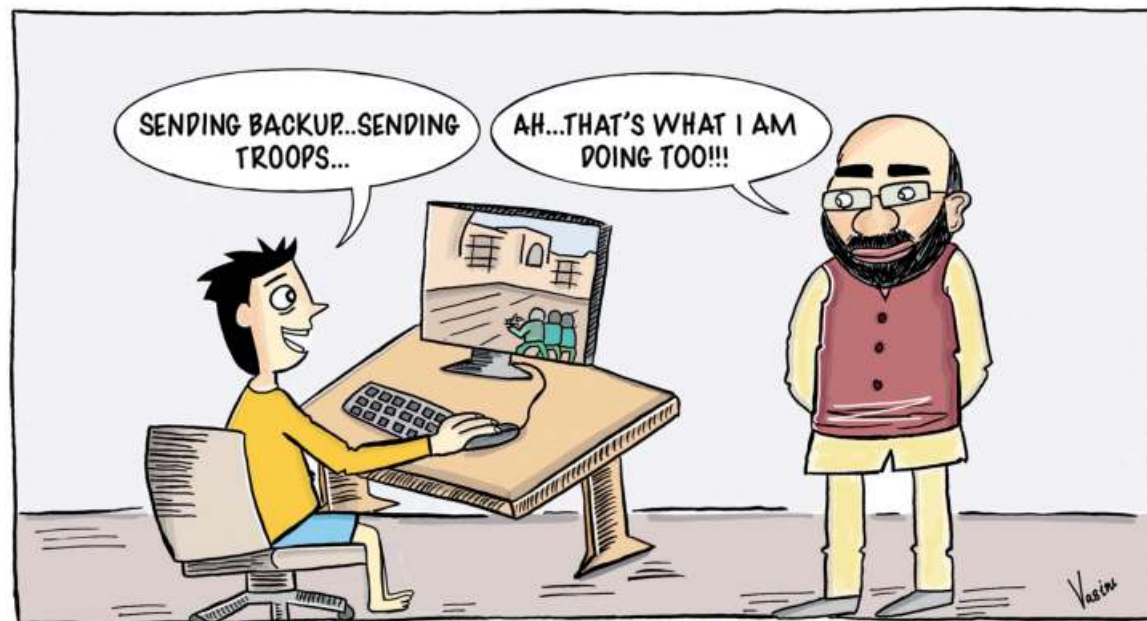
However, with the 2020 U.S. elections around the corner, Mr. Trump is unlikely to let go of the Iranian issue because it is – as it was in 2016 – a source of much election campaign material. Back then, it was the JCPOA; this time, it will be Tehran's alleged belligerence and sabotage on the high seas. Invariably, Mr. Trump's election campaign team will be hoping to portray that it is only Mr. Trump, with his strongman image, who can effectively bring Iran to heel and thus secure the U.S.'s vital security concerns in the region.

On its part, the Iranian government appears to be waiting out the tensions, hoping that it can mend ways with the next administration. But has it reckoned with the fact that Mr. Trump's approval ratings have been somewhat on the ascendant?

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, in his interaction with the press at the UN, hinted at engaging diplomatically with the U.S. to defuse tensions. He even went on to offer an additional protocol agreement, which would grant the IAEA further inspection rights that would not only be comprehensive but also even more intrusive than before.

Perhaps Tehran has come to grips with the reality that ‘waiting out’ and ‘strategic sabotage’ on the high seas alone will not work in the long term. However, its offer to defuse tensions has been met with scepticism in Washington, and this portends a continuation of hostilities as the search for a common ground goes on.

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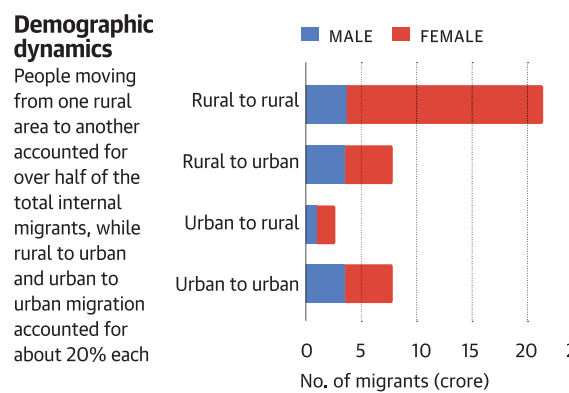
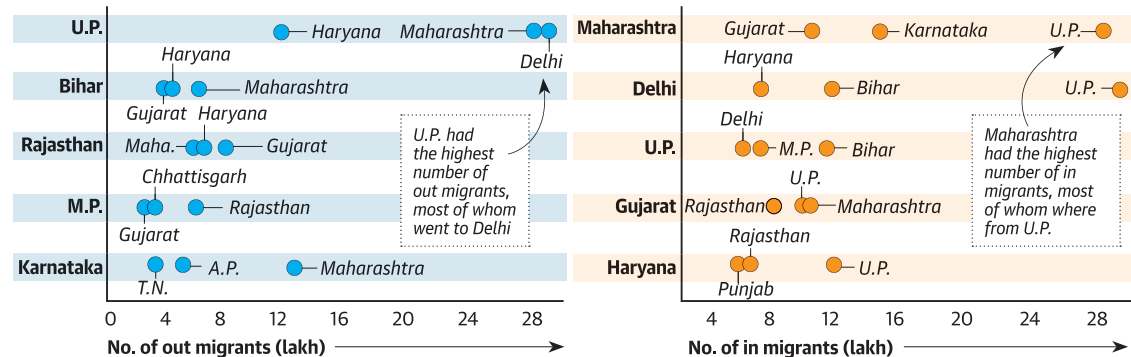


## DATA POINT

### India on the move

As of 2011, Maharashtra was home to the highest number of internal migrants, most of whom hailed from Uttar Pradesh, the State which recorded the highest outmigration. People mostly migrated from one rural area to another. Most international migrants were from Bangladesh. By Varun B. Krishnan and Sumant Sen

From where to where | Chart 1 shows the top five States which had the highest number of outmigrants and the States the migrants headed to. Chart 2 shows the top five States which had highest number of in migrants and the States of their previous residence



From a foreign land | Migrants from Bangladesh to West Bengal accounted for over 30% of the total international migrants, the highest by a large margin

Country	State	Migrants (lakh)	% of total
Bangladesh	West Bengal	18.97	34.55
Nepal	Bihar	2.60	4.74
Bangladesh	Tripura	2.15	3.92
Pakistan	Punjab	2.01	3.67
Sri Lanka	Tamil Nadu	1.40	2.56
Nepal	U.P.	1.25	2.28
Pakistan	Delhi	1.17	2.14
Pakistan	Haryana	1.08	1.97

Source: 2011 Census

## The Hindu

### FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 30, 1969

## No judicial probe into murder

The Union Home Minister, Mr. Y.B. Chavan, turned down in the Lok Sabha to-day [July 29, New Delhi] a demand for the appointment of a judicial commission to inquire into the murder of the Jan Sangh leader, Mr. Deen Dayal Upadhyaya. (The Special Sessions Judge has acquitted the accused of the charge of murder). The question of appointment of a judicial commission or committee would arise only after the U.P. Government decided whether to go in appeal against the Special Session Judge's verdict or not, Mr. Chavan said while replying to a calling attention notice tabled by Mr. A.B. Vajpayee and four other members. The notice reminded the Home Minister of the demand made by more than 70 members of Parliament that a judicial commission vested with necessary and effective powers should be appointed to find out the facts regarding the murder. Mr. Chavan told Mr. Vajpayee that it would be an embarrassing situation if the U.P. Government were to go in appeal to a higher Court after the Centre decided to appoint a judicial commission. The Centre had examined the judgement of the Special Judge and forwarded its view to the U.P. Government.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 30, 1919.

## Paddy Prices Up.

Paddy is again selling fearfully dear [in Nellore]. What was 105 Rupees a putty three weeks ago has become 130 Rupees a putty; and enquiries appear to be brisk even at that rate. Second sort paddy has flown up from 64 Rs. to Rs. 100. To the public these frequent rises are very difficult to understand. Since their memorial to Government last March about the situation in food stocks and prices, the Government appear to have put restrictions upon exports of rice from this district by rail. What stock there then was, assuming that our local administrators had fully and vigilantly prevented smuggling out – one speculator alone is reported to have purchased 70,000 Rs. worth of paddy for export the other day – has been augmented by the second crop harvest in the delta taluks which has just come in. Further, during May, a few consignments of Rangoon rice had been allowed into the local market by the Director of Civil supplies. Under these circumstances, we had thought we had fairly enough to keep us going on for some more time easily and without any catastrophic fluctuations of price.