



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Case Analysis | 30 July 2024

1968 All Over Again? US Election Year Turmoil Continues, As Kamala Harris Replaces President Biden for the Democratic Nomination

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Series: **Case Analysis**

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A united GOP under Trump – convicted felon and wannabe dictator – or an uncertain Democratic party and country unfamiliar with Harris, whose main message is ‘Stop Trump’ – the choice for American voters.

The US continues to endure serious, historic levels of turmoil in another highly contentious election year, with no clear end in sight. The superpower entered 2024 with a deep sense of foreboding, but the political class is lurching from one crisis to another. It now appears to be in the middle of a predicament resembling that of 1968 which led to the withdrawal of President Lyndon B. Johnson from the election. This followed the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr, and Senator Robert Kennedy who was running for the Democratic nomination, student uprisings against the Vietnam War, and the unflinching resistance of the Vietnamese people that inspired the Tet offensive.

2024 is arguably much worse. Widely acknowledged levels of domestic political polarisation or, rather, ‘factionalisation’,¹ are almost unprecedented since the civil war era (1861-65). The US (and world) are still reeling from the Trump-led attempted coup and insurrection of 6 January 2021,² the prosecution and conviction of the Republican nominee on 34 criminal charges, the recent failed assassination attempt on his life, and resignation of the head of the secret service. The fire has only been further stoked by the dramatic withdrawal of President Biden from seeking the Democratic nomination for a second term, and his replacement by Kamala Harris, with around 100 days until the 5 November election. Harris would become the first woman of colour to be nominated for president by a major political party. She is the daughter of an Indian-American mother and Jamaican-American father.

The already bloodied and bruised reputation of the US, the world’s lone superpower, continues to be battered by this recent turn of events. These signify the deepening of the ongoing political crisis of legitimacy that the United States has been embroiled in for several decades, but especially since the Iraq war and the financial crash of 2008.

US Crisis Is a World Crisis

A domestic political crisis in the United States is necessarily a crisis of world order which will, too, have consequences for global power dynamics.³ One effect, of course, is that China is becoming increasingly active as a diplomatic force – witness China’s brokering the normalisation of Iran-Saudi relations in March 2023, an entente that has yielded amicable relations and greater trade. That it has withstood Israel’s war on Gaza speaks volumes for its durability.⁴ In addition, China has

¹ Inderjeet Parmar, “Book Review: Is America on the Brink of Civil War and Fascism?” *WIRE*, 13/2/2022, accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/felMyouU>

² Inderjeet Parmar, “Trump’s Coup and Insurrection: Biden’s Challenge and Opportunity,” *Insight Turkey*, vol. 23, no. 1 (Winter 2021), accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/7elMuL3U>

³ Inderjeet Parmar, “Poly Crisis or Organic Crisis? The Crisis of the United States and the US-led World Order,” *Economic & Political Weekly*, vol. 58, no. 34 (August 2023), accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/melMaAsi>

⁴ Giorgio Cafiero, “A Year Ago, Beijing Brokered an Iran-Saudi Deal. How Does Détente Look Today?” *Atlantic Council*, 6/3/2024, accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/felMflyb>

made strong efforts in bringing Palestinian factions together to discuss and form a government of national unity between Hamas, Fatah, and others.⁵

At the heart of the crisis is the US' steadily declining commitment to the rule of law, and to constitutional and international liberal norms. The US and its western allies' hurtle down this path has already been evident regarding its continual military, diplomatic and financial support of Israel despite rulings by the International Court of Justice of 'plausible genocide' by Israel in Gaza. The International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant for Prime Minister Netanyahu, and the UN has declared illegal, once again, Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Yet, Netanyahu has addressed both houses of the US congress to rapturous applause on his official visit to the United States. Meanwhile, the Israeli onslaught on the people of Gaza continues to have ramifications for spilling over into conflict involving Lebanon, Iran, and the Houthis of Yemen, with recent attacks from there on Israel and 'retaliatory' Israeli bombing.

But what does Biden's replacement with Harris mean for the future of this war, and where does she stand on Netanyahu's visit? She's a 'moderate pragmatist', according to the *New York Times*,⁶ and has long kept a relatively low profile on controversial issues. While being fully behind Biden's pro-Israeli policies, and supportive of a cease-fire in principle, Harris was careful to be out of the Washington DC beltway for the Israeli leader's visit. Following her low key private meeting with Netanyahu she emphasized the need for an end to the suffering of the people of Gaza, return of Israeli hostages, the right of Israeli self-defence, and the need for a ceasefire.⁷ We can expect her to try and walk the tightrope between full support for US policy, whilst attempting to build bridges with a furious and alienated Arab and Muslim electorate which, despite being a tiny fraction of US voters, remain significant in key 'swing' states like Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.⁸ Although these states tipped Biden over the electoral college line to the White House in 2020, many of those voters ticked 'not committed' in the Democratic primaries (rather than vote for Biden) as did large numbers of millennials.⁹

Kamala Harris replacing Biden is unlikely to change the fundamental dynamics of the election – which undoubtedly remains a *referendum on Trump* – nor of fundamental policy positions such as on Israel-Palestine, Ukraine war, China's rising stature in world affairs, let alone the almost ever-burgeoning military budget.

5 Tessa Wong & Raffi Berg, "China Seeks to Unite Palestinian Factions with Reconciliation Deal," *BBC*, 23/7/2024, accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/2eIMhCHy>

6 "What to Know About Kamala Harris, Joe Biden's V.P. Choice," *New York Times*, 18/2/2021, accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/GelMzPGB>

7 Andrew Payne, "Kamala Harris has a different view on Gaza to Joe Biden – it could win her votes in November," *The Conversation*, 24/7/2024, accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/0eIMW4YN>

8 Shola Lawal, "American Muslims helped Biden win in 2020. Will they abandon him now?" *Aljazeera*, 27/2/2024, accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/seIMRyIf>

9 Niraj Warikoo, "Jewish, Arab voters in Michigan have Mixed Reaction to Kamala Harris as Democratic Nominee," *Detroit Free Press*, 26/7/2024, accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/XeIMTp5y>

The enthusiasm of Wall St for Kamala Harris sends its own signals about the basic synergy between Big Money and the Democratic party and administrations, as well as for Trump and the Republicans.¹⁰ This further suggests that Harris represents far more continuity, not a break, with the past.

Nevertheless, a fresh face in the White House *could* provide renewed impetus for small but meaningful adjustments – greater pressure on Israel for a ceasefire with the threat of withholding arms and diplomatic support; and opening serious peace talks over what appears to be an ‘endless’ Ukraine war. Biden’s strategy towards Israel has failed to deliver a cease fire principally because there has been little serious attempt to halt the flow of American weapons, a major contradiction some put down to the president’s mental infirmities. In addition, regarding the Ukraine war, the Biden administration has provided no clear idea of what victory looks like, raising anxieties, captured by Trump’s camp, about another ‘forever’ war. Stronger action – a slight course correction - by Harris on these matters could have substantial impact on the lives of ordinary people as well as on easing global tensions and the threat of a wider war.

There is clear daylight on US policy towards the Ukraine war emerging between the most rigid Trumpists in the House and Senate and the Democrats, a space which a Harris presidency might occupy by specifying how the war ends, and making serious efforts at a peace agreement. But a letter of support for Harris signed by over 300 former national security officials suggests little would fundamentally change under President Harris regarding Ukraine, Israel, and China.¹¹ The signatories include Victoria Nuland, former under-secretary of state for political affairs who was in Kiev presiding over the 2014 overthrow of the elected pro-Russian regime, both Obama secretaries of state (Hillary Clinton and John Kerry), former directors of National Intelligence (James Clapper), CIA (Michael Hayden; Leon Panetta, who was also defense secretary), former national security advisers Tom Donilon and Susan Rice, and a former US ambassador in Moscow (Michael McFaul). Senior former officials who signed the letter from the Republican camp include Robert Blackwill, Richard Haass, and Chuck Hagel. It is clear from this cross-party cooperation that Harris represents the national security managers’ *“anyone-but-Trump, continuity-with-Biden”* candidate.

Kamala Harris Surge Obscures Deeper Ongoing Divisions in the Party and the Country

Harris appears to be a unifying force in the Democratic party, attracting tens of millions of dollars into her election war chest, but there is still a long way to go to the party convention in August, let alone the 5 November election. How will Harris change the dynamics of the election and, if she emerges victorious in November, how might it affect key areas of domestic and foreign policy?

¹⁰ David Dayen, “Who Is Kamala Harris?” *The American Prospect*, 23/7/2024, accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/5eIMIQkO>

¹¹ “Former National Security Leaders Endorse Kamala Harris for President,” *The Washington Post*, 23/7/2024, accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/7eIMADD8>

There was a clear split apparent between the Left of the party – Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, Bernie Sanders and other members of the ‘squad’ – who stridently backed Biden remaining the Democratic candidate for the White House, and an increasing number of leading Democrats – Schumer, Schiff, Jeffries, Pelosi, and Obama, who edged Biden out. The Left hails Biden’s multi-trillion dollar industrial and social programmes such as the Inflation Reduction Act and the ‘Build Back Better’ initiatives as the future, even if they disagree on Gaza-Israel policies and military budget increases. They also perceived there to be no other Democratic path to the White House which was any less fraught than with Biden. Challenges to his authority, they feared, could open the floodgates to further splits in the party including at the August convention. Even with Harris seemingly firmly in place as the Democratic nominee, attracting pledged donations over \$100m almost overnight by donors large and small, the Obamas were tardy in announcing their support. There remains no reliable indication yet on how Harris’s nomination plays among Muslim and Arab American voters in swing states, ¹²although younger voters might be lured back into line.

Kamala Harris was never, up till now, seen as a strong contender for November. She polled badly with consistently low approvals and high disapprovals. And polls suggest electoral dynamics would not change much with a Harris candidacy; it remains a referendum on Trump pretty much as it was in 2020. A recent YouGov poll indicated that about 55% of Democratic voters are voting **against** Trump while around 80% of Trump’s are voting FOR him. It remains to be seen if anything changes under Harris.

Beyond the issues of Israel and Russia’s war on Ukraine, Harris, despite being more centrist than Biden, is now essentially aligned with Biden politically – including in aspects of his Build Back Better agenda (Industrial policy), on severe immigration clamp downs, on abortion rights, and especially on STOPPING Trump. Regarding illegal immigration on the southern border, the *Wall St Journal* considered the Harris-backed bipartisan Border Security Bill “the most restrictive migrant legislation in decades”, a long way from her original support for pathways to citizenship.¹³

But the polls continue to show a close race even in swing states, even if Trump leads, but within the margin of error. In addition, recent polls before Biden stepped down suggested that the percentage of American “double haters”, who hate both candidates for the presidency, hit an all-time high of 25% of the electorate – around 40 million people. Will Harris, who has generally polled badly, move the dial on that on the long march to November?¹⁴ Will she make a difference among swing state voters (the 6% of voters in 6 states who will effectively determine the election outcome). Harris pips both Biden and Trump as the *least unfavourable* candidate, hardly a ringing endorsement of the choice on offer.¹⁵

¹² Warikoo.

¹³ “A Border Security Bill Worth Passing,” *Wall Street Journal*, 5/2/2024, accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/4elMGiA8>

¹⁴ Noah Bressner & Dave Lawler, “Disappearing “Double Haters”: Most Americans like Trump or Harris,” *Axios*, 26/7/2024, accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/oelMHOUK>

¹⁵ Andrew Payne, “Internal Polling Shows Harris Ahead of Biden in Net Favorability,” *The Conversation*, 24/7/2024, accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/OelMK8ba>

Trump vs the Not-Trump

Donald Trump, the Republican nominee for president, who is leading in the opinion polls, has a long list of dubious ‘accomplishments’, including being twice impeached, 91 indictments including for insurrection and election interference, convictions for sexual attacks and financial fraud. His violent speeches – invoking Hitlerite language of “blood poisoning” and “vermin” with regard to immigrants, minorities, refugees, liberals, and the Left – add to the sense of foreboding. He says he is “fighting like hell” for the White House, and refuses to believe that he could lose the election other than by “deep state” conspiracies,¹⁶ promises to be a ‘dictator’ and deport millions of illegal immigrants, probably reinstitute the notorious ‘Muslim’ travel ban, and use the state to go after his political opponents. Project2025 as much as the GOP’s Agenda 47 signals the aspirations of a personalist presidential dictatorship under a second Trump administration. Project2025 would gut the state department and replace career officials and policy and area experts with political appointees¹⁷; It would mean, if carried out, the ‘deconstruction of the administrative state’.¹⁸

What are the chances of a peaceful transfer of power in the shadow of such conditions and forces? And as election year turmoil continues, and morphs into new directions and shapes: is the USA barrelling towards an authoritarian dictatorship under a Trump presidency? Is an unusually united GOP, and a Democratic party uncertain and under-prepared to rival the Republicans, paving the way to Trump II – what might be the road to an American style political dictatorship? And where is America going in world terms? Can its allies and partners rely on it? How will domestic crises and possible slide to political strife and violence impact its foreign and security policies?

A lot happens in the space of a week in politics. And there are still almost 16 weeks to go till the 5 November poll, the only one that really counts, a few weeks till the Democratic convention, and eight until the first Harris vs Trump television debate.

There is a lot more turmoil to come.

¹⁶ Robert M. Dover, “January 6 US Capitol Attack: Deep State Conspiracies Haven’t Gone Away,” *WIRE*, 6/1/2023, accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/uelMMhWA>

¹⁷ Mike Ludwig, “Trump’s Alternative to Project 2025, “Agenda 47,” Is Also Extreme and Anti-LGBTQ,” *Truthout*, 15/7/2024, accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/7elM2gek>; “Project 2025: What a Second Trump Term Could Mean for Media and Technology Policies,” *Brookings*, 22/7/2024, accessed on 30/7/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/KelM29zv>

¹⁸ Mark Tushnet (ed.), “The Administrative State in the Twenty-First Century: Deconstruction and/or Reconstruction,” *Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences*, vol. 150, no. 3 (Summer 2021).



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