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US Protests against Police Brutality: Election Disaster for Trump?

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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The United States of America is witnessing massive protests in retaliation to the killing of a black citizen, George Floyd, by a white policeman who was filmed kneeling on Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The situation was exacerbated by President Donald Trump's response, appealing to his own electoral base as a strong leader representing "law and order," rather than making any promises to tackle the deep-rooted racial discrimination in the United States, especially in the police. The crisis came at a time when the country was already overwhelmed by Covid-19, the consequent economic fallout and rising unemployment. This has undoubtedly contributed to the expansion of the protests across the country, just five months before the presidential and legislative elections.

Background

Although police brutality and judicial discrimination towards black Americans is deeply ingrained and certainly not new, Trump's personality, his affiliation with white nationalism and his rhetoric have exaggerated political and ethnic divisions since his election and undoubtedly aggravated these issues. After his election, he did not hesitate to express his sympathy for white supremacist and neo-Nazi movements, whose violence he made excuses for during their aggressive demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia, in the summer of 2017. Trump has also often voiced support for and encouraged police use of violence against citizens. In August 2017, he issued an executive order in which he overturned a decision by his predecessor, Barack Obama, that prevented the US Department of Defense from providing civilian police departments with military equipment and weapons. According to Trump's order, the police can obtain these equipment and weapons, either for free or through government grants; a fact that has reinforced the militarization of police forces.⁽¹⁾

The horrific video footage revealing Floyd's killing on 25 May 2020 came at a time when black Americans were already paying the highest price for Covid-19, both economically and in terms of casualties. The US unemployment report for May 2020 indicates that the unemployment rate at the national level is 13.3%, reaching 16.8% among black Americans, and it was later revealed that both rates are much higher in reality.⁽²⁾ Medical studies have shown that the death rate among black Americans due to Covid-19 is three times higher than that of their white counterparts.⁽³⁾ This data indicates the extent of the marginalization and institutional discrimination suffered by black Americans, who number 40 million (13% of the population). In addition, black Americans have access to poor quality of education earn lower salaries and suffer from an unequal distribution of wealth compared to white families who possess 10 times the wealth of black families on average.⁽⁴⁾ The number of black Americans in prison amounts to a third of the total overall number of prisoners,

1 Sean Collins, "Trump's Policies have Enabled Police Violence Against Black Americans," *VOX*, 30/5/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/30iP1bF>

2 Greg Iacurci, "Here's Why the Real Unemployment Rate May be Higher than Reported," *CNBC*, 5/6/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://cnb.cx/379Yzr3>

3 Ed Pilkington, "Black Americans Dying of Covid-19 at Three Times the Rate of White People," *The Guardian*, 20/5/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2MGMj7P>

4 Nellie Peyton & Anastasia Moloney, "George Floyd: America's Racial Inequality in Numbers," *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, 1/6/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://tmsnrt.rs/37hLWKv>.



meaning they are 5 times more likely to be incarcerated than white men.⁽⁵⁾ Black men are killed by US police officers at a rate between 3.2 and 3.5 times higher than it is for white men.⁽⁶⁾ A survey conducted in 2019 found that for every five black men arrested by the police, three of them had been arrested without convincing justification. About eight out of ten black Americans who hold a university degree say they have been discriminated against because of their ethnicity.⁽⁷⁾

Crisis Management

As usual, Trump's handling of the crisis of protests over Floyd's killing was messy and the response of his administration was inconsistent and at times contradictory. As the video went viral, Trump described the scene as shocking. The White House stated the president was taking the matter seriously and was very upset.⁽⁸⁾ Then Trump returned, with increasing public discontent, and declared that what happened was a "a grave tragedy" that "should never have happened" and that it had "filled Americans all over the country with horror, anger, and grief."⁽⁹⁾ However, unlike his predecessors in such incidents, the President did not address the nation to pledge reforms bridging the racial divide in the United States. The leadership vacuum in the White House thus contributed to the escalation of popular protests, some of which were accompanied by riots and looting of property.

Trump began to adopt a more aggressive and defensive rhetoric. He declared that the protests were "nothing to do with justice or peace," criminalizing them as the actions of "rioters, looters, and anarchists" dishonouring Floyd's memory at the instigation of left-wing extremist groups. Trump announced his support for law enforcement and sent out his now infamous tweet claiming that "When the looting starts the shooting starts"⁽¹⁰⁾ as well as threatening protesters outside the White House, which further aggravated tensions.⁽¹¹⁾

On 1 June 2020, Trump made contact with state governors asking them to "dominate" the demonstrators and "take back" the streets, or that he would issue orders to deploy the regular army, under the "Rebellion Law" of 1807, in the cities that the Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper, described as a "battlespace." Trump also informed the state governors that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, would be responsible for countering the protests.⁽¹²⁾ Immediately, members of

5 Charlotte Edmond, "5 Charts Reveal Key Racial Inequality Gaps in the US," World Economic Forum, 2/6/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2XGEDJ1>.

6 Tom Nolan, "Arming our Police with More Powerful Weapons Has Led to More Violence Against Americans, Ex-cop Says," *Market Watch*, 2/6/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://on.mktw.net/3dK5lpY>.

7 Peyton & Moloney.

8 Jill Colvin & Colleen Long, "Trump Tries a New Response after George Floyd's Death," *Start Tribune*, 28/5/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <http://strib.mn/2Ade3OT>.

9 Trevor Hass, "President Donald Trump Called George Floyd's Death 'a Grave Tragedy,'" *boston.com*, 30/5/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/378S7AA>.

10 "President Trump Condemns Protesters, Calls Death of George Floyd a 'Tragedy,'" *Fox6 News*, 30/5/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2UnjKke>.

11 Collins.

12 Zachary Shevin, "Trump Says Gen. Milley '80 'in Charge,' Expanding Concerns about the Militarization of Law Enforcement," *Daily Princetonian*, 3/6/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3cHoWFR>.



the Presidential Protection Service, backed by federal security services, National Guard forces and his helicopters, circled at a low level, broke up a peaceful demonstration in Lafayette Park in front of the White House, using rubber bullets, sound bombs and pepper spray. It later became clear that Trump wanted to visit, along with the Ministers of Justice and Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and a number of other advisors, St. John's Church, adjacent to the White House, and take a picture in front of it carrying the Gospel, in a bid to show firmness and strength.⁽¹³⁾ The emergence of Trump, not known for his religiosity, carrying the Bible, was a perfectly obvious attempt to address his supporters from evangelical churches and gain their sympathy in these circumstances.

Military Response

These actions drew widespread criticism, initiated by four former US presidents: Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. Trump has also come under heavy criticism from former military leaders, as his former defense secretary, James Mattis, Admiral Mike Mullen, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, and former Chief of staff for the Trump administration, General John Kelly, have gone as far as considering that the deployment of military forces in the cities may constitute a breach by the soldiers of their constitutional duty to protect Americans.⁽¹⁴⁾ This was followed by a letter signed by 89 former defense officials, including four former defense ministers, both Republican and Democrat, as well as dozens of other retired officials and generals, condemning Trump's threat to use the military to counter popular demonstrations, his attempts to politicize the military, and drag them into domestic battles. The letter also condemned the defense minister, General Esper, and General Milley, for pandering to Trump.⁽¹⁵⁾ This is not the first time that Trump's actions have demonstrated a lack of awareness of the democratic system and its red lines, even for the conservatives, in the United States.

Faced with these pressures, and with the resignation of a senior defense ministry official in protest against Esper violating his oath "to defend the constitution" and the growing public dissatisfaction with a number of current army generals, Esper began to move away from Trump's position. He claimed that he was not aware of the dispersal of the demonstrators by force outside the White House nor of Trump's intention or destination when he accompanied him to the church. He said that he "opposes using active-duty troops to put down the protests in American cities."⁽¹⁶⁾ These statements have outraged the White House. Other reports indicate that Milley is adopting the same position and that he, along with both Esper and the Secretary of Justice, William Barr, has opposed Trump's request to deploy 10,000 regular soldiers in American cities.⁽¹⁷⁾

¹³ Michael Balsamo, "Barr Says he Didn't Give Tactical Order to Clear Protesters," *Associated Press*, 6/6/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3h5e0oX>.

¹⁴ Fred Kaplan, "The Officers' Revolt," *Slate*, 03/6/020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2XFW612>.

¹⁵ "89 Former Defense Officials: The Military Must never be Used to Violate Constitutional Rights," *The Washington Post*, 52020/6/, accessed on 82020/6/, at: <https://wapo.st/30ko2wA>.

¹⁶ Kaplan.

¹⁷ David Martin, "Trump Demanded 10,000 Active-duty Troops Deploy to Streets in Heated Oval Office Meeting," *CBS NEWS*, 6/6/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://cbsn.ws/2Uol0n5>.



The Impact of the Protests on the Elections

Although it is too early to gauge the impact of the protests in the November 2020 elections, current polls indicate that it may lead to a decline in Trump's chances of winning a second term. According to a Reuters/Ipsos poll, 55% of respondents expressed disapproval of Trump's handling of the protests, while 64% expressed sympathy for the demonstrators.⁽¹⁸⁾ This means that Trump's attempt to present himself in the elections as a candidate of "law and order" has not succeeded, at least not yet. A series of opinion polls show that the Trump administration's failure to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, its negative economic repercussions and the high unemployment rates, as well as its turmoil in dealing with the protests, are all factors that will make it difficult for Trump to secure 270 delegates in the electoral college to win a second presidential term.⁽¹⁹⁾

Joe Biden maintains an average 7.8 lead at the national level, which extends to a number of states that Trump decisively won in 2016 in the electoral battle against Hillary Clinton and poses a threat in historically Republican states. For example, one survey indicates Biden's lead over Trump in Wisconsin, which the latter won in 2016, by 49% to 4%.⁽²⁰⁾ Meanwhile, another poll indicates that Biden is ahead of Trump in Florida by 3 points.⁽²¹⁾ In Michigan, another state that Trump won from Democrats in 2016, Biden leads at 48% to 46%.⁽²²⁾ Two big surprises are that Trump and Biden are almost equal in two Republican strongholds; Texas and Arizona, where Trump is only one point ahead of Biden.⁽²³⁾ The same polls also indicate that Republicans will likely lose control of the Senate.⁽²⁴⁾ However, it is still too early to predict the results of the US elections, especially in light of the opinion polls failing to predict Trump's victory in 2016.

Conclusion

George Floyd's killing exposed the reality of crisis that has engulfed the United States for centuries. The country has never reconciled with its bitter history of slavery, racial discrimination and police brutality, despite the passage of more than half a century since the victory of the civil rights movement. But this current situation, and its overarching context, may lead to the rise of a new civil rights movement, especially as a large number of white and other non-black Americans join and some cities and states announce broad reforms to deal with police violence and accountability.

18 Kevin Breuninger, "Joe Biden's Lead Against Trump in the 2020 Election is Growing Wider, Polls Show," *CNBC*, 4/6/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://cnb.cx/2A6n8cq>.

19 Chris Cillizza, "The Electoral Map is Tilting Badly Against Donald Trump Right Now," *CNN*, 5/6/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://cnn.it/2A6nEqS>.

20 Breuninger.

21 Julia Manchester, "Poll: Trump and Biden Neck and Neck in Six Crucial Swing States," *The Hill*, 3/6/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2zekwZn>.

22 Ibid.

23 "Biden Vs. Trump: Neck And Neck In Texas," Quinipiac University Poll Finds, 3/6/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2BF4tod>.

24 Alexander Bolton, "Republicans Fear Trump May Cost Them Senate," *The Hill*, 6/6/2020, accessed on 8/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2Ybl8rf>.



Notably, despite the crisis revealing the extent of the Republican Party's complicity with Trump, and its silence on his dismissal of some American values, it has also showed strong resistance to attempts to infringe on the freedom of peaceful expression of American citizens, and attempts to politicize the military establishment.