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The State of Democracy in the United States

2021-12-05 10:00

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Preamble

Democracy is a common value shared by all humanity. It is a right for all nations, not a prerogative reserved to a few. Democracy takes different forms, and there is no one-size-fits-all model. It would be totally undemocratic to measure the diverse political systems in the world with a single yardstick or examine different political civilizations from a single perspective. The political system of a country should be independently decided by its own people.

The United States' system of democracy is derived from its own practices. This system is unique, not universally applicable, and it is far from perfect. However, over the years, the US, despite the structural flaws and problematic practice of its democratic system, has claimed itself as the "model of democracy". It has incessantly interfered in other countries' internal affairs and waged wars under the guise of "democracy", creating regional turbulence and humanitarian disasters.

Based on facts and expert opinions, this report aims to expose the deficiencies and abuse of democracy in the US as well as the harm of its exporting such democracy. It is hoped that the US will improve its own system and practices of democracy and change its way of interacting with other countries. This is in the interest of not only the American people, but also the people of other countries. If no country seeks to dictate standards for democracy, impose its own political system on others or use democracy as a tool to suppress others, and when all countries can live and thrive in diversity, our world will be a better place.

I. What is democracy?

Democracy is a term that derives from the ancient Greek language. It means "rule by the people" or "sovereignty of the people". As a form of government, democracy has been practiced for over 2,500 years, though in different forms, such as direct democracy of the ancient Athenian citizens and representative government in modern times. Democracy is a manifestation of the political advancement of humanity.

Democracy is not an adornment or publicity stunt; rather, it is meant to be used to solve problems faced by the people. To judge whether a country is democratic, it is important to see whether its people run their own country. In addition to voting rights, it is important to see whether people have the rights to extensive participation. It is important to see what promises are made in an election campaign and, more importantly, how many of those promises are honored afterwards. It is important to see what political procedures and rules are instituted by a country's systems and laws and, more importantly, whether these systems and laws are truly executed. It is important to see whether the rules and procedures governing the exercise of power are democratic and, more importantly, whether power is truly put under the oversight and checks of the people.

A functional democracy must have a full set of institutional procedures; more importantly, it should have full participation of the people. It must ensure democracy in terms of both process and outcomes. It must encompass both procedural and substantive democracy, both direct and indirect democracy. It must ensure both people's democracy and the will of the State. If the people of a country are only called upon to vote and then are forgotten once they have cast their votes; if the people only hear high-sounding promises during an election campaign but have no say whatsoever afterwards; or if they are wooed when their votes are wanted but are ignored once the election is over, then such a democracy is not a true democracy.

Whether a country is democratic should be judged and determined by its own people, not by a minority of self-righteous outsiders.

There is no perfect system of democracy in the world, nor is there a political system that fits all countries. Democracy is established and developed based on a country's own history and adapted to its national context, and each country's democracy has its unique value. Members of the international community should engage in exchanges and dialogues on democracy on the basis of equality and mutual respect, and work together to contribute to the progress of humanity.

II. The alienation and three malaises of democracy in the US

From a historical perspective, the development of democracy in the US was a step forward. The political party system, the representative system, one person one vote, and the separation of powers negated and reformed the feudal autocracy in Europe. The well-known French writer Alexis de Tocqueville recognized this in his book *Democracy in America*. The *Declaration of Independence*, the Bill of Rights, abolitionist movement, civil rights movement and affirmative action were highlights in the advancement of American democracy. The principle of "government of the people, by the people and for the people" articulated by Abraham Lincoln is recognized worldwide.

However, over the years, democracy in the US has become alienated and degenerated, and it has increasingly deviated from the essence of democracy and its original design. Problems like money politics, identity politics, wrangling between political parties, political polarization, social division, racial tension and wealth gap have become more acute. All this has weakened the functioning of democracy in the US.

The US has often used democracy as a pretext to meddle in other countries' internal affairs, causing political chaos and social unrest in these countries, and undermining world peace and stability and social tranquility in other countries. This makes many people in the US and other countries wonder if the US is still a democracy. The world needs to take a closer look at the current state of democracy in the US, and the US itself should also conduct some soul-searching.

1. The system fraught with deep-seated problems

The US calls itself "city upon a hill" and a "beacon of democracy"; and it claims that its political system was designed to defend democracy and freedom at the time of its founding. Yet, the vision of democracy has lost its shine in the US today. The self-styled American democracy is now gravely ill with money politics, elite rule, political polarization and a dysfunctional system.

(1) American-style democracy has become "a game of money politics"

The American-style democracy is a rich men's game based on capital, and is fundamentally different from democracy of the people.

Over a hundred years ago, Republican Senator from Ohio Mark Hanna said of American politics: "There are two things that are important in politics. The first is money, and I can't remember the second." More than one hundred years have passed, and money has not only remained "the currency" in US politics, but also become even more indispensable. For example, the 2020 presidential election and Congressional elections cost some US\$14 billion, two times that of 2016 and three times that of 2008; indeed, they are known as the most expensive elections in American history. The cost of the presidential election reached another record high of US\$6.6 billion, and the Congressional elections cost over US\$7 billion.

The fact that the American people have to face is that money politics has penetrated the entire process of election, legislation and administration. People in fact only have a restricted right to political participation. The inequality in economic status has been turned into inequality in political status. Only people with enough capital can enjoy their democratic rights provided by the Constitution. Money politics have increasingly become an "irremovable tumor" in American society and a mockery of democracy in the US.

A US Senator had a sharp observation, "Congress does not regulate Wall Street. Wall Street regulates Congress." According to statistics, winners of 91% of US Congressional elections are the candidates with greater financial support. Big companies, a small group of rich people, and interest groups are generous with their support and have become the main source of electoral funding. And those so-called representatives of the people, once elected, often serve the interests of their financial backers. They speak for vested interests rather than the ordinary people.

In March 2020, Robert Reich, Professor of Public Policy at University of California, Berkeley and former Secretary of Labor, published a book entitled *The System, Who Rigged It, How We Fix It*. According to him, the American political system has been hijacked by a tiny minority over the past four decades. Political donations are almost seen as "legitimate bribery". They enable the rich to have more political clout. During the 2018 midterm elections, the huge political donations, mostly coming from the top 0.01% ultra-rich of the American population, accounted for over 40% of campaign finance. Money politics and lobby groups are restricting channels for ordinary Americans to speak out, whose voices expressing genuine concerns are overshadowed by a handful of interest groups. The oligarchs would enrich themselves with the power they have got while totally ignoring the interests of ordinary Americans.

On 23 September 2020, in an interview with Harvard Law Today, Harvard Law School Professor Matthew Stephenson said that the US is by no means the world leader in clean government, and certain practices related to lobbying and campaign finance that other countries would consider corrupt are not only permitted but constitutionally protected in the US.

(2) "One person one vote" in name, "rule of the minority elite" in reality

The US is a typical country dominated by an elite class. Political pluralism is only a facade. A small number of elites dominate the political, economic and military affairs. They control the state apparatus and policy-making process, manipulate public opinion, dominate the business community and enjoy all kinds of privileges. Since the 1960s in particular, the Democrats and Republicans have taken turns to exercise power, making the "multiparty system" dead in all but name. For ordinary voters, casting their votes to a third party or an independent candidate is nothing more than wasting the ballot. In effect, they can only choose either the Democratic candidate or the Republican one.

In the context of Democratic-Republican rivalry, the general public's participation in politics is restricted to a very narrow scope. For ordinary voters, they are only called upon to vote and are forgotten once they have cast their ballots. Most people are just "walk-ons" in the theater of election. This makes "government by the people" hardly possible in US political practice.

Noam Chomsky, a political commentator and social activist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, points out that the US is a "really existing capitalist democracy", where there is a positive correlation between people's wealth and their influence on policy-making. For the lower 70% on the wealth/income scale, they have no influence on policy whatsoever. They are effectively disenfranchised.

Ray La Raja, Professor at the University of Massachusetts, notes in an article for *The Atlantic* that America's current system is democratic only in form, not in substance. The nominating process is vulnerable to manipulation by plutocrats, celebrities, media figures and activists. Many presidential primary voters mistakenly back candidates who do not reflect their views.

(3) The checks and balances have resulted in a "vetocracy"

American political scientist Francis Fukuyama points out in his book *Political Order and Political Decay* that there is an entrenched political paralysis in the US. The US political system has far too many checks and balances, raising the cost of collective action and in some cases making it impossible altogether. Fukuyama calls the system a "vetocracy". Since the 1980s, the "vetocracy" of the US has become a formula for gridlock.

The US democratic process is fragmented and lengthy, with a lot of veto points where individual veto players can block action by the whole body. The function of "checks and balances", which was purportedly designed to prevent abuse of power, has been distorted in American political practice. Political

polarization continues to grow as the two parties drift further apart in political agenda and their areas of consensus have reduced significantly. An extreme case is the fact that "the most liberal Republican now remains significantly to the right of the most conservative Democrat". Antagonism and mutual inhibition have become commonplace, "vetocracy" has defined American political culture, and a vindictive "if I can't, you can't either" mentality has grown prevalent.

Politicians in Washington, D.C. are preoccupied with securing their own partisan interests and don't care at all about national development. Vetoing makes one identify more strongly with their peers in the same camp, who may in turn give them greater and quicker support. Consequently the two parties are caught in a vicious circle, addicted to vetoing. Worse still, the government efficacy is inevitably weakened, law and justice trampled upon, development and progress stalled, and social division widened. In the US today, people are increasingly identifying themselves as a Republican or a Democrat instead of as an American. The negative impacts of identity politics and tribal politics have also spilled over into other sectors of American society, further exacerbating "vetocracy".

According to a Pew Research Center report in October 2021 based on a survey of 17 advanced economies (including the US, Germany and the Republic of Korea), the US is more politically divided than the other economies surveyed. Nine in ten US respondents believe there are conflicts between people who support different political parties, and nearly 60% of Americans surveyed think their fellow citizens no longer disagree simply over policies, but also over basic facts.

Jungkun Seo, Professor of Political Science at Kyung Hee University, observes that as political polarization intensifies in the US, the self-cleaning process of American democracy, which aims to drive reform through elections, will no longer be able to function properly. With the Senate trapped in a filibuster, the US Congress no longer serves as a representative body for addressing changes in American society through legislation.

(4) The flawed electoral rules impair fairness and justice

The US presidential election follows the time-honored Electoral College system, where the president and vice president are not elected directly by popular vote, but by the Electoral College consisting of 538 electors. The candidate who achieves a majority of 270 or more electoral votes wins the election.

The flaws of such an electoral system are self-evident. First, as the president-elect may not be the winner of the national popular vote, there is a lack of broader representation. Second, as each state gets to decide its own electoral rules, this may create confusion and disorder. Third, the winner-takes-all system exacerbates inequality among states and between political parties. It leads to a huge waste of votes and discourages voter turnout. Voters in "deep blue" and "deep red" states are often neglected, while swing states become disproportionately more important where both parties seek to woo more supporters.

There have been five presidential elections in US history in which the winners of nationwide popular vote were not elected the president. The most recent case was the 2016 presidential election in which Republican candidate Donald Trump won 62.98 million popular votes or 45.9% of the total, while Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton won 65.85 million or 48% of popular votes. Although Trump lost the popular vote, he won 304 electoral votes while Clinton secured only 227, which gave Trump his presidency.

Another flaw of the electoral system widely acknowledged by the US public is gerrymandering. In 1812, Governor of Massachusetts Elbridge Gerry signed a bill in the interest of his own party, creating in his state an odd-shaped electoral district that was compared to a salamander. Such practice was later called gerrymandering, which refers to an unfair division of electoral districts in favor of a particular party to win as many seats as possible and cement its advantage.

The US conducts a census every ten years. Following the completion of the census, redistricting or the redrawing of electoral district boundaries will take place under the principle of maintaining roughly equal population in every voting district while considering demographic shifts. Under the US Constitution, each state legislature has the power to redistrict. This leaves room for the majority party in state legislatures to manipulate the redrawing of electoral districts. Two principal tactics are often used in gerrymandering. One is "packing", i.e. concentrating the opposition party's voters in a few districts, thus giving up these districts to secure the others. The other is "cracking", i.e. splitting up areas where the opposition party's supporters are concentrated and incorporating them into neighboring districts, thus diluting votes for the opposition party.

On 27 September 2021, the Democratic-governed state of Oregon became the first in the country to complete redistricting. Electoral districts firmly in the hands of the Democratic Party have increased from two to four, and swing districts reduced from two to one. This means that the Democratic Party can control 83% of the state's congressional districts with 57% of voters. On the contrary, the Republican-controlled state of Texas, with new electoral district boundaries determined on 25 October 2021, has seen districts held by Republicans grow from 22 to 24 and swing districts shrink from six to one. The Republican Party now occupies 65% of state House seats with just 52.1% of voters.

According to a YouGov poll in August 2021, just 16% of US adult citizens say they think their states' congressional maps would be drawn fairly, while 44% say they think the maps would be drawn unfairly and another 40% of adults say they are unsure if the maps will be fair. As US politics grows more polarized, both the Republican and Democratic parties are seeking to maximize their own interests, and gerrymandering becomes the best approach.

The superdelegate system of the Democratic Party is also an impediment to fair election. The superdelegates include major Democratic leaders, members of the Democratic National Committee, Democratic members of Congress, and incumbent Democratic governors, and are seated automatically. The superdelegates may support any candidate they choose or follow the will of the Party leadership without giving any consideration to the wishes of the general public.

The late political analyst Mark Plotkin wrote on The Hill that the "Democrats' superdelegate system is unfair and undemocratic", and "the process of eliminating this elitist exercise should immediately begin".

(5) Dysfunctional democracy triggers trust crisis

The American-style democracy is more like a meticulously set up scene in Hollywood movies where a bunch of well-heeled characters publicly pledge commitment to the people, but actually busy themselves with behind-the-scene deals. Political infighting, money politics, and vetocracy make it virtually impossible for quality governance to be delivered as desired by the general public. Americans are increasingly disillusioned with US politics and pessimistic about the American-style democracy.

A Gallup survey in October 2020 shows that only 19% of the Americans surveyed are "very confident" about the presidential election, a record low since the survey was first conducted in 2004.

In November 2020, an online *Wall Street Journal* report argues that the 2020 general election can be seen as the culmination of a two-decade decline in faith in democracy in the US.

According to a poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, only 16% of Americans say democracy is working well or extremely well; 45% think democracy isn't functioning properly, while another 38% say it's working only somewhat well. A Pew Research Center survey finds that just 20% of Americans say they trust the federal government just about always or most of the time.

A Brookings online article in May 2021 indicates that the certification of the 2020 election results by all 50 states still leaves 77% of Republican voters questioning the legitimacy of President Biden's election victory due to allegations of voter fraud. This is the first time such things happen since the 1930s.

A CNN poll in September reveals that 56% of Americans think democracy in the US is under attack; 52% reply they are just a little or not at all confident that elections reflect the will of the people; 51% say it's likely that elected officials in the next few years will overturn the results of an election their party did not win.

A 2021 Pew survey conducted among 16,000 adults in 16 advanced economies and 2,500 adults in the US shows that 57% of international respondents and 72% of Americans believe that democracy in the US has not been a good example for others to follow in recent years.

2. Messy and chaotic practices of democracy

That democracy in the US has gone wrong is reflected not only in its system design and general structure, but also in the way it is put into practice. The US is not a straight A student when it comes to democracy, still less a role model for democracy. The gunshots and farce on Capitol Hill have completely revealed what is underneath the gorgeous appearance of the American-style democracy. The death of Black American George Floyd has laid bare the systemic racism that exists in American society for too long, and spurred a deluge of protests rippling throughout the country and even the whole world.

While the COVID-19 pandemic remains out of control in the US, the issue of mask-wearing and vaccination has triggered further social division and confrontation. Dividends of economic growth are distributed unfairly, and income growth has stalled for most ordinary people for a long period of time. The American-style democracy can hardly uphold public order and ethics, nor advance public well-being to the fullest.

(1) The Capitol riot that shocks the world

On the afternoon of 6 January 2021, thousands of Americans gathered on Capitol Hill, Washington, D.C. and stormed the Capitol building in a bid to stop the joint session of the Congress from certifying the newly-elected president. The incident interrupted the transfer of US presidential power, leaving five dead and over 140 injured. It is the worst act of violence in Washington, D.C. since 1814 when the British troops set fire to the White House, and it is the first time in more than 200 years that the Capitol was invaded. Senate Republican leader described it as a "failed insurrection". A scholar from the US Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) explains that the US is not nearly as unique as many Americans believe, and that the Capitol riot should put an end to the notion of American exceptionalism, of an eternal shining city on a hill.

The assault on the Capitol has undermined the three major bedrocks of the American-style democracy.

First, "democracy" in the US is not democratic as it claims. The refusal of some US politicians to recognize the election results and their supporters' subsequent violent storming of the Capitol building have severely undercut the credibility of democracy in the US.

Second, "freedom" in the US is not free as it claims. Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms suspended the personal accounts of some US politicians, a de facto announcement of their "death on social media". This has bust the myths of "freedom of speech" in the US.

Third, the "rule of law" in the US is not bound by the law as it claims. The totally different attitudes taken by US law enforcement agencies toward the "Black Lives Matter" (BLM) protests and the Capitol riot are yet another reminder of the double standards in the US "rule of law".

The assault on the Capitol sent shock waves throughout the international community. While deploring the violence, many people also expressed disappointment at the US.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson tweeted that what happened in the US Capitol were "disgraceful scenes".

French President Emmanuel Macron said that "in one of the world's oldest democracies ... a universal idea — that of 'one person, one vote' — is undermined."

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa commented that it "shook the foundations" of democracy in the US.

Former Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono tweeted that the political farce in the US offers much food for thought, and that there is no perfect democracy, especially when it comes to its practices.

(2) Entrenched racism

Racism is an indelible blot on democracy in the US. While advocating "all men are created equal", the founding fathers of the US left the institution of slavery untouched in the Constitution of 1789. Today, although racial segregation has been ostensibly abolished in the US, white supremacy is still rife and rampant across the country. Discrimination against Black Americans and other racial minorities remains a systemic phenomenon.

American society has experienced relapses of its malaise of racial discrimination from time to time. On 25 May 2020, George Floyd, a Black American, lost his life in Minnesota because of law enforcement violence by the police. "I can't breathe" — Floyd's desperate plea for life before his death — sparked public outrage. Afterwards, protests and demonstrations erupted in about 100 cities across the 50 states of America, demanding justice for Floyd and protesting against racial discrimination. The demonstrations continued more than 100 days after the incident.

What happened to George Floyd is merely an epitome of the tragic plight of Black Americans over the past centuries. Sandra Shullman, Past President of the American Psychological Association, says that America is in "a racism pandemic". The dream of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. remains unrealized. According to an editorial of The Indian Express, a mainstream newspaper of India, American racism has endured, subverting the country's deepest democratic institutions in the process.

In February 2021, Stanford News, a website of Stanford University, carried an article examining systemic racism in the US. The article suggests that in education, youth of color are more likely to be closely watched; in the criminal justice system, people of color, particularly Black men, are disproportionately targeted; and in the economy and employment, from who moves forward in the hiring process to who receives funding from venture capitalists, Black Americans and other minority groups are discriminated against in the workplace and economy-at-large. A study by the University of Washington finds that around 30,800 people died from police violence between 1980 and 2018 in the US, which is about 17,100 higher than the official figure. It also indicates that African Americans are 3.5 times more likely to be killed by police violence than white Americans.

The anger erupting across America is not just Black anger, but across racial lines. An article published on the website of The Jerusalem Post of Israel notes that American Jews are concerned about right-wing antisemitism and violence driven by white supremacist groups. According to annual surveys conducted by the American Jewish Committee, in 2020, 43% US Jews feel less secure than a year ago, and in 2017, 41% say antisemitism is a serious problem in the US, up from 21% in 2016, 21% in 2015, and 14% in 2013.

The bullying of Americans of Asian descent is increasing in the US. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, there have been growing cases of Asian Americans humiliated or attacked in public places. Statistics from the US Federal Bureau of Investigation indicate that hate crimes against people of Asian descent rose by 76% in the US in 2020. From March 2020 to June 2021, the organization Stop Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Hate received over 9,000 incident reports. A survey of young Asian Americans on the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) website shows that in the past year, a quarter of young Asian Americans became targets of racial bullying, nearly half of the respondents expressed pessimism about their situation, and a quarter of the respondents expressed fear about the situation of themselves and their families.

(3) Tragic mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic

With the best health and medical resources in the world as it claims, the US has been a total mess when it comes to COVID response. It has the world's highest numbers of infections and deaths.

According to figures released by Johns Hopkins University, as of the end of November 2021, confirmed COVID-19 cases in the US had exceeded 48 million, and the number of deaths had surpassed 770,000, both the highest in the world.

On 8 January this year, 300,777 new confirmed cases were reported, a record single-day increase since the COVID-19 outbreak in the US. On 13 January alone, 4,170 Americans died of COVID-19, far exceeding the death toll of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

At the end of November, the average daily increase of confirmed cases in the US had climbed to over 70,000, and daily death toll to over 700.

One in every 500 Americans have died of COVID-19. Up to now, COVID-19 deaths in the US have surpassed its total death toll from the 1919 Influenza Pandemic, and its combined deaths in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Iraq War and the war in Afghanistan.

If the US had taken a science-based response, a lot more lives could have been saved. The pandemic, as epidemiologist and former head of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention William Foege put it, is a "slaughter".

The pandemic has taken a heavy toll on the US economy. The rate and scale of business shutdown and unemployment in the country are beyond imagination, leaving a large number of Americans jobless. People's anxiety and sense of powerlessness has been exacerbated by growing factors of social instability.

The COVID Hardship Watch released by the US Center on Budget and Policy Priorities on 29 July 2021 suggests that while there have been improvements over the situation in December 2020, hardship is widespread for Americans in the first half of 2021. Some 20 million adults live in households that have not got enough to eat, 11.40 million adult renters are behind on rent, facing the risk of being evicted.

As indicated in the statistics released by the US Census Bureau, by 5 July 2021, at least one member in 22% of all households with underage dependents had lost their source of income.

US consumer confidence has dropped substantially, and progress in job market recovery has stalled. Institutions such as Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley and Oxford Economics have significantly revised down growth forecasts for the US economy. At the same time, the pandemic, coupled with three rounds of massive economic stimulus plans, among other factors, has caused port congestion and supply shortages, pushing inflation higher. In October of this year, US CPI surged by 6.2% from a year earlier, marking a year-on-year rise of no less than 5% for six consecutive months, and a record high since 2008.

The root cause of the continued spread of the coronavirus in the US is not a dearth of science, but the refusal to trust and rely on science. For the sake of elections, some politicians have prioritized partisan interests over national interests, politicized pandemic response, and focused on shifting blames on others. The federal and state governments have failed to galvanize a concerted response to the pandemic, and are mired in infighting instead. As a result, pandemic response measures have been severely politicized. The choices with regard to vaccination and mask-wearing have become a bone of contention between the parties and among the people. There appears a growing trend of anti-intellectualism.

A report by the French newspaper *Le Monde* observes that the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the fragility of democracy in the US. The extremely expensive health system, reserved for the rich and leaving the poorest without social security, has made this country, yet one of the most developed in the world, fall behind due to social injustice. This is a typical case of a democratic drift that makes it impossible to effectively manage a crisis.

Stanford News notes that, in the area of public health, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted communities of color and has highlighted the health disparities between Black Americans, whites and other demographic groups.

(4) Widening wealth gap

The US is more polarized than any other Western country in terms of wealth distribution. Its Gini coefficient has increased to 0.48 in 2021, almost the highest in 50 years. As revealed by reports of the Institute for Policy Studies, a US think tank, the combined wealth of US billionaires soared 19-fold between 1990 and 2021, while over this same period, US median wealth only increased 5.37%. The harsh reality in the US is the rich is becoming richer, and the poor poorer.

According to Fed's October 2021 statistics, the middle 60% of US households by income, defined as the "middle class", saw their combined assets drop to 26.6% of national wealth as of June this year, the lowest in three decades, while the first 1% had a 27% share, surpassing the "middle class".

A report by UC Berkeley economist Emmanuel Saez shows that in terms of average annual income, America's top 10% rich earn over nine times as much as the bottom 90%; the wealthiest 1% are about 40 times more than the bottom 90%; and the ultra-wealthy top 0.1% are 196 times of the bottom 90%.

The stimulus policy that the US has introduced in response to COVID-19 has, while pushing up stock markets, further widened the gap between the rich and the poor. The wealth of US billionaires has grown US\$1.763 trillion, or 59.8%, over the 16 months since the COVID outbreak in the US. The wealthiest 10% now own 89% of all US stocks, registering a new historic high.

The wealth polarization in the US is inherent to its own political system and the interests of the capital that its government represents. From the "Occupy Wall Street" movement, to the recent "Harambe stares down Wall Street's Charging Bull", the American people have never stopped condemning the widening wealth gap. Yet, nothing has changed. Those governing the US choose to do nothing about the growing wealth inequality. And the pandemic has further exposed a rule in American society — capital first and the rich first.

(5) "Freedom of speech" in name only

In the US, the media is juxtaposed with the executive, the legislative and the judiciary as the "fourth branch of government" and journalists are considered "uncrowned kings". Though US media organizations claim to be independent from politics and serve freedom and truth, they are actually serving financial interests and party politics.

A few media conglomerates maintain control of the US news media and have morphed into a political force with outside influence.

Under the *Telecommunications Act of 1996*, the federal government is required to relax regulation over the ownership of media outlets. This has led to an unprecedented wave of mergers and a crippling erosion of the diversity and independence of the US media. The drastic reduction in the number of media outlets has enabled a few companies to expand into monopolies.

In the US, a few media conglomerates are now in control of over 90% of media outlets, netting them an annual profit even higher than the gross domestic product (GDP) of some developing countries.

These media behemoths, while eager to make more business footprints, have extended their reach into American politics, attempting to sway political processes through lobbying, public relations campaign or political donations.

The US media monopolies have become "invisible killers" of civil and political rights.

Robert McChesney, a leading US scholar in the studies of political economy of communications and professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, notes in his book *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* that media companies, profit-driven by nature, confine people to the world of entertainment programs, depriving their access to diversified information, distracting their interest in public affairs, diminishing their ability to distinguish between right and

wrong, and muting their voice in the decision-making of social policies. In an American society dominated by media narratives, traditional notions of civic and political involvement have shriveled. Depoliticization has turned democracy into a political game without citizens.

A report in Miami's *New Herald* argues that as the media is controlled by the elite and conglomerates, people are not able to distinguish between facts and political propaganda.

The US media is no longer a "gatekeeper" of democracy. The political wrangling between the Left and Right in the US media has further entrenched the estrangement and division between the two parties and between the elite and the mass public. It has aggravated political polarization in the US, pushing the political Left further left and the Right further right. And it has fueled the spread of extremist ideologies and populism in the US.

According to a study by Sejong Institute, a think tank in the Republic of Korea, over 80% of conservative voters in the US see news reports by mainstream media outlets, such as *New York Times*, as false information and have a biased trust in media. Voters believe in only a few media outlets and would ignore communications at the national level. Levelheaded discussions and consensus-building have been replaced by megaphone politics and negative partisan strife.

The *Digital News Report 2021* issued by the University of Oxford and Reuters Institute indicates that among 92,000 online news consumers surveyed in 46 markets, those in the US have the lowest level of trust in news, a mere 29%.

In the information age when traditional media is on the decline, social media has become a new favorite for the general public. Yet, like traditional media, social media is also under the control of big capital and interest groups. To increase their website traffic, social media sites use algorithms to create "information cocoons", leaving extreme content unchecked and uncontrolled. This drives users toward self-reinforcing their existing views, exacerbates identity politics, and further divides public opinion.

In October 2021, former Facebook employee Frances Haugen leaked tens of thousands of pages of explosive internal documents of Facebook. She disclosed to Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) that Facebook would not hesitate to sacrifice public interests to keep users on its platform and make profits. Facebook has become a main platform for social extremists and is fraught with hate speech, disinformation and misinformation. Action is only taken on 3-5% of hate and about 0.6% of violence and incitement on the platform.

3. Disastrous consequences of US export of its brand of democracy

Without regard to huge differences in the level of economic development and in the historical and cultural backgrounds of countries around the world, the US seeks to impose its own political system and values on other nations. It pushes for what it calls "democratic transition", and instigates "color revolution".

It wantonly interferes in other countries' internal affairs and even subverts their governments, bringing about disastrous consequences for those countries. In other words, the US has attempted to model other countries after its own image and export its brand of democracy. Such attempts are entirely undemocratic and at odds with the core values and tenets of democracy. Without producing the expected chemistry, the American-style democracy has turned out to be a "failed transplant" that plunges many regions and countries into turmoil, conflicts and wars.

(1) The "color revolutions" undermine regional and national stability

The US has a habit of interfering in other countries' internal affairs in the name of "democracy" and seeking regime change to install pro-US governments.

A former senior CIA official once talked about making people "what we want them to be" and "follow our directions", and the possibility of confusing people's minds, changing their values, and making them believe in the new values before they know it.

Former Secretary of State Michael Pompeo openly admitted "I was the CIA director. We lied, we cheated, we stole. We had entire training courses. It reminds you of the glory of the American experiment."

The US has developed a system of strategies and tactics for "peaceful evolution". It would start with "cultural exchanges", economic assistance, and then public opinion shaping to foster an atmosphere for "color revolution". It would exaggerate the mistakes and flaws of incumbent governments to foment public grievances and anti-government sentiments.

In the meantime, it would brainwash local people with American values and make them identify with America's economic model and political system. It would also cultivate pro-US NGOs and provide all-round training to opposition leaders. It would seize the opportunity of major elections or emergencies to overthrow targeted governments through instigating street political activities.

In recent history, the US has pushed for the neo-Monroe Doctrine in Latin America under the pretext of "promoting democracy", incited "color revolution" in Eurasia, and remotely controlled the "Arab Spring" in West Asia and North Africa. These moves have brought chaos and disasters to many countries, gravely undermining world peace, stability and development.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, people have long been under no illusion about "the American-style democracy". Any attempt of the US to promote its self-styled "model of democracy" would be only self-defeating and self-humiliating.

In 1823, the US issued the Monroe Doctrine, declaring "America for the Americans" and advocating "Pan-Americanism".

In the following decades, the US, under the excuse of "spreading democracy", repeatedly carried out political interference, military intervention, and government subversion in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The US pursued a policy of hostility toward socialist Cuba and imposed blockade against the country for nearly 60 years, and subverted the government of Chile under Salvador Allende. These were blatant acts of hegemonism. "My way or no way." That's the US logic.

Since 2003, Eastern Europe and Central Asia have seen the "Rose Revolution" in Georgia, the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine, and the "Tulip Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan. The US State Department openly admitted playing a "central role" in these "regime changes".

In October 2020, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service revealed that the US planned to instigate "color revolution" in Moldova.

The "Arab Spring" that started in 2010 was an earthquake that shook the entire Middle East. The US orchestrated the show behind the scene, and played a key role. *The New York Times* revealed in 2011 that a small core of American government-financed organizations were promoting democracy in "authoritarian" Arab states. A number of the groups and individuals directly involved in the "Arab Spring" revolts received training and financing from US organizations like the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute and Freedom House.

Mustafa Ahmady, an African and international affairs specialist in Ethiopia, contributed an article to Ahram Online entitled "Promised Lands", explaining that it was largely due to Obama's famous statement "Now means now" that furious Egyptian protesters overthrew Mubarak, and that they paid a heavy price as a result of the political change.

Seeing what the US had done, the Arab people have come to realize that the US wants to force a stereotyped model of democracy on them regardless of their own will.

In countries forced to copy and paste American values, there is no sign of true democracy, true freedom, or true human rights. What have been left in these countries are prevailing scenes of persisting chaos, stagnation and humanitarian disasters.

The US export of its values has disrupted the normal development process in the recipient countries, hindered their search for a development path and model befitting their national conditions, brought political, economic and social turmoil, and destroyed, one after another, what used to be other peoples' beautiful homelands. The turmoil, in turn, have given rise to terrorism and other long-term challenges that threaten and jeopardize regional and even global security.

As suggested by the French website *Le Grand Soir*, democracy has long become a weapon of massive destruction for the US to attack countries with different views.

The US applies different standards in assessing democracy of its own and other countries. It praises or belittles others entirely according to its own likes or dislikes. Following the Capitol attack on 6 January 2021, an American politician compared the incident of violence to the 9/11 terror attack, calling it a "shameful assault" on the US Congress, constitution and democracy. It is ironic that in June 2019 the same politician called the violent demonstrations at the Hong Kong Legislative Council building as a "beautiful sight to behold" and commended the rioters for their "courage". What a blatant double standard.

(2) The US imposition of its brand of democracy causes humanitarian tragedies

The US export of its brand of democracy by force has led to humanitarian disasters in many countries. The 20-year US war in Afghanistan has left the country devastated and impoverished. A total of 47,245 Afghan civilians and 66,000 to 69,000 Afghan soldiers and police who had nothing to do with 9/11 attacks were killed in US military operations, and more than 10 million people were displaced. The war destroyed the foundation for Afghanistan's economic development and reduced Afghans to destitution.

In 2003, the US launched military strikes against Iraq for its alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction. The civilian death toll of the Iraq war is between 200,000 and 250,000, including over 16,000 directly killed by the US military. More than a million people lost their homes. Moreover, the US troops seriously violated international humanitarian principles, as evidenced by the frequent incidence of prisoner abuse. Until now the US has not been able to produce any credible proof of Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction.

According to records available, 33,584 civilians were killed in war and conflict in Syria between 2016 and 2019. Among the victims, 3,833 were directly killed in bombings by the US-led coalition and half of them were women and children. The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) reported on 9 November 2018 that the "most accurate air strike in history" launched by US forces on Raqqa alone killed 1,600 Syrian civilians.

In 2018, the US launched airstrikes on Syria again for the purpose of, what they called, preventing the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government. But the "evidence" of the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government turned out to be a fake video footage directed and produced by the White Helmets, an organization funded by intelligence agencies of the US and other countries.

(3) The abuse of sanctions breaches international rules

Unilateral sanction is a "big stick" the US wields in dealing with other countries. Over many years, the US has exercised its financial hegemony and abused its technological clout to carry out frequent, unilateral bullying against other countries.

The US has enacted some draconian laws, such as the *International Emergency Economic Powers Act*, the *Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act*, and the *Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act*, and issued a series of executive orders to target and sanction specific countries,

entities or individuals.

The ambiguous rules contained in these acts and executive orders, such as the "minimum contacts principle" and "doctrine of effects", are in fact a willful expansion of the jurisdiction of US domestic laws.

These acts and executive orders make it possible for the US to abuse its domestic channels for prosecution and exercise "long-arm jurisdiction" over entities and individuals in other countries. The two most prominent examples are the case of French company Alstom and that of Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou.

Statistics show that the Trump administration had imposed over 3,900 sanction measures, which means the US wielded its "big stick" three times a day on average. As of fiscal year 2021, the entities and individuals on US sanction lists topped 9,421, 933% higher compared to the previous fiscal year.

The US unwarranted unilateral sanctions and "long-arm jurisdiction" have gravely undermined the sovereignty and security of other countries, severely impacting their economic development and people's wellbeing. The sanctions and "long-arm jurisdiction" constitute a gross violation of international law and basic norms of international relations.

The US sanctions against other countries have continued unabated into 2021.

The US administration, in collaboration with its European allies, have ramped up containment and suppression against Russia, imposed blanket sanctions allegedly in response to the Navalny incident and alleged Russian cyber attacks and interference in US elections, among others, and launched a diplomatic war by the expulsion of Russian diplomats.

With regard to issues such as the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline project and the digital service tax, the US has not hesitated to sanction even its European allies.

Following the entry into force of the China-US phase one trade agreement, the US has taken further measures to suppress and contain China. It has placed over 940 Chinese entities and individuals on its restricted lists. According to statistics from the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the US Department of the Treasury, as of 19 October 2021, a total of 391 entities and individuals from China (including Hong Kong and Macao) have been sanctioned by the US.

In an article published in the September/October 2021 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Daniel Drezner, Professor at Tufts University and Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, criticizes successive US administrations for using "sanctions as the go-to solution for nearly every foreign policy problem." He notes that sanctions not only are ineffective, but also "exert a humanitarian toll", and that the United States of America has become the "United States of Sanctions".

US unilateral sanctions are a continuous, grave violation of human rights of Americans and other peoples. The worst example is the protracted US blockade against Cuba.

For more than 60 years, in total disregard of the many resolutions of the UN General Assembly, the US has continued its comprehensive blockade against Cuba based on its embargo policies and domestic laws such as the Torricelli Act and the Helms-Burton Act.

The Cuba blockade is the longest and cruelest systemic trade embargo, economic blockade and financial sanctions in modern history. The blockade has been gravely detrimental to Cuba's economic and social development, causing US\$100 billion direct losses to Cuba's economy.

US blockade and sanctions against Iran began in late 1970s. Over the past 40-plus years, US unilateral sanctions have increased in both intensity and frequency. They have gradually evolved into a rigorous sanction regime that covers finance, trade and energy, and are targeted at both entities and individuals. The purpose is to intensify pressure on Iran from all dimensions.

In May 2018, the US government announced its unilateral withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and soon after resumed and expanded sanctions against Iran. Many countries and relevant entities have been forced to give up their cooperation with Iran. A large number of foreign oil enterprises left the country. Iran's manufacturing industry has been unable to keep up normal operations. The country has suffered economic slowdown, coupled with heightened inflation and massive currency depreciation.

The US has imposed sanctions on Belarus, Syria and Zimbabwe, among others, over the years, and ratcheted up "maximum pressure" against the DPRK, Venezuela, etc.

(4) The "beacon of democracy" draws global criticism

The people of the world have a discerning eye. They see very well the flaws and deficiencies of democracy in the US, hypocrisy in exporting US "democratic values", and US acts of bullying and hegemony around the world in the name of democracy.

A Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson once noted that the US is accustomed to posing as the "global beacon of democracy" and urging everyone else to take a humane approach to what they call "peaceful protests", but adopting completely opposite measures at home. She further noted that the US is "not a beacon of democracy", and that the US administration "would do well to, first of all, listen to its own citizens and try to hear them, instead of engaging in witch-hunts in their own country and afterwards talking hypocritically about human rights in other countries". The US is in no position to lecture other countries on human rights and civil liberties, she noted.

In May 2021, Latana, a German polling agency, and the Alliance of Democracies founded by former NATO Secretary General and former Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, released a Democracy Perception Index which is based on a survey of over 50,000 people in 53 countries. The findings reveal that 44% of respondents are concerned that the US may pose a threat to democracy in their country, 50% of Americans surveyed are concerned that the US is an undemocratic country, and 59% of US respondents think that their government acts in the interest of a small group of people.

In June 2021, Brian Klaas, Associate Professor of Politics at University College London, contributed an article to The Washington Post entitled "The world is horrified by the dysfunction of American democracy". The article quotes data from Pew Research Center, which suggest that "America is no longer a 'shining city upon a hill'" and that most US allies see democracy in the US as "a shattered, washed-up has-been", and that 69% of respondents in New Zealand, 65% in Australia, 60% in Canada, 59% in Sweden, 56% in the Netherlands and 53% in the United Kingdom do not think that the US political system works well. More than a quarter of people surveyed in France, Germany, New Zealand, Greece, Belgium and Sweden believe that American democracy has never been a good example to follow.

A report by the polling agency Eupinions indicates that the EU's confidence in the US system has declined, with 52% of respondents believing the US democratic system does not work; 65% and 61% of respondents in France and Germany hold the same view.

In September 2021, Martin Wolf, a renowned British scholar, pointed out in his article "The strange death of American democracy" contributed to The Financial Times that the US political environment has reached an "irreversible" point, and "the transformation of the democratic republic into an autocracy has advanced".

In November 2021, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, a Sweden-based think tank, released The Global State of Democracy listing the US as a "backsliding democracy" for the first time. The Secretary General of the institute said that "the visible deterioration of democracy in the United States" is "seen in the increasing tendency to contest credible election results, the efforts to suppress participation (in elections), and the runaway polarization".

Indian political activist Yogendra Yadav points out that the United States is not "an exemplar of democracy", that the world has realized that the US needs to reflect on its democracy and learn from other democracies.

Mexican magazine *Proceso* comments that behind a seemingly free and democratic facade, the US system of democracy has major flaws.

Sithembile Mbete, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Pretoria, writes in an article published in *Mail and Guardian* that "many of the markers of free and fair elections — a universal voters' roll, centralized election management, uniform rules and regulations — are absent in the American system. Much of what we Africans have been trained to recognize as good electoral conduct has never existed in the US."

Conclusion

America: no longer the beacon on the hill

— *The Times of Israel*

What is now imperative for the US is to get to work in real earnest to ensure its people's democratic rights and improve its system of democracy instead of placing too much emphasis on procedural or formal democracy at the expense of substantive democracy and its outcome.

What is also imperative for the US is to undertake more international responsibilities and provide more public goods to the world instead of always seeking to impose its own brand of democracy on others, use its own values as means to divide the world into different camps, or carry out intervention, subversion and invasion in other countries under the pretext of promoting democracy.

The international community is now faced with pressing challenges of a global scale, from the COVID-19 pandemic, economic slowdown to the climate change crisis. No country can be immune from these risks and challenges. All countries should pull together. This is the best way forward to overcome these adversities.

Any attempt to push for a single or absolute model of democracy, use democracy as an instrument or weapon in international relations, or advocate bloc politics and bloc confrontation will be a breach of the spirit of solidarity and cooperation which is critical in troubled times.

All countries need to rise above differences in systems, reject the mentality of zero-sum game, and pursue genuine multilateralism.

All countries need to uphold peace, development, equity, justice, democracy and freedom, which are common values of humanity.

It is also important that all countries respect each other, work to expand common ground while shelving differences, promote cooperation for mutual benefit, and jointly build a community with a shared future for mankind.

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