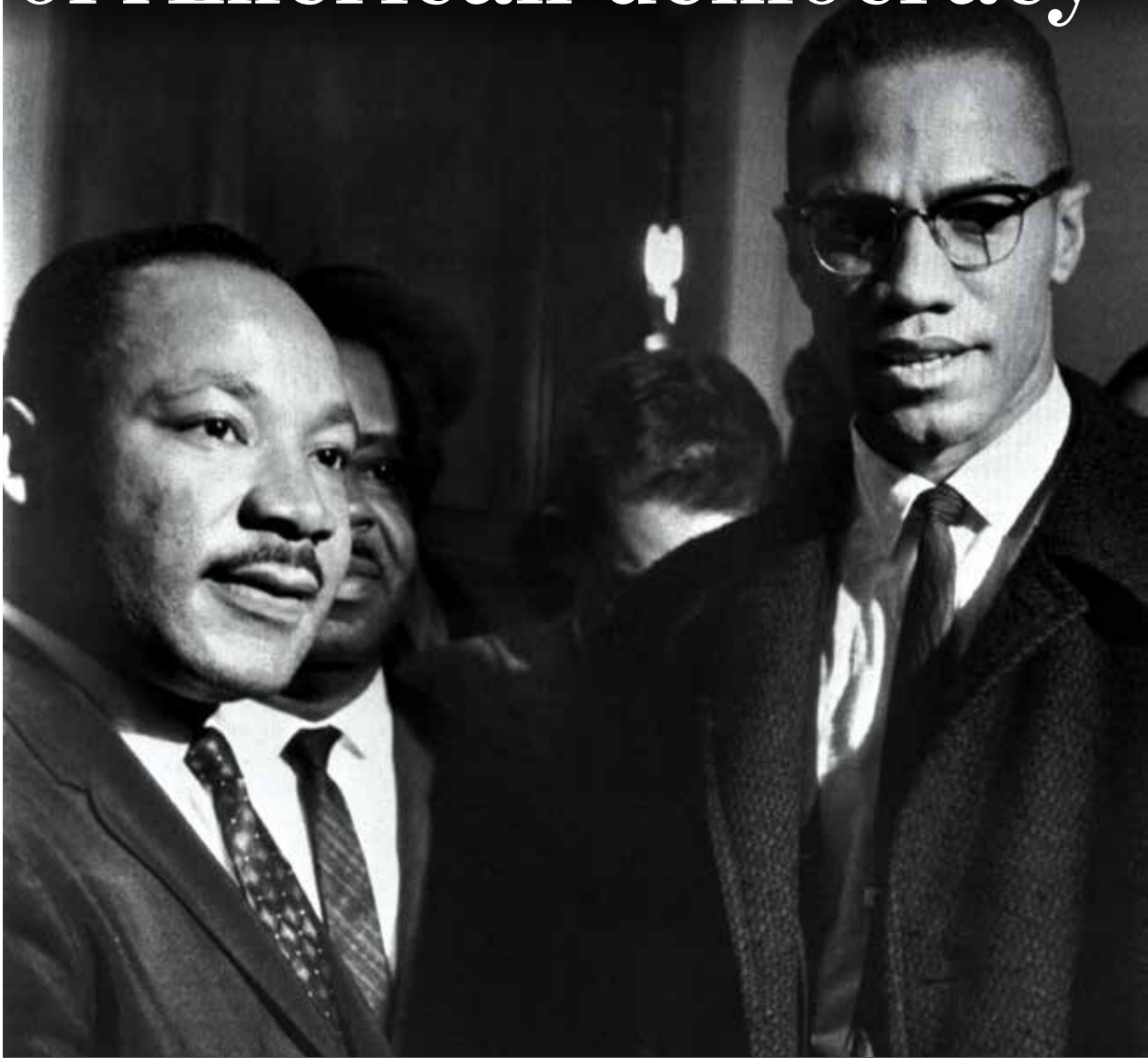


**POST-OBAMA CRISIS IN BLACK**

# The Uncertain Future of American democracy



Rev. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X

Demography does not translate automatically into electoral and political destiny, certainly not in America's constitutionally rigged system.

By Francis A Kornegay, Jr

The United States of America is undergoing a major multi-dimensional conjunctural transition, one affecting the politics of its domestic and foreign relations with global implications. As such, the role and future of Black America as a pivotal nation within the African Diaspora caught up in this transition deserves critical analysis in the wake of the election of 2016.<sup>1</sup> This article was initially drafted in January 2016 and went unpublished. It was motivated by unease about the state of black political consciousness, focus and sense of urgency in relation to mobilising for the election year that was unfolding.

The outcome of the election more than justified unease as it ushered in Donald J Trump as the 45th president of the United States of America in what proved to be a heavily tainted election, unprecedented in US political history. It was accompanied by Republican control of both houses of the US Congress, promising, in turn, continued rightwing control of the Supreme Court.

This article focused on the state of Black America as the election approached, expressing concern that the Black Lives Matter movement, justified though it was due to the police epidemic of murdering unarmed black citizens might, nevertheless, result in distracting attention from electoral task at hand.

In the event, Trump's victory revealed even deeper fault-lines interacting with those of race, class and ideology: the electoral disadvantage of major big city, mega-metropolitan regions of multicultural concentration compared to sparsely populated, mainly rural states, small-town counties and the regions of the Old South and plains states. This disparity between the most and least populated regions of the US in the outcome of the 2016 election was underlined in Trump's Electoral College victory against Hillary Clinton even though, in the popular vote, she received nearly three million more votes

Many factors, on the margin, contributed to Clinton's loss in the Electoral College. This included unprecedented skullduggery and external intervention by the Moscow-Wikileaks alliance (that, at the time

of writing, was also trying for an ultra-right nationalist Marine Le Pen victory in France's presidential election). Though Clinton has been deservedly criticised as a flawed candidate with a very complacently flawed strategy, major responsibility must be shouldered by President Barack Obama and his team as well. They grievously neglected the Democratic Party at all levels throughout Obama's eight years in the White House, even though black voter support for Obama was of unprecedentedly nationalistic magnitude.

Yet failures in voter turnout in the Midwest so-called 'Rustbelt' states (especially Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin), especially amongst black voters constituting the most loyal core of the Democratic Party, proved decisive. Turnout in Philadelphia's

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black wards dropped by 8 percent.<sup>2</sup> There was a 14 percent drop in Detroit along with drops in other industrial centers with large black populations like Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Flint, Michigan.<sup>3</sup> “Taken in totality, it appears that black turnout dropped somewhere between 5 percent and 10 percent – with few exceptions.”<sup>4</sup> No wonder Trump issued this racist taunt: “They didn't come out to vote for Hillary. They didn't come out. And that was a big – so thank you to the African-American community.”<sup>5</sup> (italics added) Again, this at least partially reflects back on Obama. But it implicates African-American political and activist weaknesses more broadly. Obama, inspirational as he was, was not the messiah!

There is now an administration

in the White House likely to actively pursue voter suppression against blacks and Hispanics; this will challenge those unimaginatively contemplating a new civil rights movement in Black Lives Matter as they confront more urgent circumstances: the need for something considerably more progressively political in a nationalistic Black Votes Matter movement interacting with an interracial, multicultural electoral reform movement for constitutional change. In other words: a *Black Votes for Black Lives Matter* movement.

The forgoing is all by way of introducing an updated version of the original concerns raised at the beginning of 2016.

### 2016 in historical perspective: at the 'knife-edge' of dictatorship?

Harold Cruse, in his seminal *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (1967, Morrow) presciently warned that “if the Negro leadership is hampered by deficient conceptualizing of American group reality, then the Negro movement will defeat itself in the long run.” That was in 1967. Today, in 2015, the extent of lost momentum in ‘the Negro movement,’ reflected in understandable but misdirected Black Lives Matter activism, was never so apparent as America's first black-led presidency entered its final year in 2016. As such, the stakes in the 2016 general election could not have been higher in its implications for the African-American future and that of the United States as a whole. This had both to do with the health of American democracy and the credibility of US global leadership during an era of rapid, multi-dimensional change.

These stakes essentially are a function of the polarising and precarious balance of partisan forces between Democrats and Republicans; given the absence of any moderating centre within a GOP internally in disarray, if Democrats as the only existing ‘centrist’ party were not going to prevail at the presidential level in Election '16, the US would be facing deepening ungovernability at home and a discrediting of its global standing abroad under what was effectively going to amount to a right-wing

dictatorship.

The historically unresolved issues of race and regionalism rooted in the nation's founding and in its unresolved post-civil war and aborted Reconstruction legacies are at the heart of the 'knife edge' America found itself on, in 2015 going into the 2016 election. While the election of Barack Obama as America's first black president was widely perceived as heralding the dawn of a new post-racial progressive American future, in fact, it dialectically threw up yet another 'white backlash' after-shock of reaction from the upheavals of the 1960s.

This propelled the Republican Party further away from the bipartisan centre of gravity, making precarious the governing stability of the two-party system. Under Obama, at the federal level of the executive, the US was effectively a one-party dominant state whereas, in a decisive majority of states and GOP-gerrymandered congressional districts, one-party dominance in opposition to Obama prevailed.

Why this partisan divergence (now uniformly one-party at all levels!) in federal-state dominance was so significant can be attributed to what it reflects in the socio-racial and ethnic terms of a continuing 'Union-Confederacy' power-struggle over the role of government in American society and polity: "an outright political war along racial and ethnic lines over the distribution of resources and opportunities" according to the *New York Times* 'economic scene' reporter, Eduardo Porter. According to Porter, "62 percent of white Americans would like government to be smaller and provide fewer services" whereas only 32 percent of blacks and 26 percent of Hispanics back this proposition. Moreover, "racial animosity has long fostered a *unique mistrust of government among white Americans*" which, in turn accounts for an historically minimalist state; in effect, this reflects a nationalising of the southern confederate vision of an America shaped by the original sin of its founding: 'have slave, have free.'

In essence, American democracy has, from its 18th century beginnings, reflected a highly qualified project with

constitutionally embedded obstacles to majority rule and to a concentrating of state power at the centre, a tension ultimately leading to civil war over the issue of abolishing slavery, followed by reassertion of southern regional autonomy on matters of race in the aftermath of a collapsed Reconstruction. In 21st Century America, this intersection between race and regionalism with opposing visions of the role of government and its partisan reflection in the balance of forces between Washington and the states assumes a new dimension; it is one that raised the stakes in the outcome of the 2016 presidential and national elections to historic proportions due to the eroding white electoral base for imposing the confederate version of American federalism.

“This has left all branches of the US government at all levels – local, state and federal – in right-wing Republican hands buttressed by what will become a GOP-dominated Supreme Court!”

The federal-state predicament in partisan polarisation under Obama was a function of what had become a demographically bifurcated electorate: Democrats, ascendant nationally, propelled by a multiracial, multicultural demographic; one that is inclusive of urban and suburban educated whites, youth and women; Republicans, moving further and further to the anti-federalist extreme right prevailing in state elections, propelled by an older, whiter and more reactionary electorate dominating mid-term elections. Reflected here is the comparative advantage Republicans have held since the days of Barry Goldwater in ideologically-motivated voter mobilisation compared to an essentially unmotivated, disengaged and demobilised Democratic base.

But, as the results of 2016 rudely demonstrated, demography is not *automatically* destiny!

Thus, the electoral dynamic between the two parties tends to even out, making national elections far from forgone conclusions in spite of the Democrats' demographic advantage – which is why the 'knife edge' stakes of the 2016 elections had never been higher or more dangerous, given the reactionary extremism of the GOP candidate field during the primaries. *The nightmare outcome in November: a virtual right-wing federal-state, executive-legislative branch Republican dictatorship.* This is what came to pass.

Meanwhile, the 'black leadership,' such as it is (since, de facto, many in the black community assume wrongly that President Obama should have filled that role – and, in fact, out-of-office, will be forced to!), seems devoid of a threat perception posed by this state of affairs even now, post-election 2017 with segregationist Jess Sessions as US Attorney General. What we could be staring at is the 'black hole' of a black political vacuum.

#### **BLM and the protest vs politics conundrum: In search of synthesis**

Into the gap emerged the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest-cum-'civil rights' movement. What would have been more to the political point of 2016 would have been a resuscitated black consciousness movement centered on voter mobilising civic education. This should extend across the entire Democratic Party base, black and nonblack alike. BLM, however, in its essentially apolitical activism (including a separatist faction), threatened further to distract and demobilise what was a virtually nationalistic black voter turnout benefiting Obama in 2008 and 2012 to the possible detriment of his Democratic successor in 2016. Here, research is urgently needed to assess BLM's political impact on voter turnout, especially amongst black millennials.

White liberals, perennially intimidated by any kind of militancy from left or right, threatened to fund BLM, thereby setting themselves up as accomplices in what could turn out to be a disastrous Democratic Party

defeat in 2016 – as came to pass. This has left all branches of the US government at all levels – local, state and federal – in right-wing Republican hands buttressed by what will become a GOP-dominated Supreme Court!

Why then did there seem to be no apparent black leadership and activist sense of urgency to the implications minority voter suppression posed to the outcome of the 2016 election? Bernie Sanders-aligned Minnesota Congressman Keith Ellison of both the Black and Progressive Caucuses could potentially make a major difference about which more will be said later. Otherwise, the answer to the question posed perhaps lies in the difficulty in mounting a long-overdue but admittedly uphill pro-democracy struggle for major structural reform in the nation's electoral system. This would require constitutional change as opposed to mounting yet another black protest movement. Duplicating the southern civil rights movement is essentially a lost cause in today's America.

Black movement leadership in the '60s and '70s was never able to transition from a heavily church-influenced protest mode of political action emphasising 'racial integration' toward a more secular approach to what Harvard Professor Martin Kilson once interpreted as the 'politicization of black ethnicity.' This undomesticated strain emerging out of the Black Power revival of cultural nationalist sentiment held out potential for arriving at an assimilation-nationalist synthesis.

It might have informed a more coherently balanced struggle strategy of black community empowerment within the dynamics of Cruse's 'American group reality' linked to a long-overdue national (rather than 'racial') integrationist reforming of America's political system. But this synthesis never happened; amid assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King (who was alienating much of the white establishment with his anti-Vietnam war campaigning and broadening of 'civil rights' into the class-struggle of a multiracial poor peoples' movement), COINTELPRO (counter-intelligence programme of the FBI) decimation of militant black activism interacting with

Justice Department investigations into leading members of the Congressional Black Caucus, black struggle culture became impoverished into a sterile politics of non-ideological transactional pragmatism.

The upshot: repetitive and unimaginative deliberations on a rehashed 'shopping list' of unthreatening (in power terms) 'worthy causes.' The usual 'equal opportunity' litany: education, housing, minority business enterprise, jobs, youth programs, police-community relations, etc., etc. – all critically important to black individual and community development, social cohesion and security. Yet the entirety of this 'equal opportunity' menu has been detached from any integrative visioning in an up-scaling of political and electoral reform in the American system required to package such an agenda and to equip black America with the capacity to chart a coherent national integration strategy within the wider society and

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polity of the nation as a whole.

Basically, as the 1980s rolled around, black leadership had capitulated under repressive onslaughts by local, state and federal law enforcement and political and economic establishments. This was a situation wherein all black movement tendencies reached a cul-de-sac. On the one hand, racial integrationist civil rights activism came up short in delivering anything in terms of genuine national integration in socio-racial terms beyond ameliorative nominalism in the public sphere. On the other, the dead-end separatist and escapist brand of racial solidarity, in its neo-Garveyite utopianism and unstrategic distancing from non-black allies coupled with indulgence in intra-racial politics of 'blacker than thou' one-upmanship, undermined a workable cultural nationalist complement to interracial cooperation on all fronts in fashioning a credible and coherently progressive movement in American politics.

Between pragmatically unstrategic interracial assimilationism and a totally misconceived separatism (which should never be conflated with nationalism!), a workable black political synthesis for advancing the African-American national interest within a broader progressive American agenda has never threatened to materialise. Indeed, whenever there has been even a hint of such a prospect, the interracial establishment governing the race relations status-quo comes down like a 'ton of bricks' in stamping out any prospect of such an empowering strategic synthesis.

### Obama and the black leadership vacuum

All one has to do is revisit the crumbling of the attempted alliance between the Reverend Ben Chavis and the Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan amid internal contradictions and external anti-nationalist reaction to appreciate challenges facing a nationalist-integrationist black advancement strategy. Couple that with the lack of momentum generated by Farrakhan's historic Million Man March interacting with the futile symbolism of Jesse Jacksonian 'rainbowism' and by the time Obama emerges on the presidential scene, he has no interlocutor to work with in carrying forward a black national agenda within the context (not disconnected from) of his national public policy political imperative which necessarily has had to be race (but not class)-neutral. But isn't it ironic that President Obama's fixation on the internal cohesion of the black community reflected in initiatives like 'My Brother's Keeper' and any number of his oratorical exhortations espousing themes of responsibility have an intra-racial social cohesion resonance of cultural nationalist potential?

Yet there seems no dearth of celebrity intellectuals (Rev Dr Cornel West comes to mind) peddling political analysis who have allowed themselves to become disillusioned with Obama, the inevitably fallible politician, whom they had mistaken as the coming of the black messiah! Somehow, Obama was going to liberate black America – which they had failed to do! – and attend to

America and its national interest as a whole. They are thus disillusioned that he failed to do that – when the joke is on them for allowing themselves to be disillusioned by a politician in the first place!

By the dawn of the 21st century, the residual black political class (those who had not been crippled by one or another form of investigation) and intelligentsia had essentially abdicated any sense of leadership vision and responsibility. This became depressingly apparent during the electoral crisis culminating in the judicial coup ending what could have been a Democratic party follow-up to eight years of the Bill Clinton presidency, possibly forcing Republicans into a centre-right reset instead of the reactionary extremist momentum continuing to grip today's GOP.

Indeed, here is an intriguing 'what if': What if Colin Powell, an Ed Brookes-type 'Rockefeller Republican' had decided to vie for the White House in 2000 and had become the GOP standard bearer instead of George W. Bush? We would see a different Republican party from the extremist cabal we have today. Powell, whether winning against Gore or not, would have split the black vote down the middle, opening the way for a 'rainbow' Republicanism the party struggles to attain today, stuck as it is in a 'Dixiecratic' evangelical Christian nationalist nativism it cannot extricate itself from.

Yet the demise of Al Gore, robbed as he was of the presidency in spite of garnering a popular vote majority, should have resonated as a message to all America, blacks especially, that our two-party electoral house was crumbling into a potential right-wing dictatorship and that something more compelling than another civil rights protest movement was needed to resist such a threat.

From a black perspective, this should have been picked up as a dire warning of things to come. Initially, very briefly, it appeared the message had gotten through. Black leadership competitors, reverends Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson began making noises about the need to reform an Electoral College weighted in favour of small

population southwestern and Rocky Mountain states and those situated in the Deep South and Middle American border regions – essentially the 'Sun Belt' geography that propelled and sustained the Ronald Reagan presidential era. Only recently, beginning with the Election 2000 Bush-Gore stalemate, had it begun to register that a pro-Democratic Party demographic shift was underway; one that would eventually elect America's first black president. But to reiterate: demography does not translate automatically into electoral and political destiny, certainly not in America's constitutionally rigged system.

Only sustained political mobilisation within this emerging but unconsolidated centre-left demographic will offset

“The Supreme Court upheld the establishment of an independent redistricting commission to take the drawing up of district boundaries out of the partisan hands of the state legislature”

the prevailing though shrinking advantages of a right wing in American politics that never demobilises but constitutes an 'empire' continually striking back with a vengeance. It seems that neither Sharpton nor Jesse foresaw or sufficiently understood the stakes introduced into US electoral equations by the Electoral College crisis bequeathing the George W Bush presidency; a regime that went on to decimate the Clintonian budget surplus and produce the multi-dimensional mess that Obama's presidency has been preoccupied with cleaning up both abroad as well as at home amid unremittingly racist GOP resistance.

#### **Nationalising the Confederacy?**

It may not be appreciated how

close, but for the growing unpopularity of the Iraq quagmire, Washington came to descending into a virtual right-wing executive-legislative dictatorship during the tenure of GOP House Majority Leader Tom Delay of Texas. This could happen yet again and with more devastating effect if Democrats fail to retain the White House in 2016 and/or make significant gains in House and especially Senate elections.

On this note, *Financial Times* observer of things American, Edward Luce's caution needs to be taken to heart: "...the advance of liberal America is no longer viewed as inevitable. It may not even be likely. Two-thirds of US state legislatures and governorships are controlled by Republicans as are both chambers of Congress. Depending on the day, the same is true of a majority of the Supreme Court. *All it would take is one upset presidential election for Republicans to assume control of all three branches of federal government.* To say the least, that would put Mr Obama's legacy in jeopardy. *The advance of Republicans under Mr Obama also boosts their ability to redraw district boundaries after the next census in 2020 thus cementing another decade of control.* For all the talk of Mr Trump's people being left behind, this would be their gain."

The incumbent black political class has been complicit in this knife-edge of a polarised partisan predicament threatening right-wing hegemony. They, by and large, over-subscribed to Republican gerrymandering strategies guaranteeing safe black congressional seats at the expense of more partisanly competitive congressional districts. Given predictable Democratic base demobilisation during mid-term elections favouring an older and whiter electorate, the GOP has parleyed gerrymandering at the state level into controlling the majority of state legislatures. This happens under an essentially confederate constitutional dispensation allowing 'state's rights' in controlling state and local elections. The Federal Election Commission has no control over state and local elections. Neither did the black leadership nor the Democratic Party more broadly appear to connect the dots of this predicament to the partisan

dimension of the US Supreme Court in incentivising mobilisation as an imperative.

Given the ideological extremism of the Republican Party generally (the ‘establishment’ as well as the Tea-Party ‘base’, apart from Trump who really has no ideology), an incipient rightwing dictatorship via gerrymandered state and congressional elections backed up by the plutocratic friendly Roberts Court is not something to be dismissed lightly. The agenda: to manipulatively ride on the backs of an insecure white working-middle class into a class-based oligarchic caste regime committed to decimating the safety net on route to installing a deregulated global ‘Casino’ capitalism; one that would disregard national security interest in an internally strong America as a pre-condition to sustaining US global primacy.

This plutocracy, after all, is transnational. It transcends national boundaries and defies anyone’s notion of a so-called ‘patriotic bourgeoisie’! As far as this 1% is concerned, the US and its social and physical infrastructure can go to pot – and obviously black America along with it! Yet, this scenario is not a given in what amounts to a race against time with Democrats holding a putative electoral advantage in presidential politics at national level. It was crucial that the oligarchs capture the White House in order to entrench a rightwing American plutocracy; they must accomplish this before Democrats consolidate favorable electoral demographics sufficiently at state as well as national level to place this goal politically out of reach. And of course they have lots of running room, as Democrats, post-2016, are facing an uphill struggle to reverse Republican gerrymandered hegemony.

The questions as originally raised in January 2016: would Democrats manage to consolidate the Obama Demographic of 2008-2012 into continued Democratic Party control of the White House in 2017 and, hopefully, begin rolling back what amounts to a gerrymandered GOP lock on Congress intertwined with Republican dominance of state-level politics? Would the black political class among Democrats become sufficiently exercised by the magnitude of the

stakes the 2016 outcome held for black America to mobilise a proto-nationalist voter turnout comparable to 2008 and 2012 – and against greater odds given the ‘southernising’ voter suppression advances Republicans had made in several ‘battle ground’ states? As the world turned, these questions were not answered in the affirmative.

These questions remain compelling given widespread observations such as those by Alec MacGillis in *Who Turned My Blue State Red?* that rather than poor whites voting against their interests, they simply don’t vote. This in turn reinforces non-voting among blacks and Hispanics and other pro-Democratic constituencies in off-year, mid-term elections. According to MacGillis these constituencies, based on voting data and surveys have “become profoundly disconnected from the political process.” The success of sustained Republican anti-Washington, anti-federal government propaganda feeds this disconnect. It is rooted in the confederate underpinnings of southern white antebellum thinking that sustained slavery and led to civil war – and, in 2016, served the interest of a 1 percent craving ‘freedom’ from governmental regulation over the economy, including an evisceration of social safety nets in the anti-Obamacare movement.

Coupled with the fact that Democrats seem only to get mobilised during presidential elections and the apparent failure of Obama’s much vaunted ‘ground-game’ to register as a factor in the 2010 and 2014 mid-term disasters, pro-Democratic single-issue advocacy activists are so fickle that if they fail to receive satisfaction on any of their pet issues, they are more likely than not to take it out on the Democrats. These activist constituencies are unwitting allies of rightist hegemony – as BLM could have been. The idea that there is a larger strategic agenda at stake and that the name of the game is shifting ‘balances of forces’ in a progressive electoral direction irrespective of how any given issue is affected seems irrelevant in the left activist-lobby calculus. Then there is the vapid false equivalency reporting and commentaries in mainstream media giving Republican and rightwing

lunacies a free ride in shaping popular perceptions – reinforced by talk radio and other ‘echo chamber’ outlets along with social media.

In the absence of sustained centre-left pro-Democratic media strategy and agitprop initiatives linked to public policies in the interest of the white working class as well as minorities and other Democratic constituencies, the disconnect described by MacGillis is a constant and present danger to the kind of level playing field fundamental to a well-functioning democracy. The Democratic left is devoid of any cohering discipline in the face of this predicament. Something (which may be nothing!) is not working. Democrats tend to avoid educating voters on a mass scale, keeping them informed on issues close to their economic security interests and mobilising them as a constantly engaged constituency – a political ‘standing army’!

#### **Black ‘conjunctural’ moment?**

Meanwhile, the emergence of BLM protest potency, in all its distracting potential, reflected how this disconnect resonated in an African-American community devoid of dynamic political and intellectual leadership; that is, apart from profiling ‘celebrities’ in some quarters enthusing over the emergence of a ‘black digital intelligentsia’ (Rev Dr Michael Eric Dyson) while elevating prophecy as the cultural exemplar of black leadership when black America is sorely in need of a politically conscious public policy elite. Given the foundational role of the ministry in the lives of black people and in shaping the leadership culture of black America in and outside the pulpit, the prophetic certainly cannot be discounted as a driving force in political mobilisation.

But prophecy, disconnected intellectually and operationally from a secular power-politics-policy triad courts failure in advancing the black national interest at a crucial historical conjuncture in America’s future, one that could either propel the black agenda to new heights of fulfillment or usher in a new nadir of marginalisation and isolation as other actors in the American group reality advance their interests.

Hence the ‘Conjunctural Question’: where is the Black Political Imagination at a moment when Republican campaigns of voter suppression mocked the 50th anniversary of a Robert’s Court-eroded Voting Rights Act accompanied by that same Court facilitating the ascendancy of plutocracy via Citizens United which aims to defuse the demographic ascendancy of a progressive coalition of forces in American politics? Answering this question by embarking on a constitutional electoral reform platform would appear to be a precondition to advancing a comprehensive BLM agenda. Without a drastically reformed political landscape at state and local levels, BLM is a lost cause. This would most surely usher in a descent into the powerlessness of despair and marginalisation feeding the disconnect from political processes, making progressive politics an uphill struggle.

Protest without political action is an expression of powerlessness at the grassroots. As such, BLM reflects a ‘bottom-up’ expression of popular ‘enough is enough’ in black communities in need of black leadership ‘top-down’ intervention of convergence linking BLM to a broader constitutional democratisation agenda focused on reforming the electoral system. This is where black America at leadership levels interacting with grassroots community-based action could, for the first time, coordinate a socio-racial ‘nationalist’ agenda linked to a broader interracial coalition for progressive political change via electoral reform, advancing genuine American national (as opposed to ‘racial’) integration as the country transitions into a majority-minority future.

The question: what role for black leadership? It is not as if nothing is happening on the electoral reform front. In fact, much is happening at many a state and local levels throughout the country, including widespread protest over the GOP-dominated Supreme Court’s upholding of Citizens United by defining corporations as ‘persons’ eligible for ‘free speech’ in the unlimited financing of political campaigns: SCOTUS-sanctioned corruption of democracy in America. Amid this nakedly partisan-influenced power-play at the highest

judicial level, the electoral reform landscape is dynamic; *except there appears no sign of major black political engagement and an incorporation of electoral reform at the very top of the black agenda.* This is where BLM could potentially be transformed into a more politically relevant Black Vote Matters (BVM) force for democratising the electoral system, consolidating current reform initiatives into a movement for comprehensive constitutional change.

The electoral reform landscape includes many a promising initiative, some that have been enacted at state levels throughout the country. Most notable in ‘battleground’ Ohio was the winning ballot initiative banning partisan gerrymandering and calling for the establishment of a bipartisan redistricting commission to redraw legislative districts promoting competitive elections. This victory in such a strategically important state goes to the heart of what needs fixing on a national scale in an increasingly undemocratic electoral system propelled by white backlash-driven partisan polarisation benefiting the right. In Arizona, after the Supreme Court upheld the establishment of an independent redistricting commission (since the Robert’s Court leans toward ‘state rights’!) to take the drawing up of district boundaries out of the partisan hands of the state legislature, movement is underway to enact nonpartisan ‘open primary’ voting like that enacted in Nebraska.

Other initiatives include voter-turnout motivational undertakings like ‘mail voting’ making it easier for individuals to vote instead of restricting it. Also included are legal challenges to over-turn Republican ‘voter fraud’ efforts to suppress turnout through eliminating or cutting back ‘early voting,’ requiring voter ID combined with placing polling places out of reach of minority voters.

These efforts are made all the harder since the Robert’s Court gutted the Voting Rights Act (VRA) provision requiring states with a history of voter discrimination from seeking permission for changing voter rules and regulations in their states. The GOP-controlled Congress is unlikely to buy into efforts underway to restore this

provision underlining the confederate fundamentals of elections in America. Thus, democracy for African-Americans is always reversible, not just in the South but nation-wide. The irony that this was actually happening during the 50th anniversary of VRA highlights a major post-civil war concession to southern ‘states rights’ urgently in need of correction: an interventionist *National Independent Elections Commission* that can oversee local, state and national elections in the US as a safeguard against partisan bids at voter suppression as has currently gained momentum in Republican-controlled state legislatures in the aftermath of stripping VRA of its enforcement provisions.

The concept of ‘states rights’ in overseeing elections highlights a recent insight into the extent of the post-civil war reconstruction political victory of the defeated Confederacy. In a *Financial Times* review of *Liberty and Coercion: The Paradox of American Government from the Founding to the Present* by Gary Gerstle, it is observed that: “Despite federal victory in the civil war, the exemptions accorded to individual states were reinstated by the Supreme Court in the 1870s and the 1880s as de jure and de facto racial segregation replaced slavery”, with Gerstle arguing that a century later “were it not for the cold war ... the federal government might have lacked the necessary strength to back civil rights: it ‘gave the central state the confidence to take on the states’.”

Supreme Court decisions ratified the Tilden-Hays Compromise that sealed the fate of W E B Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction*, paving the way for almost a century of southern regional autonomy at the expense of black freedom until the cold war-facilitated civil rights movement of the 1960s. It is this seminal social movement that has inspired reactionary aftershocks of white backlash underpinning the rise of a ‘new confederacy’ in today’s Republican Party – and a reassertion of ‘states rights.’ This prompted Desmond King, in his review of *Liberty and Coercion* to opine how “for all the power the US federal government wields, it is the country’s constituent states that have often had the upper

hand...". The nationalisation of 'states rights' in GOP instigated voter suppression momentum accentuates this imbalance of power; in the process exposing the shallowness of a civil rights movement that never assimilated the structural change implications of a Black Power movement which, now, must be revisited to complete the unfinished business of its promise.

### Voter mobilisation and constitutional reform

If, however, there is to be (as there should) a Black Power reassertion, it cannot be allowed to revert back into the separatist cul-de-sac of black self-marginalisation. It has to form one interactive wing of a larger multiracial coalition of forces for voter mobilisation in the first instance followed up by a constitutional electoral reform movement in the second. This is where the Keith Ellison voter registration initiative in Minneapolis showed much needed promise as a possible focal point for such a protracted democratisation struggle agenda. Congressman Ellison's initiative aimed at expanding Democratic voter turnout by having workers fan out into apartment buildings and low-income urban neighborhoods, which had worked for him in Minneapolis, caught the eye of Democrats while Ellison himself was also on the frontline in mediating grassroots protests where BLM had been flourishing.

That Ellison reflects a convergence in allegiance to both Black and Progressive Caucuses in the House at a time when the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has come under the chairmanship of Hispanic Caucus member, New Mexico Representative Ben Ray Lujan seems propitious. It could and should serve as a harbinger of the strategic concentrating of forces for the magnitude of mobilisation required to roll back the partisan-class dictatorship project that has hijacked the GOP while sustaining a long-term battle for constitutional electoral reform.

Whether or not Ellison can and does emerge into the vacuum that seems apparent in black political leadership at the moment remains to be seen. Were this vacuum to be filled sufficiently by

him (or someone else) to sustain the magnitude of black mobilisation that elected and re-elected Obama, and that might have contributed to eight years of a Hillary Clinton administration, there awaits an extensive electoral reform agenda to concentrate the black political imagination for national as well as black America's benefit. Illustratively:

- First and foremost, consolidate state and local-level initiatives such as those in Ohio, Arizona, Utah, Oregon and elsewhere into a coordinated and mutually reinforcing national campaign for nonpartisan redrawing of districts as the basis for a much broader electoral reform movement for constitutional revision.
- Focus such a national campaign on the convening of a *National Constitutional Convention* to, among other things, nationalise the American federal electoral system under a National Independent

“Democracy for African-Americans is always reversible, not just in the South but nation-wide”

Elections Commission.

- Such a commission should be empowered to oversee congressional redistricting after each census while policing state election administration which, in many states, is prioritising voter suppression.
- A constitutional convention should review ways and means of more effectively aligning the Electoral College with the popular vote in presidential elections – or whether or not it should be abolished altogether, including state-level initiatives already underway for such structural realignment.

Electoral reform urgently needs to redress asymmetries benefiting small and sparsely-populated states and regions at the expense of major urban metropolitan centres where the economic growth impetus of the US economy also resides:

- Review the inequitable basis of Senate representation increasingly disenfranchising major urban-metropolitan regions to the benefit of the smallest and least populated states and communities at the expense of the genuine representivity of American democracy.
- A constitutional convention should consider a new 'home rule' status for major urban-metropolitan regions throughout the US in the interest of urban self-determination against out-state, rural-small town dominance in imposing constraints against the most populous and diverse communities within these states and the country at large.
- If America is to continue retaining federalism with 'confederate characteristics,' such a constitutional convention must mandate an equitable balancing of 'states rights' with 'urban rights' in a manner ensuring fairness between urban big-state and rural small-state interests in a restructured federal system.
- Consideration of urban self-determination should be coupled in such a convention with exploring possibilities for regionalising the electoral and/or federal system overall as a basis for arriving at a more equitable compact as the basis for American democracy; this might take the form of clustering several states into regionally-consolidated constituent autonomous 'republics' with the option of negotiating an expanded US-Canadian North American federation.

### Black and minority politics:

- The formation of independent slates and/or state and local-level third parties within the Democratic coalition (and, if feasible, extending as a black bipartisan tendency within the GOP) to influence public policy priorities and their implementation as part of local, state and national agenda-setting and electing suitable candidates (strategically and pragmatically, irrespective of race). (The Working Families Party of New York is indicative of what is possible.)



- The establishment of a King-Shabazz Tendency among black Democrats (and like-minded black Republicans) commemorating Martin and Malcolm with a reparations policy agenda featuring a public-private funded African-American National Sovereign Wealth and Development Fund.
- The coordination, within the tri-caucus congressional framework, of independent tendencies within the Democratic coalition (and amongst like-minded Republicans) addressing minority policy priorities amongst Hispanics and Asians as well as among blacks.

### Urban Home-Rule: Black & multicultural self-determination

At the end of the day, this is all about strengthening the checks and balances of American federalism in an equitable manner that depoliticises how elections and federal power – local-state-federal – are structured, managed and held at all levels. In the quest for a ‘more perfect union’ that once and for all resolves civil war contradictions while opening the way for a transcending of the socio-biracial divide in guarding against plutocratic class dictatorship, the forgoing might serve as elements for informing a *National Study Commission on Historical Justice and Reconciliation* as a basis for establishing an appropriate national constitutional reform agenda with a targeted mandate. Herein might finally reside the African-American nationalist-assimilation synthesis of self-determination within the radical restructuring of American federalism. At the very least, the outcome of such a process should be the establishment of an equitable co-existence regime benefiting every community’s self-determinative aspirations in a system of democratic cultural pluralism.<sup>6</sup>

### Postscript – and Obama’s atonement?

By now, the upset election of 2016 and its domestic and internationally destabilising outcome has become the rebirth of history that continues to unfold. That the constitutional system of democracy as is generally assumed in the US is under serious threat from a

rightist authoritarian Trump presidency in alliance with similar movements in Europe backed by Vladimir Putin’s rightwing nationalist United Russia regime and Wikileaks anarchism has become widely acknowledged if not fully processed in terms of its implications on the international left.

Even before the November election, it was reported that post-presidency, Barack Obama would join his former attorney general, Eric Holder in launching the National Democratic Redistricting Committee (NDRC) to begin the long, uphill process of rolling back the Republican gerrymandered state legislative regime that anchors GOP control of Congress in a veritable one-party dictatorship. For Obama, this should serve as atonement for his having neglected the health of the Democratic Party during his presidency which cost him control of Congress and truncated his progressive agenda.

Whether or not, in the process, this will contribute to much needed black political leadership renewal will remain to be seen. Closely allied with NDRC and the momentum it needs to generate will be Democratic National Committee renewal.

At the much anticipated election of a new Democratic National Committee chair in Atlanta on the 25th of February, Hispanic former Labor Secretary under Obama, Thomas Perez edged out Sanders-Senator Elizabeth Warren-backed Ellison. The contest was hotly contested along ‘establishment’ (Obama) versus insurgent (Sanders ‘revolution’) lines. However, with Perez choosing Ellison as his deputy, the potential exist for a black-Hispanic led progressive Trump resistance. Given the ‘sunbelt’ demographic ‘reconquista’ of Latinos, looking toward 2020, Perez was a better strategic choice than Ellison.

While Ellison did not prevail in the DNC chairmanship race, conditions still exist for greater black leadership ascendancy at the top of the Democratic Party in tandem with Obama-Holder NDRC momentum – and through Ellison, closer reconciliatory alignment between so-called ‘establishment’ and progressive wings among Democrats. Of course, this is being optimistic given die-hard tendencies among Sanders ‘revolutionaries.’ But Sanders’ weakness

during the primaries is that he was not pulling minorities. Perez as DNC chairman with Ellison as deputy should generate greater Hispanic political momentum within the Democratic Party along with the black leadership momentum Obama and Holder bring to the equation and which they will need to provide via NDRC.

The question these new developments will need to provide answers to is how/if they can:

- Generate a black political renewal dynamic within the Democratic Party, one of veritable nationalist consolidation in interactive tandem with:
- A broad-based re-organising and re-energising of the Democratic Party base across all other constituencies, building on the protest momentum generated by the anti-Trump resistance; and finally
- Begin making headway in rolling back Republican hegemony in the states coupled with launching a protracted electoral and federalist reform and restructuring agenda of constitutional change.

Incorporated into this matrix, in terms of its African-American dimension, will need to be reflection of a new imagination preconditioning Black Lives Matter with Black Votes Matter (BV-LM)! ■

### References:

- <sup>1</sup> This article acknowledges the United Nations the International Decade of People of African Descent
- <sup>2</sup> Nate Cohen, “How the Obama Coalition Crumbled, Leaving an Opening for Trump,” *New York Times*, December 23, 2016.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid. Also: “Clinton lost Michigan by 11,000 votes. Of those, black folks in Michigan who did vote, 92 percent of them voted for Clinton, but 300,000 African-Americans who were eligible to vote didn’t vote; 153,000 black voters in Michigan who came out for Obama in 2008 stayed home in 2016. Clinton lost Pennsylvania by 44,000 votes, and 400,000 African-Americans who were eligible to vote didn’t cast ballots. In Arizona, the margin was 91,000 votes, and 600,000 Latinos who were eligible to vote were not mobilized to the polls.” (“Here’s an Organizing Strategy to Revive the Democratic Party That Doesn’t Depend on White Voters: Many Democrats assume it’s impossible to get more people of color to vote. That’s just not true,” by Steve Phillips, *The Nation*, December 22, 2016.
- <sup>5</sup> Colbert I. King, “Trump’s sad ‘thank you’ to African-Americans,” *Washington Post*, February 3, 2017 and: “Donald Trump’s strategy for minority Americans: Don’t let them vote,” *Washington Post Editorial Board*, October 11, 2016.
- <sup>6</sup> Such a commission has been proposed by *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof and could revisit Larry Sabato’s *A More Perfect Constitution* (Walker & Co., 2007) as its point of departure.
- <sup>7</sup> Jesse Alston, “The Rust Belt Elevated Trump, But Its Electoral Power Is Dwindling,” *FiveThirtyEight*, February 16, 2017.