

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (Crown, 2018), 320.

Steven Levitsky is a Professor of Government and Daniel Ziblatt is the Eaton Professor of the Science of Government at Harvard University. Both of them are political scientists, have been in the field for about fifteen years and are well-reputed scholars. They have conducted in-depth research on authoritarian governments, their trends, democratic breakdowns, and the informal and formal institutions.

The book's main focus is to educate the readers about the defining moment in the history of the United States of America. According to the authors, the US is now standing at the brink of a democratic breakdown. The book, *How Democracies Die*, has nine chapters that discuss the factors that contributed to the derailment of the American political process, with politicians hurling outrageous allegations at each other and the institutions becoming discredited, leading the US to a point where its democratic system is under threat. The authors explain the lessons that history teaches us, by closely studying the collapse of democracies in other states and then pointing out similar pitfalls in America's political life in the past. After highlighting the discrepancies between what had happened and what ought to have happened, it provides us with a roadmap to survive in the three possible scenarios in the face of this looming crisis: post-Trump America where democracy manages to stand up from its knees to on its feet. The second scenario envisaged by the authors is the darkest where Trump continues down this road of democratic derailment and gets elected as president for a second term and the last where Trump might fall but the American nation would be left highly polarized and democracy would once again be in grave danger.

The United States has enjoyed the position of one of the eldest and strongest democracies in the world. It has been an advocate of the rule of law around the globe and has endorsed it time and again. However, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt find no option but to turn

their gaze towards their own country. The election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th president of the United States, in 2016, has further intensified their concerns.

How Democracies Die points out that in the twenty-first century, totalitarian governments seldom take visible coercive actions for rising to power. The means employed to sabotage democracy are masked as Samaritan efforts. "Because there is no single moment... in which the regime obviously 'crosses the line' into dictatorship, nothing may set off society's alarm bells." (p. 4). Therefore, it is imperative to identify potential autocrats before it is too late. For this reason, the writers- taking inspiration from '*The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*' by Juan J. Linz- have come up with four behavioural markers to detect an authoritarian: "1) Rejects in words or actions the democratic rules of the game, 2) denies the legitimacy of opponents, 3) tolerates or encourages violence, 4) indicates a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media." (p. 14).

Any ruler that checks one of these four boxes is a cause for concern; Trump checks them all.

The writers demonstrate how history provides us with clear cut trends that shape the political arena to allow 'demagogues' like Mussolini and Hitler to soar to power. America's own history has been carefully scrutinized to study the triggers of polarization; racial exclusion and partisan politics of the Democrats and the Republicans are the main contributing factors for the polarization of American society, according to the authors.

Perhaps the most important finding of the book is that, for decades, it was not just the constitution but strong democratic norms that took up the role of soft guardrails of democracy. According to the writers, "Two norms stand out as fundamental to a functioning democracy: mutual toleration and institutional forbearance" (p. 68).

Mutual tolerance refers to the acceptance of rivals' legitimate right to coexist, while forbearance is the controlled or limited use of the institutional prerogative available to an individual. The democratic institutions of America have been under attack throughout history, nonetheless, these norms supported by regulatory bodies and the public at large did not allow these values to be severely undermined.

Several solutions have been proposed that can improve the state of American politics by the authors. They expect citizens of America to take on a tremendously heavy yet urgent responsibility of restoration of democratic norms in a way that is "multiracial and genuinely democratic". There is no denial of the enormity of the task but its success could indeed make America great again or in the words of the writers: "America will truly be exceptional".

My initial opinion of the book was that it expands the Democrat narrative, bashing Trump on partisan political grounds and revolving around his everlasting scandals. However, this book is far from a personal attack on Donald Trump. Neither it is a historical account of America and other authoritarian regimes. The writers have carefully studied the behaviour of totalitarian governments in different countries and identified parallels in America's history, that have shaped the political environment that made the rise of likes of Trump possible.

The conclusions drawn by the authors are not just based on historical events. By analysing these events, they concluded that "History doesn't repeat itself. But it rhymes" (p .7). For example, mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance have been termed by the authors as the fundamental norms of democracy, they go on to explain that American presidents and legislative bodies have long worked to write these informal rules, which played a pivotal role in keeping democracy intact. Trump, however, has been a 'serial norm breaker' that has shredded these norms time and again, weakening the American democracy.

It is important to note here that Trump did not trigger or initiate the process of norm corrosion. He has only accelerated it. A major event of norm deviation was observed during Obama's presidency when in 2016, the conservative justice, Antonin Scalia, passed away in his sleep and Obama, despite opposition, appointed Merrick Garland to fill the the position. Subsequently, for the first time in over 150 years, the Senate refused to endorse a president's orders and did not even grant Garland a hearing. The Senate's actions were not illegal neither were they an attempt for a coup. It was simply the desecration of democratic norms that Americans have come to take for granted. This led Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt to conclude that institutions and constitutions can only do so much to contain transgressors.

The book does present a few solutions but they are a little problematic. The authors have acknowledged that reformation of the Republican party and restoration of democratic norms are massive tasks and have outlined some party level steps that can be undertaken but do not delineate specific measures that can set the wheels of reforming the party in motion. Furthermore, practices that saved the Belgian democracy in the 1930s have limited applicability in this day. The current world by comparison is marked by rapid technological advancements and a complete transition of society's dynamics, owing to the evolving nature of work and the recognition of the need for diversity- be it in race and religion or gender fluidity.

How Democracies Die is an interesting read to assess the current status of democracy in the United States. It effectively highlights instances where the US failed to adhere to the democratic norms and how the ephemeral gaol of winning elections took precedence over the bigger goal of perpetuating norms of democracy.

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