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USA

Trumps' first days in power: Is the US heading toward fascism?

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Trump's narrow victory in the popular vote in the November 2024 US presidential elections has given rise to speculation that the US is headed towards authoritarianism and even fascism. While a full discussion and definition of fascism is beyond the scope of this article, and the Trump presidency at this writing is only one week old, a flurry of presidential decrees issued within the first few days give an indication of what can be expected.

As promised and expected most of these -and those to come-are attacks on immigrants, LGBTQI+ people, women, existing environmental protection laws, communities of color, and labor and progressive organizations, while sending messages that the 1% will enjoy tax cuts and face far fewer worker safety and environmental protection regulations. Some seemed to be designed in part to test the limits of his allies fealty and state institutions, like his pardoning and sentence commuting of all of the January 6 insurrectionists, including those convicted of violent attacks against the police officers defending the capitol.

It should be clear that Trump is a right wing, would-be dictator and intends to expand presidential power as far he can. But the blatantly authoritarian, far-right orientation of Trump and his collaborators shouldn't obscure the ways that Trump's government both adheres to and breaks with contemporary capitalist ideology and practice. Indeed, the line between conservative capitalist politics and fascism is not always clear. Trumps' hostility to environmental, labor, and consumer rights protections and guidelines put him squarely within the free-market neo-liberal order.

Indeed, within the first 24 hours of his presidency, Trump cancelled scores of regulations, and inspectors generals, who are responsible for enforcing government regulations were replaced with Trump loyalists. All federal DEI officers were put on leave as a prelude to their positions and jobs being eliminated. Trump withdrew the US from the World Health Organization, and the Paris Climate change accords and sent clear green lights for increased oil exploration. Trump's attack on immigrants and promises to deport them have been a hallmark of his program since his first presidency when he promised to build a wall along the US/Mexican border to deter immigration. It should be remembered that inhumane treatment of refugees has been carried out by right wing and social democratic governments in Europe and elsewhere, and Obama's government deported more immigrants than that of his predecessor, conservative Republican George W. Bush.

At the same time, Trump's loudly proclaimed protectionism and threats to put tariffs of up to 25% on imported goods from Mexico and China, puts him at odds with neo-liberal free trade. The contradiction reflects an aggressive, take-no-prisoners capitalism vis-a-vis allies, long seen by US presidents and the two parties as partners, but now seen as competitors. Protectionism, economic nationalism, and jingoism have always marched together but Trump's vision takes this much further and in ways aimed to remake the international capitalist order to favor the US even more.

This also explains the seeming contradiction between Trump's isolationist bent and his threats to use military force, a new version of Realpolitik. US presidents have long chosen captains of financial and industrial capital as advisors and officials, but Trump has surrounded himself with a large coterie of ultra rich capitalists like Elon Musk, the richest man in the world (who recently addressed Germanys fascist AfD party, declaring it to be Germany "best hope"), Mark Zuckerberg, and Jeff Bezos, three of the richest people in the world, with Musk in an official role. As the owners of Twitter and Facebook, Musk and Zuckerberg control huge swaths of social media and information. Their proximity to the world's most powerful man, with dictatorial tendencies has enormous anti-democratic implications.

A fascist?

Much of Trump's program and first steps in this presidency resembles therefore classic conservative and even liberal governments, though often to the extreme. In what sense, then can they be seen as fascist? Firstly, fascist and far right authoritarian regimes greatly expand the scope of executive power and eradicate checks on that power, turning parliaments into rubber stamps. Likewise, they seek to eliminate legal and political opposition. Among Trump's first moves has been a purge of civil service to ensure that government personnel will be politically committed to Trump's agenda. While there is no sign of Trump moving to ban the opposition Democratic Party, threats to prosecute and jail members of the congressional January 6 committee, all Democrats, could be first step in that direction. Among Biden's last official acts as president was to give likely targets of political persecution preemptive pardons to shield them from Trump's wrath. This is unprecedented in US political history.

Secondly, fascist regimes suspend or sharply curtail civil and political rights including those of free speech, the press, and assembly. If Trump's threats against the press and critical journalists escalate beyond verbal threats, this too would place Trump in the authoritarian/fascist camp. Trump's feud with former Chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, General Mark Miley arose from the former's refusal to use troops against peaceful Black Lives Matter protestors. If Trump were to use violence and mass repression against protestors, he would clearly be making a step towards authoritarianism and fascism.

A colossus with clay feet

Trump, a lumpen capitalist and reality TV star cum 45th president, twice impeached, indicted and convicted, and finally reelected, becoming the undisputed caudillo of the Republican party may seem invincible now. But like all would-be dictators, Trump will turn out to be a colossus with clay feet. His congressional majority is razor thin and while the Republican party leadership has mostly caved in, there are still untamed holdouts that will slow his agenda.

This was seen in the vote to confirm Trump's ultra-reactionary choice for Secretary of the Defense, Pete Hegseth. Three Republicans voted against him resulting in a tie that was only broken in favor of conformation by Vance as the Speaker of the House. While Trump stacked the federal judiciary including the Supreme Court with ultra conservative supports, the court have far from being an across the board rubber stamp. A conservative federal judge appointed by Reagan slapped down Trump's pronunciamiento ending birthright citizenship as blatantly unconstitutional. Many of Trump's most fervent supporters are strongly anti-abortion. But Trump, recognizing how many Republicans are pro-choice, tries to play it both sides by taking credit for overturning Roe v. Wade but refuses to commit to a federal abortion ban, calling instead for the reproductive right be decided at the state level. But Trump can't evade the issue for long and will inevitably encounter the opposition of one side or the other, if not both.

The high price of daily life necessities under Biden was a main reason that Trump won. When the cost of living fails to improve and is aggravated by Trump's tariffs, much of his support among workers and middle class voters will lessen. Alarming numbers of Latino/as and Blacks voted for Trump in 2024. Attacks against DEI and affirmative action, the strengthening of the carceral and repressive apparatus of the state will eventually lay bare those contradictions. When Trump fails to make good on his promises to bring about general prosperity the midterm congressional elections scheduled for November 2026 may well see Trump lose his Republican majority in the Senate and the House of Representatives, which would represent a blow to his ambitions, but also gives him and his advisors incentive to move quickly.

Ultimately, Trumpism, fascism, and the capitalist system that makes Trump possible will only be defeated by the mass mobilization and unity of workers and the oppressed independent of the Democrat and Republican parties.

While the elections seem to reflect despair and division among these, the recent history of mass anti-racist struggle and militant labor struggles seen during the BLM protests in 2020 and impressive labor struggles by auto workers, teachers and others, point the way forward underscore the potential for a united fightback.

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