

In Britain and the US, elections signify democracy. They also mask its decline

By Rafael Behr, *The Guardian*, January 3rd, 2024

This year, countries with a combined population of about 4 billion – half of all the people in the world – will hold elections. That would be cause for celebration if democracy consisted only of the act of voting.

That it doesn't will be proved in March, when Russian citizens will be asked to choose a president, knowing in advance that the winner will be Vladimir Putin. Again.

Tyrants don't manipulate elections to trick their subjects into thinking they have a choice of ruler. They do it to demonstrate the futility of expecting change. It is an assertion of power by demoralisation. The point is to discredit the idea that elections make a difference.

Cultivating contempt for democracy is one of the most powerful propaganda weapons in a despot's arsenal. This is something Donald Trump grasps intuitively, making his participation in this year's White House race exceptionally dangerous.

The foundation of Trump's bid for the presidency is the belief among his supporters that Joe Biden stole the last election and is now using judicial chicanery and deep-state subterfuge to thwart a restoration of the true commander-in-chief. The truth is that Trump was defeated and then tried to obstruct the proper transfer of power by inciting insurrection.

There have been many bitter, polarised US elections before 2024. But none, not even the one that put Trump in the White House the first time, has involved a candidacy so explicitly hostile to continuity of the constitutional republic.

In 2016 it was still possible (albeit naive) to project cartoonish hyperbole on to the ravings of a celebrity demagogue. That delusion is no longer available. When Trump promises to expunge the "radical left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country", it is a safe bet that he intends to follow through. If returned to the White House he would use every executive lever to eliminate restraint on his power. He would requisition the justice system to entrench his position and pursue vendettas against all who crossed him.

If Trump prevails, there will be an army of apologists ready to argue that his subsequent purge of Democrats is nothing worse than what was attempted against him. The "Biden crime family" has corrupted the courts to subvert the people's choice, it will be said. Now they must face justice. This is how tyranny makes itself electable: it is branded as the avenging arm of freedom.

UK politics is reassuringly tepid by comparison. Rishi Sunak will not spend 2024 calling Keir Starmer a gangster and, in the likely event that the Tories lose an election this year, their leader will not pretend to have won.

The availability of regime change via the ballot box is enough to make British politics the envy of dissidents in authoritarian regimes. The ugliness of the next Westminster election will be a democratic beauty pageant next to the grotesquery on display in Russia this spring.

But there is false comfort in comparison with Putin's pastiche polls. More relevant is the abyss into which American democrats stare in horror. It is the vortex where politics has ceased to be a stable competition conducted under a common set of rules, grounded in a mutually recognisable set of facts. It is a breakdown in civic culture and a loss of shared values so thorough that tens of millions of people would gladly elect a tyrant on a platform of spiteful retribution against the existing constitutional order.