**Democracy distorted**

[**Dr. James J. Zogby**](https://nation.com.pk/Reporter/5749)

November 03, 2021

I’m not going to contest the oft-repeated notion that democracy is the best form of government, but I am going to observe that the way democracy is being practiced in the US and Israel is testing its wisdom. In both societies, democracy has been perverted and now amounts to doing whatever it takes to stay in office or whatever is required to keep someone out of office. Lost in all of this are principles and sound policy that serve people’s needs, justice, and security.

Let me begin with a story about US politics that I love to tell: Forty years ago, I was speaking to a member of Congress, who was a good friend, about how disturbed I was by the way his colleagues were voting to give Israel a blank-check support to pursue policies that defied not only international law and human rights law, but stated US policy as well. I was acquainted with a number of these members and knew from conversations with them how deeply troubled they were by Israeli practices. Many of them would say to me “I’m really with you, but you know how it is. I’m running for reelection and can’t risk taking a stand on this issue right now.” (I had heard this same thing enough times that I would joke that there should be an “‘I’m Really With You But...’ Congressional Caucus.”)

[Top military officials to brief lawmakers on national security](https://nation.com.pk/04-Nov-2021/top-military-officials-to-brief-lawmakers-on-national-security)

Bothered by this behavior, I asked my friend, “Where are their principles and their concern for the national interest?” He replied, “Zogby, what you don’t understand is that from the day they are elected, my colleagues’ primary concern and their definition of the national interest become synonymous with their reelection.” While I might have been naïve back then, as the situation has only worsened, I’ve become more wise. Let me be clear about the fact that there are principled members of Congress who will take risks to do what is right for the country. That, however, is not the case for the overwhelming majority. The combination of hyper-partisanship, the massive amounts of money being raised to run for Congress, and the role of “dark money” groups have so polluted the waters that our politics have become a grossly distorted caricature of democracy.

Hyper-partisanship has resulted in a paralysed Congress that can’t pass legislation to save lives from disease or guns, protect the environment, or even ensure the right to vote. Instead of acting to defend the interests of the American public, too many members of Congress decide their votes based on what will harm their opponents, help them raise money, and appease lobbyists who can make massive expenditures either for or against their reelection efforts. All this has been compounded by the continued appeal of former President Donald Trump. Trump’s insistence that he won the 2020 election, but had it fraudulently stolen by Democrats is still believed by two-thirds of Republican voters. This has impacted our democracy in three ways. Too many Republicans are running for office with campaigns designed to win the support of the former president and his “base” by mimicking his effort to discredit any election that he or they don’t win. Republicans are passing laws in states where they control the legislatures and executive branch that will establish partisan control over elections and voting. And Congress has been unable to pass laws to insure an expansion and protection of voter rights.

[Ex-AJK president Masood Khan to be appointed ambassador to US](https://nation.com.pk/04-Nov-2021/ex-ajk-president-masood-khan-to-be-appointed-ambassador-to-us)

In short, American democracy is at risk.

Israel, which likes to call itself the “only democracy in the Middle East” is faring no better. Leave aside, for this discussion, the reality that Israel is an apartheid state in the way it maintains a harsh occupation over five million Palestinians and treats its two million Palestinian citizens as second class and unwelcome. Its functioning makes a mockery of its claim to be democratic state.

It appears that the US has bought into this same logic in the way it has bent over backwards to accommodate Netanyahu’s successor, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. In order to avoid embarrassing him, the Biden administration has refrained from publicly criticising Israeli government plans to build settlements that will dangerously further cut off Palestinian access to Jerusalem. And they have deferred delivery on a campaign promise to open the US Consulate in Jerusalem for the same reason.

And so I end where I began, with the observation that when democracy becomes doing whatever it takes to stay in office or whatever is required to keep someone out of office, what’s lost are principles and sound policy that serve people’s needs, justice, and security.