**[Manchurian candidates](https://www.dawn.com/news/1809430/manchurian-candidates)**

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[THE Manchurian Candidate (1962)](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0056218/" \t "_blank) starring Frank Sinatra, Janet Leigh and Angela Lansbury — of Murder She Wrote fame — was one of the most iconic films of the Cold War era.

Building on anti-communist paranoia, the story centres on Captain Shaw, a scion of a prominent political family, who is captured and brainwashed by communists during the Korean War. Shaw’s mother, the real puppet master, plans to use Shaw to carry out the assassination of the leading candidate in the elections so that communists can get their candidate — Manchurian candidate — to the White House with “…powers that will make martial law seem like anarchy”.

Though there was a remake of the film in 2004, its main message was buried by the sands of time. But, as more than half of the world’s population votes this year, the film’s themes centred on the fraught nature of democracy — political conspiracies, special interest and violence — remain as relevant today as during the height of the Cold War.

2024 is truly the ‘year of democracy’ as more than four billion people — including from Brazil, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, the US and UK comprising eight out of the 10 most populous nations — in over 70 countries will vote in elections. But, where this milestone should be celebrated, democracy appears to be in serious trouble.

For starters, the quality of democracy is plummeting almost everywhere. Most democracies are now suffering from democratic backsliding or a ‘democratic regression’, a term coined by Larry Diamond, a Stanford University professor.

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According to the latest [Democracy Report](https://www.v-dem.net/documents/30/V-dem_democracyreport2023_highres.pdf) by the V-dem Institute, advances made in democracy over the last 35 years have been wiped out and the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen is down to 1986 levels. Specifically, drastic negative changes are taking place in freedom of expression, government censorship of media, government repression of civil society and in the quality of elections — many of which will have no meaningful policy impact.

In order to understand how we got here we are going to have to take a historical detour. Charles Tilly, an American academic, explained that the need to pay for pre-modern war forced state formation; a mechanism largely for extraction — conscription and taxation.

In societies where capitalism was already entrenched, capitalists and merchants entered into a marriage of convenience with the state by enshrining democracy. They did so to protect their economic gains from state predation as democracy offered the best protection by allowing the people a say in the formation of extractive policies.

In unequal societies, however, the marriage of convenience between capitalism and democracy was not a marriage of equals; it remained tilted in favour of capitalism. Thomas Piketty pointed out how in the case of Sweden, money could literally buy political influence, albeit with some restrictions.

But, once capitalism was no longer in the ring against another economic system in the post-Soviet era, capitalist elites, apparently, activated populists — or modern-day Manchurian candidates—for capturing democracy, the very system that had earlier generated protection for them, so as to close the door on redistributive taxation, forever.

At least in the case of the US, the best example of capitalism’s encirclement of democracy is evident in ‘[Citizens United vs Federal Election Commission](https://www.fec.gov/legal-resources/court-cases/citizens-united-v-fec/)’ (2010), a controversial decision from the US supreme court that reversed century-old campaign finance restrictions enabling corporations and other groups to spend unlimited funds on elections.

Where government policies are increasingly being influenced by special interests impacting democracy’s quality, the global economic growth engine is also stalling. According to the World Bank, the global economy is poised for its weakest half-decade growth in 30 years. But, instead of placing capitalism on the chopping block, populists have turned the heat on democracy by claiming that it provides a disproportionate share of the economic pie to immigrants and minorities.

This cat-and-mouse game between capitalism and democracy will be played out in many countries this year. However, none of these elections have the potential to subvert democracy like in the US, where Donald Trump will likely be pitted against President Joe Biden, an unpopular and ageing candidate.

Once back in the White House, analysts argue, Donald Trump may weaponise the US Justice Department to go against political opponents. Civil rights, religious freedom as well as freedom of speech could all come under strain as Trump’s legal supporters are already developing procedural rationales like the unitary executive theory that may assist in bypassing various checks and balances in the US political system.

Given Trump’s protectionist ideas, Trump’s second term could prove disastrous for economic growth, especially if he decides to slap import tariffs on China and Europe. Additionally, if Trump’s foreign policy pronouncements are to be believed, the US could withdraw from Nato, leaving the field open for other hegemons. Indeed, some have likened Trump to a modern-day Manchurian candidate given his apparent paranoia of US intelligence agencies, while exhibiting trust in foreign governments.

In India, where the BJP’s win in the 2024 elections is “almost an inevitability”, Narendra Modi, another populist, has been capitalising on economic insecurities in the run-up to elections. Despite a high economic growth, the Indian economy has failed to create enough jobs — the unemployment rate has exceeded 10 per cent for the first time since the pandemic. Ramachandra Guha, an Indian historian, believes that if left unchallenged, the Modi regime “may come to be remembered … for its dismantling of Indian democracy”.

Democracy is increasingly appearing weak in the age of unbridled capitalism and populism. Will capitalism finally win by delivering a coup de grâce?

The short answer is that all is not lost, at least not yet. Where the relationship between capitalism and democracy has evolved, with the former coming to dominate the latter, capitalism, too, will also face evolutionary pressure to settle on a new equilibrium with people power.

Of course, this idea is based on a hope and a prayer that the voting publics will identify the populists for the Manchurian candidates that they really are.

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