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Trumpism, Immigration and Globalisation

By Arunajeet Kaur

Synopsis

President Donald Trump has intensified a debate about US national identity and American attitude towards migration since taking office a year ago. Trump's first State of Union Address in January continues to reiterate tough curbs on immigration which is unsettling to both Americans and believers of globalisation.

Commentary

THE TRUMP administration quit the December 2017 talks on a proposed United Nations agreement, the Global Compact on Migration, to improve ways of handling global flows of migrants and refugees. Aides of the United States President Donald Trump described their country's continued participation as a 'subversion of American sovereignty'.

Analysts have observed that immigration reform has been a testy issue in the US for more than a century. Trump's White House predecessor Barack Obama admitted during his term in office that '...our immigration system is broken' but he was unable to execute his plans for immigration reform, including the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), that has largely been referred to as 'amnesty' for undocumented immigrants already in the US.

America's U-turn?

Long-standing problems with the US immigration system being 'broken' entail securing borders, addressing visa overstayers, undocumented immigrants and the difficult 'green card' administrative process that has complications in areas of taxation and integration.

In a 2014 poll, 74 percent Americans said they did not want more immigration. This is

a radical U-turn of the American pro-immigration mindset, which buttressed a policy initiated over two centuries ago when George Washington, the first US president asserted, "the bosom of America is open to receive not only the opulent and respectable stranger but the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions".

Trump made immigration restriction one of the centerpieces of his presidential election campaign. His logic has the following strands: unauthorised Mexicans bring crime; border security is important to national security; and admitting refugees from the Middle East could be the 'Trojan Horse' for terrorism into the US. Within his first 100 days in office, Trump issued several executive orders on immigration restriction, to fulfil his election campaign promises.

Raising the Ramparts

The Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements executive order (BSIEE) directed the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to plan for the construction of a wall on the 3,200 kilometre border between Mexico and the US. The DHS is to train state and local police officers to detect unauthorised foreigners. In the first two months of the Trump presidency, arrests of "removable" foreigners from the border numbered 21,400.

The executive order of Protecting the Nation from Terror Attacks by Foreign Nationals (PNTAFN) created controversy as it suspended the entry of nationals from Muslim-majority countries, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Syria, Libya, Somalia and Yemen, halted refugee admissions for 120 days and called for 'extreme vetting' of some foreigners seeking visas to enter the US.

The Buy American and Hire American (BAHA) executive order directed federal agencies and the DHS as well as the Departments of Labour, Justice and State to study existing guest worker programmes and recommend changes to primarily protect the interests of US workers. The BAHA order was to ensure that H1-B visas go to the most skilled or highest paid foreign workers, ending the current practice of selecting those who get H1-B visas by lottery.

Polarisation of Sentiments on Immigration

The year 2018 began with President Trump reiterating his four priority areas concerning migration, namely, border security, chain migration, the visa lottery and the DACA. He made headlines when referring to immigrants from African countries, Haiti and El Salvador in an abusive rant, demanding to know why the US should accept citizens from such countries.

There is a parallel between Trump's victory in the US and the backlash against globalisation. Major global occurrences have led to a rethink on migration and open borders within domestic politics, bilateral and regional relationships and national security policy of states. The post 9/11 era has witnessed a retreat from multiculturalism.

The threat of Islamist terrorism followed by the Arab Spring whereby the wave of

political unrest throughout the Arab world, climaxing in the violence in Syria, has generated large flows of refugees to Western countries.

Economic woes that started with the 2008 global economic crisis had also led many states to tighten immigration control measures and to send surplus and undocumented migrants home. European political leaders seeking to curb migration have become popular in polls. This is true in countries like France, Austria and Germany.

Trumpism in Australia?

Although the initial reaction to Trump's decision to ban the entry of citizens of seven Muslim majority states was met with protest, surveys after the preliminary objections revealed that 55 percent of respondents across ten countries, including those in Europe, agreed that 'all further migration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped'.

Australia's Turnbull government, seemingly encouraged by Trump's attitude towards restrictive immigration, announced in early 2017 that it was cracking down on foreign worker visas and adopting an 'Australians first' approach. Both Turnbull's and Trump's policy decisions stand to appeal to the nationalist wings of their respective political parties and the right-wing constituencies in Australia and the US.

The first-year scorecard on the Trump presidency by various analysts deem him as an impulsive and erratic leader with no clear direction on domestic as well as foreign policy. However, general trends reveal the increasing aversion governments and the xenophobic segments of their citizenry are demonstrating towards open borders.

There are doubts over reintegration in host lands and opportunities for locals first in jobs and a skilled economy. Considering these growing public sentiments towards immigration, Donald Trump can be seen as simply espousing popular sentiments on the ground, no matter how politically incorrect, crass, undiplomatic or even racist his comments may be.

Meanwhile negotiations in the US remain complex for a coordinated response to deal with border controls and provisions of amnesty-like provisions like the DACA. The January 2018 federal government shutdown in the US demonstrates this split in action and motive towards immigration policy in the US.

It would be simplistic to term this current negativity towards immigration simply as xenophobia when actually it is a moment in time that reveals the tensions between nationalists and globalising forces in the form of open migration.

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