

# The Peace Dialogue

Issue No. 09

Hekima Institute of Peace Studies and International Relations (HIPSIR)



## **“Has the United States Gone Mad? Reflections on the Upcoming Elections”**

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The current electoral season in the United States is without a doubt the most bizarre in living memory. Establishment candidates are on the defensive in both major parties. Less than a year ago most observers considered Donald Trump’s candidacy either as a source of entertainment or a bad joke that would fizzle out when the electoral process became serious. However, as his continued momentum in primary elections and caucuses across the country demonstrates, the prospect of Trump as the nominee of the Republican Party has become increasingly possible. Similarly, a year ago, Bernie Sanders was a virtually unknown, self-declared “socialist” Senator from the tiny state of Vermont whom not even his most ardent admirers gave a serious chance of challenging the Democratic machine solidly aligned behind Hillary Clinton. What has happened within the American electorate to lead large parts of it to reject the mainstream leadership of both parties? While their personal styles and ideological stances diverge radically, if you probe more deeply, the Trump and Sanders candidacies are in many ways products of the same structural shifts that have transformed American society in the 2000’s.

### **What are these structural transformations?**

(1) Deepening social and economic inequality, which began in the 1980’s and accelerated rapidly in the 1990’s and 2000’s. In 2007 the top 1% of wage earners accounted for 23.5% of total income, equal to their share in 1928 on the eve of the Great Depression, when inequality was at its peak. The concentration of wealth in the hands of the top 1% is even more extreme, at about 40%. These figures have increased significantly from 12% and 33% twenty-five years ago. At the same time, inflation-adjusted take-home pay has remained stagnant or decreased for all but the highest wage earners. Real wages have declined 12% for men with only a high-school education.<sup>i</sup> Thus, for a large number of working Americans, the ideal of equal opportunity rings hollow and the dream of upward mobility has become increasingly elusive.

(2) Demographic shifts. The U.S Census Bureau predicts that by 2044 the majority of the U.S. population will be non-white (predominantly African-American and Hispanic), and already by 2020 half of the children under 18 will be non-white.<sup>ii</sup> At the same time, education and income levels of African-Americans and Hispanics remain significantly below those of whites.

3) A deepening racial divide. Despite the rhetoric of a “post-racial America” in the wake of the election of Barack Obama, racial tensions have risen considerably over the past year and a half in the wake of a seemingly endless series of police shootings of unarmed black men and boys. While black men constitute 6% of the population, they account for 40% of unarmed men shot by the police.<sup>iii</sup> Angry demonstrations by black youth around the theme of “Black Lives Matter,” charges of deeply rooted “institutional racism” in urban police forces, and riots reminiscent of the 1960’s in several cities where shootings have occurred have laid bare the persistence of sharply contrasting racial perceptions and life experiences that many (particularly white) Americans believed to be a thing of the past.

These developments have produced deep-seated fear and resentment, especially among white lower middle-class and working-class voters, who see themselves losing ground as once well-paying, unionized manufacturing jobs are outsourced to developing countries and what job creation exists is mostly in low-skilled minimum-wage jobs with few fringe benefits and few prospects for advancement. In a series of polls conducted over the past six months, only about 27% of voters on average thought that the country was moving in the right direction.<sup>iv</sup> Donald Trump’s angry anti-establishment rhetoric plays to this mass base of disaffected voters, as does his quest for scapegoats, be they illegal migrants from Mexico and Central America accused of stealing “American” jobs or Muslim refugees undermining American values and serving as a front for potential terrorists. While Bernie Sanders proposes very different policy options, his focus on inequality as the key issue confronting the U.S. and his attacks on Wall Street bankers and free-trade agreements are directed to much the same audience.

These increasingly sharp social, economic, and racial fracture lines are reflected in deepening political polarization and intolerance. The civic virtues in which the United States has always taken such pride are eroding and a “culture of incivility” sowing division and fear is taking their place. Respect for one’s opponent and civilized debate over policy issues has increasingly given way to a no-holds-barred ideological civil war in which the objective is to completely demolish – both personally and politically – one’s rivals. Recent episodes of violent confrontations between supporters and protestors at Trump rallies are one manifestation of the degeneration of the political climate in the United States.

What does this mean for American democracy? Some observers have argued that an extreme concentration of income and wealth is incompatible with meaningful democracy, concluding that the U.S. has been transformed into an oligarchy as a result of the power of big money to dominate the political process, both during and after elections. Others sound the alarm that the exacerbation of racial and ethnic tensions, combined with the demonization of the “other” in the rhetoric on immigrants and refugees, threaten America’s distinctive identity as a nation of immigrants and the vibrancy of its multi-ethnic and multi-religious culture. Finally, at a time when effective leadership bringing Americans together is sorely needed, political institutions have been rendered dysfunctional by partisan polarization that has turned the constitutional doctrines of “separation of powers” and “checks and balances” into recipes for political paralysis.

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<sup>i</sup> Joseph E. Stiglitz, “Of the 1%, By the 1%, For the 1%,” *Vanity Fair* (May 2011).

<sup>ii</sup> Rachel Janik, “Over 50% of Americans Will Be Non-White Within 30 Years,” *Time* (March 3, 2015).

<sup>iii</sup> “A Year of Reckoning: Police Fatally Shoot 1, 000,” *Washington Post* (December 26, 2015).

<sup>iv</sup> “Right Direction or Wrong Track?,” *Rasmussen Reports* (March 14, 2016).

[http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public\\_content/politics/mood\\_of\\_america/right\\_direction\\_or\\_wrong\\_track](http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/mood_of_america/right_direction_or_wrong_track)