

Can an authoritarian government rule the United States?

by Julian Sereno

The world that we live in is changing, seemingly exponentially. Every year has been hotter than the one before, and historic droughts occur around the world. The one in Africa is fueling migrations, instability, wars and famine. Boko Haram and Al Shahab thrive; migrants flee war and poverty and head north for Europe. Thousands drown yearly attempting cross the Mediterranean.

Europe is inundated with migrant/refugees, most famously for those fleeing war in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, also people from Sub-Saharan Africa, east and west. Signs of saturation abound. More than a million came in 2015, and this is just the beginning. The United States is the destination for migrants/refugees fleeing civil lawlessness and violence in Central America. Detention centers sprout up.

Driving this change has been the exploding population of the world. In the last 50 years it has more than doubled from 3.4 billion to 7.2 billion human beings. The United States has grown from 200 million to 320 inhabitants.

This burgeoning population means that calamities are causing human misery on a far greater scale. The tsunami of December 26, 2004 killed a quarter of a million people, as did the Port au Prince, Haiti earthquake of January 10 2010, which injured a similar number and affected 3.5 million. Wars and famine cause correspondingly more misery. In the Congo alone, in a decades long civil war largely unknown in the United States, more than 5 million died, almost entirely civilians.

Those who refuse to acknowledge what a difference an extra 3.5 billion fellow human beings are making on this plant -- from the green house gasses they create to the forests they destroy -- are deluding themselves. Those who believe the

earth cannot be saved as long as there is as a growing human footprint may inadvertently be warming the footsteps last trod by Nazis.

Worrisome political phenomena occur around the globe. Fifty years ago it was assumed that the economic prosperity that the US was experiencing was the result of and inseparable from our freedom, based on our Constitution, with democratically elected governance and personal liberty enshrined in the Bill of Rights. It was confirmed by the explosion of wealth in Western Europe and Japan when they adopted our model after World War II.

Now, China has shown that it is possible to become and remain an economic powerhouse with neither democracy nor individual rights. Government critics are jailed, as are certain unauthorized Christian groups, Tibetan Buddhists and the Falun Gong.

Authoritarianism is spreading. Around the world, democratically-elected leaders have seized power and consolidated it by crushing all opposition, real or imagined. Russia, Turkey, Venezuela, and Bolivia are some examples. Their autocratic leaders surf waves of nationalism, which they churn by preaching and practicing xenophobia. None tolerate criticism. Opposition media are shut down; reporters, editors and political opponents are imprisoned, impoverished and sometimes murdered.

President Trump appears to fit this particular authoritarian mold. His campaign was built around the demonization of unauthorized immigrants from Latin America and refugees from wars in the Muslim world. In fewer than two weeks in office he has banned entry to the US from people on account of their place of birth and their religious beliefs.

He attempts to delegitimize the mainstream press in favor of alt-right bloggers by denying access, regularly ditching the White House press corp. He bypasses the mainstream media by tweeting; his tweets lash out at those who

criticize or mock him. His tweets about businesses are powerful enough to cause stock prices of individual companies to soar and to plummet. He reports falsehoods as fact, and denounces truth as lies.

Don't be surprised as President Trump uses his office to enrich himself and his friends and impoverish and ruin his imagined enemies. Don't be surprised if he proposes and the Republican-ruled Congress rubber stamps libel laws to outlaw criticism of Trump. Then he can sic teams of government lawyers on critics who, win or lose, are compelled to pay their own legal expenses.

Our country faces an existential threat -- whether or not our Constitution, and particularly the first 10 Articles, the Bill of Rights, can survive an onslaught of executive orders and new laws that would abrogate it. Will the rule of law prevail over presidential authoritarianism?

Donald Trump has already doused the flame of the Statue of Liberty. and its welcoming words, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free ..." Don't be surprised if he had his fingers crossed when he swore to uphold the Constitution.

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