

US Mid-Term Elections, 2018 – A people divided

By: Dr. Abdullah Robin*

“People react to fear, not love. They don’t teach that at school, but it’s true” said former US president Richard Nixon, and his words describe the mood of the current US mid-term elections, which, on the 6th of November, will decide which party will control the House of Representatives and the Senate, as well as many state government positions. This mid-term election campaign is characterized by fear, and the reaction to that is deep division, which is cutting the US, and even families, in half.

The son and daughter of a Republican candidate in Missouri are pleading with voters to reject their father: "My dad's a fanatic. He must be stopped ... His ideology is pure hatred. It's totally insane," said the son, and "he's made multiple comments that are racist," said the daughter. In Nevada, twelve relatives of a Republican candidate for state governor have written an article opposing him, in which they said that they "feel compelled to protect our family name from being leveraged and exploited." Another Republican candidate, Paul Gosar, who recently spoke at an anti-Muslim rally in the UK and made wild claims that George Soros was a Nazi collaborator, is opposed by six of his brothers and sisters. They made a television advert condemning their brother, and endorsing his Democrat rival standing for office in Arizona.

At the national level also, people are fearful. After eleven Jewish worshippers at a synagogue in Pittsburgh were massacred by a right-wing gunman, Trump arrived to find protesters chanting: “it’s your fault” and “words matter”. Two years ago Trump came to power on the basis of fear and hate-filled rhetoric, and he is using the same themes to motivate white nationalists to vote Republican in the mid-term elections. He is holding rallies in key states, and warning about the dangers of foreigners: “The radical Democrats want to plunge our country into a nightmare of gridlock, poverty and chaos, you know that. They want to impose socialism on our country, turn us into another Venezuela, throw your borders wide open to deadly drugs and ruthless gangs. ‘Come on in everybody! Come on in!’” he said sarcastically. His supporters love this rhetoric, and he stirs them up to such frenzy that they believe they are at war. At a Trump rally in Wisconsin a reporter from the Guardian interviewed a supporter who boasted that he told his sister: “If there is a civil war in this country and you were on the wrong side, I would have no problem shooting you in the face.” Another Trump supporter sent 14 bombs through the mail in October to prominent Democrats and other opponents of Trump. With such passions, a lot of money is being spent by both sides, and the final cost of the election is expected to be \$5 billion.

Trump has said: “I play to people’s fantasies. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular,” and one of these fantasies is that “Middle Eastern” terrorists are hidden amongst a caravan of several thousand migrants walking through Mexico to the US. The migrants are peaceful, and there is no evidence of any link to terrorism, but Trump has called it an invasion and is sending thousands of soldiers to the border with Mexico. To his followers, Trump is fighting to protect honest white Americans from the lies and conspiracies of sinister forces that are destroying the country and stealing their jobs.

The US system of government incorporates a system of ‘checks and balances’ designed to prevent abuse of power, and hence, two years after the presidential election we have mid-term elections to give an opportunity for changing who controls the Senate and House of Representatives. Currently these are both controlled by the President’s party, but it is considered likely that the House of Representatives will switch to Democrat control after this week’s elections. If that happens, then the Democrats will chase Trump’s taxes and scandals in the hope of impeaching him, as the Republicans did for Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky scandal. The response from white nationalists will be more violence, because they believe that they are part of war to ‘reclaim their country’ and Trump is their only champion. If, however, the Republicans hold on to their majority in both chambers of congress, then this will be a confirmation of Trump’s leadership and he will become bolder than ever before.