

Hurricane Sanders in the Democratic Camp

Written by Monish Tourangbam

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MONISH TOURANGBAM, FEB 16 2016

After the financial crisis and the Occupy Wall Street Movement, there is an overriding sense of anger and frustration in the United States, mainly aimed at big businesses and Washington politics. In this context, one can understand the appeal of Bernie Sanders, who is being seen as the poster boy of the 99 percent against the 1 percent. Bernie Sanders besides many other things, also being labeled as a socialist, seems to evoke a sense of progressivism within the political scene in the United States. The symbolism of Sanders' campaign and the appeal it stirs up has been on every election observer's mind. But is that enough to win him the nomination for the Democratic Party and if he does, is it enough to win him the national elections against the Republican nominee? Maybe; maybe not.

However, there is no denying that Sanders' campaign and the overwhelming support it is getting from young voters has forced pundits to doubt the inevitability of Hillary Clinton's nomination. Indeed, it is also often argued that young voters are the most uncertain lot when it comes to voting and a lot of strategizing is required to register the ones not yet registered, and to excite those registered to come and cast their ballots. Nevertheless, the shaking up of the younger base of democratic supporters and their passionate support for Sanders' left-leaning credentials and rhetoric might be a cause of concern for the Hillary camp. The narrow win in Iowa and the loss in New Hampshire have completely shaken any sense of complacency in the Hillary team; inflicting even the fear of losing further ground among women voters, especially the younger lot. Hillary Clinton, after her New Hampshire loss accepted that she had some work to do, particularly with youngsters. "Now we take this campaign to the entire country....We're going to fight for every vote in every state," she said.

Although Bernie Sanders has been a part of the establishment as the senator from Vermont, his radical positions on income inequality, education, financial reforms, etc. and his expressed distaste for big money in elections has led to him being identified as anti-establishment. Despite being seen as someone who has made socialism mainstream in US election campaigns, he describes himself as a democratic socialist. Democratic socialism, according to him, simply means an economy that works for all, not just the very wealthy; it means reforming the US political system that is "not only grossly unfair but, in many respects, corrupt."

Bernie Sanders' call to drastically revamp the American economy might rattle big businesses and bank bosses, but the political insurgency that Sanders is leading – calling for a more egalitarian United States of America has certainly fired up young voters in the country. The Clinton camp has been focusing on arguments that Sanders' campaign and the promises he has made are too radical and uncompromising – not good signs for a leader of the country. Hillary argued for "a system that kept the passions at bay" and said, "....We've got to get back to the middle, the big centre" contending that this is the way to make progress in America, by going against deep polarization either to the left or the right. Sanders, despite his appeal, has been alleged to be running a campaign high on promises that might hardly see the light of day as legislation, and is being seen as too left of centre to provide effective leadership.

Eminent economist and columnist Paul Krugman clearly jibing at the prospects of a candidate like Bernie Sanders wrote,

"The point is that while idealism is fine and essential — you have to dream of a better world — it's not a virtue unless it goes along with hardheaded realism about the means that might achieve your ends. That's true even when, like F.D.R., you ride a political tidal wave into office. It's even more true for a modern Democrat, who will be lucky if his or

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her party controls even one house of Congress at any point this decade.”

Sanders' proposals including free college tuition and single-payer health care have been attacked as something that cannot be realistically implemented. He has also been particularly exposed as weak on foreign policy and national security issues. However, this might not entirely be an area of much concern for Bernie Sanders. Obama was considered a foreign policy novice compared to both Hillary Clinton during the nomination cycle, and John McCain during the presidential elections. Bernie Sanders, given his long years of service in the US Congress and his exposure to debates on a whole range of foreign policy issues, cannot exactly be termed a freshman in the area. His positions on America's role in the world, in fact, eerily sounds like a *déjà vu* of Obama's 2008 campaign, arguing for military action as the last resort and an emphasis on diplomacy. Besides, election campaigns reflect big pictures and broad contours of foreign policy approaches; not the specifics.

Election season always produces ready stream of Washington critics from the left and the right, and Sanders' anti-establishment patriotism and radical approach to changing American politics no doubt finds takers, particularly among the millennials who are more predisposed to believe in building a more equal and fairer America. Hillary Clinton is still being touted as the favorite to ultimately win the Democratic nomination. However, if the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary made anything clear, it was that a lot of young people seem to lack trust in Hillary, and are excited and passionate about Bernie Sanders. Invoking the “nothing is impossible” millennial generation and their fetish for a simpler, black and white brand of politics has been Sanders' mantra. Everyone loves an underdog story, and Bernie Sanders is clearly the one in this race. He has developed a broad network of small-donors, keeping alive his clarion call to fight big money. It remains to be seen how far it takes the Vermont senator in the nomination cycle.

The firebrand rhetoric that Sanders employs, people fear is something that was seen, though in a more nuanced way, in the 2008 Obama campaign. By 2016, it is clear that the candidate can be quite different from the president, and the two Obama terms have shown that political adroitness and getting things done in Washington require more than just an appealing brand of idealism. Having said that, Clinton and her campaign team have their work cut out for them in the coming days and that is to find a hopeful message to take to the younger voters. Hillary Clinton has behind her long years of public office, most recently being the Secretary of State. When one has been involved in Washington politics in so many ways, directly and indirectly, the past is bound to rub off in ways, both good and bad. Hence, it is high time a message of hope and better futures emerges from the Hillary campaign, if she intends to broaden her base of young supporters. A new report has pointed to how young voters might swing the presidential election in five states, Iowa, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Colorado, proving how important it is for her to win the trust of young voters, were she to win the Democratic nomination.

David Axelrod, President Obama's former campaign manager, argued that Hillary's campaign compared to Sanders' was too much about her and not enough about her message. This could be a weak spot, as according to Axelrod, young people might be interested more in an uplifting theme than a résumé touting her experience, her electability, and her toughness. Hillary is often seen as a hardcore pragmatist as seen in her campaign speeches, emphasizing her ability to produce results and a readiness to make decisions from day one. However, a young senator, Barack Obama in 2008 with less experience in public office, and criticized as lacking foreign policy exposure snatched the democratic nomination from her, deploying messages of hope and change. This time around, a much older senator with long years of public service experience is putting up a serious challenge with a message of radical change and hope for a more egalitarian America. “[A] Lack of idealism is what allowed Obama to beat her, and it's giving Bernie room to grow,” said Dan Payne, a Democratic strategist from Boston and a supporter of Hillary's candidature. As the fight for the nomination rages on from one state to another, animosity might build up between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders. Campaigns usually have a way of becoming nastier, not nicer down the road, as already seen in competing views of what progressivism means in America. The longer the race, the sharper the divide might become within the Democratic party. This should concern the Hillary camp if she were to eventually win the Democratic nomination, and face the crucial task of building a united Democratic base against the Republican candidate in November.

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