

International

After fueling Capitol riot, disinfo stalks US politics

'Stolen election' narrative has survived and flourished online

WASHINGTON: The storming of the US Capitol pushed social media platforms to crack down on those who peddled the "stolen election" claim that drove it, but the narrative has survived and flourished online, in right-wing media and among Republican politicians. Donald Trump's supporters acted on the baseless allegation that widespread vote-rigging robbed him of victory in the 2020 presidential election, with the January 6, 2021 violence ultimately leading Twitter and Facebook to suspend his accounts.

His claims were rejected by election officials and dozens of courts, but polling shows many Americans still believe the "big lie" that he defeated Joe Biden - a falsehood that has damaging consequences far beyond the riot. "These persistent claims pose a threat to the sanctity and trust in our democratic system writ large," said Nina Jankowicz, global fellow at the Wilson Center.

False information about elections is not new - Trump made similar claims in 2016 before he defeated Hillary Clinton - but social media, which thrives on polarization, offers a place for it to spread, and for people who believe it to organize and wreak havoc. Trump - then Twitter's most powerful user - warned his millions of followers of potential cheating before election day in 2020, told them the race was being stolen as ballots were counted, and repeated the accusa-

tion in tweets and in a speech before the tumult at the Capitol.

From online rage to riot

"The January 6 attack was a product of social media," said Emerson Brooking, resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab. "The 'Stop the Steal' movement captured millions of people in an alternative reality and funneled them from mass delusion to hysteria to collective violence against the US Congress." The movement, he said, "became the most important thing in the world for tens of thousands of Americans."

Social media companies have taken steps to halt the spread of false information and conspiracy theories about Biden's victory over Trump. Facebook has removed content mentioning the phrase "stop the steal," and Twitter suspended tens of thousands of accounts linked to the

QAnon conspiracy theory, adherents of which played a prominent role in the unrest one year ago.

The companies have "generally been effective in their ban on election-related falsehoods," Brooking said. But people who believe the election was stolen are still active on both websites, and "election denialism relies more heavily on coded language and closed communities." Trump still has an online presence including a mailing list that has many sub-



WASHINGTON: Workers remove snow from the East Front of the US Capitol on Tuesday, a day after a heavy snowstorm. — AFP

scribers, and has repeatedly released statements saying the election was "rigged."

Echoing Trump, more than 100 Republican lawmakers voted against certifying Biden's win, and members of the party at both the state and national level - eager for political and financial backing - continue to give credence to the former president's unfounded claims. He also has help from prominent

pundits who amplify such messages. "Trump is still generating a lot of noise, not through Twitter or Facebook anymore but through various right-wing media personalities such as Dan Bongino, Bill O'Reilly, and Candace Owens," said Yunkang Yang, a post-doctoral fellow at George Washington University's Institute for Data, Democracy & Politics. —AFP

“ January 6 attack was a product of social media ”

Disinfo potent weapon against powerful women

PARIS: Brigitte Macron, Michelle Obama, Jacinda Ardern are among some of the world's most powerful women who have fallen victim to a growing trend: Disinformation about their sex or sexuality to mock or, worse, humiliate them. For months messages have appeared on social media claiming that Macron is a transgender woman originally named Jean-Michel. The fake news flared up in December, only a few months before presidential elections in April.

New Zealand's prime minister Ardern and former US first lady Obama were also the target of false rumours, in 2018 and 2017, that they were born as men. The rumors spread like wildfire on social media. It doesn't matter that virtually nobody believes that Macron is a transgender woman: the lies open the door to insults, scorn and even cyber harassment.

While this "gendered disinformation" is particularly visible in repeated attacks on powerful women, in also affects women in general, and sexual or gender minorities with differing levels of responsibility in public life. Disinformation targeting them is aimed squarely at sidelining women. Rumors started as disinformation have "an impact in the real world", said Marylie Breuil, a member of the feminist collective Nous Toutes (All of us Women).

Democratic erosion

"Someone who talks openly can have their career totally trashed, including by online and often offline cyber-harassment". In Iraq, Intidhar Ahmed Jassim was forced to stand down as a candidate in parliamentary elections in early 2018 after being hounded online over claims that she had been recognized in a sex tape. In 2013, former Italian parliament speaker Laura Boldrini was bombarded with sexist insults, rape threats and pornographic montages, following a rumor that she had danced on television in her underwear.

"There is a further gender dimension there of basically silencing women and eliminating women from the political sphere," said Lucina Di Meco, a gender equality expert and co-founder of #ShePersisted, a global initiative fighting this disinformation. The United Nations has voiced alarm, condemning in April "sexist online disinformation campaigns which are increasing" and which target particularly "female journalists, female politicians, and defenders of gender equality who voice their opinion on feminist issues".

"All women and other minorities know before they speak in the media that they are potentially exposing themselves at any moment to a surprise violent reaction," said Jill-Maud Royer, joint head of the LGBTQ group of French political movement La France Insoumise. By preventing or discouraging women from participating in public life, gendered disinformation contributes to the "erosion of democratic institutions", said Di Meco, of #ShePersisted.

With Macron, trans identity is used as a "vehicle" to damage the reputation of her husband French President Emmanuel Macron, said Maud-Yeuse Thomas, an anthropologist and co-founder of the Observatoire des Transidentités (Observatory of trans identities). Fuelling rumours about someone's trans identity or supposed homosexuality increases the stigmatisation of LGBTQ people. — AFP

Backlash after Macron warns unvaccinated

PARIS: President Emmanuel Macron yesterday faced anger from opponents and chaos in parliament after warning French people not yet vaccinated against COVID-19 that they would be squeezed out of key aspects of life. Macron, who has not yet formally declared his candidacy for re-election in April, came under fire from challengers already in the race, accusing him of overstepping the line with his remarks.

The uproar prompted a new delay to legislation aimed at tightening France's COVID rules at a time when the country is facing record daily infection rates fueled by the Omicron strain of the virus. "As for the non-vaccinated, I really want to piss them off," he told Le Parisien newspaper in an interview, using the French verb "emmerder". Derived from the word "merde" which means "sh*t", the word is considered vulgar slang in France.

This would mean "limiting as much as possible their access to activities in social life," he added. "We have to tell (the unvaccinated)... you will no longer be able to go to the restaurant. You will no longer be able to go for a coffee, you will no longer

Pique in parliament

The rate surged over the summer after the introduction of a "health pass" which restricted many activities to those with proof of vaccination, a recent negative test or recovery from coronavirus infection. But that still leaves millions of people not covered as the Omicron wave breaks over the country. In response, Macron's government plans to make vaccination the only way to maintain access to much of public life with a so-called "vaccine pass" introduced from Jan 15.

Parliamentary debate over the tightening was already acrimonious, with the opposition forcing a delay in debate over the draft law late Monday. Macron's comments quickly derailed action in the chamber after it resumed late Tuesday, again suspending examination of the bill and jeopardizing the government's timetable for it to come into force - although ministers insist that is still their aim.

The party chief of the right-wing Republicans (LR) Christian Jacob said the group "refused to endorse a text which aims to piss off the French". The controversy has erupted amid an increasingly



Emmanuel Macron

febrile pre-election atmosphere in France. Macron said in the interview he wants to stand for a second term in April's presidential vote but that declaring his intentions now would distract from managing the health crisis.

Macron's warning prompted backlash from all his prospective opponents in the April election which he is favourite, but far from certain, to win. "It's not up to the president of the Republic to pick out good and bad French people," Republicans candidate Valerie Pécresse, seen by many as Macron's most credible challenger, told broadcaster CNews. She called for a government "that unites people and calms things down". — AFP

Canada agrees \$31bn compensation for indigenous kids

OTTAWA: Canada announced a \$31.5 billion agreement on Tuesday to reform its discriminatory child welfare system and compensate indigenous families who suffered because of it, in what an official called the country's largest settlement. The agreements-in-principle include \$20 billion Canadian dollars (\$15.7) for First Nations children who were removed from their families and caregivers and put into state care, typically schools meant to forcibly assimilate them.

The other \$20 billion Canadian dollars will be earmarked for reforming the child and family services system over the next five years. "No compensation amount can make up for the trauma people

have experienced," said Patty Hajdu, the Minister of Indigenous Services. "But these Agreements-in-Principle acknowledge to survivors and their families the harm and pain caused by the discrimination in funding and services."

The deal, which stemmed from lawsuits brought by First Nations families against the Canadian government, acknowledges that "discriminatory underfunding" of child and family services in indigenous communities had inflicted suffering on those involved. Despite making up less than eight percent of children under 14, indigenous children account for more than half of those in Canada's foster care, according to a 2016 census.

Over the past three decades, at least 150,000 indigenous children were ripped from their homes and placed into one of 139 residential schools. Thousands died, mostly from malnutrition, disease or neglect, in what a truth and reconciliation committee called "cultural genocide" in a 2015 report. Many others were physically or sexually abused. On the heels of the discovery of more than 1,200

unmarked graves at these schools, Canada is starting to come to terms with the nationwide trauma.

Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister Marc Miller called Tuesday's agreement "the largest settlement in Canadian history" at a videoed news conference. The amount to be paid to each individual, as well as how and when, will be determined later in consultation with experts and the country's largest indigenous organization, the Assembly of First Nations, according to lawyers representing complainants in two class action cases.

"This settlement is historic and hopefully a turning point in this country's work on reconciliation," Robert Kugler, one of the lawyers, said in a statement. The amount, he added, "underscores the severity of the harm suffered, and will provide financial support to enable victims to better their lives going forward." The Canadian government has previously fought orders to compensate Indigenous families over systems it has admitted were discriminatory, including in an appeal filed last year seeking to overturn a landmark decision awarding billions to indigenous children. — AFP

Guaido digs in as 'acting president' without power

CARACAS: Opposition leader Juan Guaido officially began a new year as Venezuela's "acting president" on Tuesday after his position was renewed by a defunct parliament that continues to sit despite having no home. Guaido may retain the backing of around 60 countries but in reality, true executive and legislative power rests in the hands of his arch enemy, President Nicolas Maduro, who is supported by the nation's powerful military.

The parliament said Guaido would assume the responsibility of "defending democracy and directing the protection of state assets abroad," in a meeting that was as virtual as Guaido's power. What Guaido does have, though, thanks to backing from Washington, is control of millions of dollars worth of Venezuelan assets held outside the country, much to Maduro's chagrin.

"Today the constitution won, today Nicolas Maduro lost," said Guaido late on Monday night after the opposition-majority congress that assumed office

from 2015 to 2021 ratified his continuation as the country's acting president. In Jan 2019, Guaido used his position as parliament speaker to proclaim himself acting president after the opposition-controlled National Assembly declared Maduro a usurper.

Like much of the international community, the assembly did not recognize Maduro's 2018 re-election in a poll widely branded fraudulent. The terms of the National Assembly members ended in January 2021 amid an opposition boycott of legislative elections, but the old legislature continues to sit. "I say it clearly, the one who has an expiry date ... is him," Guaido, 38, said last week.

Maduro, though, was buoyed by a crushing victory in mayoral and gubernatorial elections in November, as a disunited opposition broke three years of boycotts. Guaido "is lost in the solitude of his own failure ... it's a type of Frankenstein policy that has failed," said Maduro. "Imperialism (the US) thought it owned Venezuela and that they could install a president in a colonial style."

Washington support crucial

Guaido's influence has waned since his dramatic proclamation almost three years ago, and his popularity has plummeted. While the European Union officially recognizes his interim presidency, it has nonetheless opened channels behind the scenes with



Juan Guaido

Maduro. Pragmatism is necessary, a diplomatic source said, since Guaido's claim has run out of steam. Guaido's importance, though, is almost entirely dependent on support from Washington, political scientist Pablo Quintero says.

Even with a change of administration in the White House, that has not weakened. Donald Trump ramped up pressure on the "dictator" Maduro through sanctions and while President Joe Biden has been less vocal on the matter, he has not altered Washington's position with regard to Guaido. "It is not nothing that the United States supports a government, even an imaginary one without real power," said Quintero. — AFP