Brexit, the great British disaster: Next few days crucial for both UK and EU

By Vishavjeet Chaudhary

On June 23, 2016, the UK held a historic referendum. With a thin margin, the ‘Brexit’ camp that wanted to leave the EU won. This was an unexpected result and took even the most seasoned political pundits by surprise. The campaign was a fiercely fought one. Those who wanted to ‘leave’ raised issues of the UK’s eroding sovereignty and how, as a member state, she was getting a raw deal. Additional thorny issues of jobs being taken by foreigners were raised. In retrospect, many of the claims made by the campaigners to leave the EU have turned out to be blatant lies. For instance, the data relied on upon by the ‘leave’ campaign in terms of the National Health Service gaining additional millions of pounds per week was not supported by any credible research. Further, in a speech made by the current PM in 2014, she had claimed that an illegal immigrant could not be deported because of his ‘pet cat’. This was again a fabricated claim to discredit the Human Rights Act of 1998 (which incorporates the European Convention on Human Rights into the UK law).

The aftermath of Brexit has been equally messy. The first political casualty was the then PM David Cameron. Rather ironically, he was the one who had suggested a referendum in 2013 as part of his election campaign! This was followed by a premature general election where the governing Conservative party remained the single largest but lost majority in 2017. Many politicians who were at the forefront of the ‘leave’ campaign have gone into oblivion. Boris Johnson, for example. Political turmoil, though, is far from over. Last month, the Parliament rejected a deal that the PM had negotiated with the EU. The very next day, she faced a no-confidence vote, which she survived. The deal, nonetheless, is far from settled. What perhaps complicates the situation further are calls for a second referendum; the argument being the first one was wrought with lies, deceit and misinformation—the second one
needs to be clearer. This is an undesirable situation for any democracy—the people have spoken and their will, according to most, should be respected.

An analysis of the Brexit vote presents a curious result. In London, the ‘remain’ campaign had a clear majority. This was reversed in the Midlands. Scotland also voted to remain. Data suggests that among people aged 18-24, more than 70% voted to stay. In fact, a majority voters younger than 44 voted to stay, and a majority of above 44 voted to leave. This glaring national discrepancy shows the country’s mood—irrevocably divided by region and age.

The UK’s future, in the short as well as in the long run, is disturbingly uncertain. It is unclear what Brexit will mean for free movement between the EU, free trade and economic ties. London’s strongest industries—finance and related services—are also under pressure. HSBC has moved substantial operations to across the channel in France. Many others are expected to follow. The role of EU Directives and Regulations is unclear. Will the Human Rights Act be scrapped? When the Act came into force, the then government had famously described it as ‘Bringing Rights Home.’ The status of these rights at home is now uncertain. Negotiations to leave have reopened—and only time will tell what deal is agreeable to both the EU and the UK.

In a deeply divided world, post the wars, the EU was seen as a hopeful alignment of nations to further economic, strategic and political alliance in the 1960s. The core values of the EU were ‘to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its citizens’ and ‘to offer freedom, security and justice without internal borders’. The 1970s saw the downfall of the last dictatorship in Europe and ushered in a new form of politics. The margin of appreciation. The 1980s culminated with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 1990s saw frontiers being brought down in the EU. The past two decades have been challenging amidst economic hardships and new threats the developed world faces. Brexit has triggered demands for similar referendums in other European countries as well.
The coming few days for the UK and the EU are extremely crucial. Divisive, populist moves are threatening the fabric of the society. The EU, which at one point was one the strongest alignment of nations, is bearing the brunt. The deal is a testing time and will have an impact on the EU. For countries like India, Brexit means better ties with the UK. Whilst it isolates the UK from the EU, it simultaneously opens it up for business to the rest of the world, including Africa. As things stand, though, it can only be described as a ‘great British disaster’.

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