

Divisions in America

by Dr. Abdullah Robin

The US Congress suffered a historic paralysis for 4 days as Republicans fought amongst themselves and failed 14 times to elect a speaker who would lead them in the House of Representatives. The last time that there were so many failed attempts to agree upon a speaker was in 1860 during the turbulent period of division that led to the US Civil War. Some US historians have even warned the White House that “the U.S. is facing a crisis similar to the tensions before the Civil War.” Now, while the Representatives were arguing, the second anniversary of the January 6th insurrection event passed, and some members reminded the others of how an angry crowd of Trump supporters was then banging at the doors behind them hunting for the previous Democrat speaker of the House, who they accused of stealing the election from Trump. Republicans have been powerless since Biden came to power as both chambers of Congress were supporting him. But, two months ago, the mid-term elections gave the Republican Party control of the House of Representatives by a narrow majority, 222 seats for them versus 213 for the Democrats. With this victory, Republicans hoped that for the first time since Trump’s defeat, they would be able to call the Biden administration to account and curb its power over the next 2 years. However, in order to achieve this, they first had to elect a speaker who functions as the leader of the House of Representatives, but their party was divided within itself.

It should have been easy, but it wasn’t. At one point, as fatigue increased and tensions rose, a member of the House of Representatives even had to be held-back from a violent confrontation with Matt Gaetz who was leading the faction blocking the election of fellow Republican Kevin McCarthy. Eventually, on the 15th attempt, in the early hours of Saturday, the 7th of January, most of the dissenting Republicans joined their fellows in voting for McCarthy and he was duly elected ‘Speaker’ of the House of Representatives, but 6 Republicans still refused to vote for him. What do the dissenters want and what will change now with the election of Kevin McCarthy as speaker for the House of Representatives?

Twenty Republicans initially voted against McCarthy claiming that although he was from their party, he was a part of the corrupt establishment. One conservative commentator, Tucker Carlson, said: "McCarthy is not especially conservative. He's ideologically agnostic. His real constituency is the lobbying community in Washington. If you've got sincere political beliefs, that's infuriating." However, the majority of Republicans voted for McCarthy, and even Trump, who announced that he will stand for next year’s presidential election, asked the party to unite around McCarthy: "Republicans, do not turn a great triumph into a giant & embarrassing defeat...it's time to celebrate, you deserve it! Kevin McCarthy will do a good job."

Those leading the opposition to McCarthy pushed him to adopt a more ideological conservative path. They are from a faction of the party in the House of Representatives called the “House Freedom Caucus” and they stand for conservative values and are strong supporters of Trump. Representative Matt Gaetz, who is one of

the six that didn't submit to pressure to vote for McCarthy, proclaims from his website: "We will never apologize for American progress. We will never cave to the cancel culture. Stand with President Trump and fight to restore our country!" The Freedom Caucus was formed in 2015, and although its membership is not public, about a quarter of House Republicans are known to be part of it. Power in Congress is very centralized, and one of the themes of the House Freedom Caucus and Trump's 'make America great again' movement is about decentralizing power and 'draining the swamp' which is how they consider the federal establishment. While many Republicans did not go against the position of their party, a few of them did so openly in order to push it in a more radical direction. This radicalization amongst Republicans is to some extent a reaction to the increasing radicalization of the Democrat Party.

McCarthy was elected as the Speaker only after have given many concessions, including making it easier to remove the speaker by allowing just one person to be sufficient to raise a vote to remove him. Furthermore, McCarthy is now committed to give positions to Freedom Caucus members on important committees that will have a say in how legislation is drafted, amended and debated in the House, and he agreed to support their positions on opposing government spending. In response, Democrat Congressman Eric Swalwell complained: "Two years ago insurrectionists failed to take over the Capitol. Tonight Kevin McCarthy let them take over the Republican Party." Very noisy investigations about the political role of the FBI, the origins of Covid-19, conspiracies surrounding the events of January 6th and claimed election fraud can be expected in the months ahead; as well as the blocking of new legislation that Democrats propose and stalemate and crisis later this year when the issue of raising the \$31.4 trillion federal debt ceiling and approving the next federal budget are due. The House of Representatives is now empowered to resume the conservative fight in the lead up to the 2024 presidential election.