Harris and Biden

Saswato Ray

Is this pair of the tiger and the lion the perfect Machiavellian duo?

“Americans don't want to witness a food fight. They want to know how we're going to put food on their table.”

These were the words that first catapulted Kamala Harris into the national spotlight during the First Democratic Debate. Harris had launched her presidential bid in early 2019 in an effort to challenge the highly polarizing, inefficient and corrupt incumbent: Donald Trump. But the opportunity was so ripe, that she met with a crowded field of a total of 29 candidates, all of them lashing out at Trump, taking advantage of a rather unhindered path to the White House in 2020. Towards the end, Harris was, however, one of the top tier candidates in the race (as she most infamously called herself), but Politics comes at its own cost, and by December, Harris had suspended her Presidential campaign, only to come back to the race in August 2020, when Joe Biden nominated her as his Vice Presidential candidate.

As a junior Senator from California, Harris has been vocal about a number of things, most significantly her testy exchanges with Justice Kavanaugh, Attorney General William Barr, Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein and former Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who had very famously told Harris,

“I am not able to be rushed this fast, it makes me nervous,"

Words, which I hope are quite self-explanatory.

But Biden’s choice of Harris can be deemed as a rather cunning political choice. Anyone following the Presidential race will have known, Biden is quite the popular guy among almost everyone, yet the major setbacks in his campaign come primarily from his gaffes, or even his prolonged inability to speak at length with energy and enthusiasm, qualities one can attribute to his age. And this is where Harris jumps in. Harris isn’t going to substantially boost the polls, but rather she will gradually become the face of this campaign. Biden might be framing policy, using his experience in every way possible but any clever person closer to the establishment knows that the rallying part, the mobilizing part is something Harris is good at, and it is only logical that she takes over it extending the campaign to the many, not the few.

Kamala Harris brings balance to the Biden administration, yet balance is a very tricky term open to interpretation. Some say that a progressive liberal on the ticket with a centrist broadens the base, while others argue that the nomination of the first Black, Indian American Vice President is a huge morale boost for the Democratic establishment in a crucial political year. The most important characteristic, however, is the achievement of the Machiavellian balance in the ticket. Several years ago, in the 16 th century, when Machiavelli first wrote The Prince, he made a very important observation- a quality significant to the harvesting of power- the balance between the cunning and the aggressive, the political prowess and the populist- the need for the conglomeration of the fox and the lion. It is true based on simple geographic demographics that the combination of an old, centrist, liberal-minded white man with a rather young, black, progressive woman born of immigrants is more representative of the USA than any ticket could ever be.

Yet Kamala Harris comes with her issues, especially her being considered a “cop”, and her flip- flops on policy, which sank her Presidential bid.

Critics have long argued that Harris’ tenure as District Attorney of California, and then-Attorney General is badly scarred, citing her as not being “progressive enough”. However, if one were to truly review her record, it speaks quite the opposite.

From the beginning of Harris’s career in the criminal justice system, she said she saw herself as a progressive working within a system she wanted to change — “at the table where the decisions are made.” Her most successful program as district attorney, “Back on Track,” allowed first-time drug offenders, including drug dealers, to get a high school diploma and a job instead of prison time. In one instance — her handling of California’s “three strikes” law — Harris was arguably ahead of the time. Under the law, someone who committed a third felony could go to prison for 25 years to life, even if the third felony was a nonviolent crime. But Harris required that the San Francisco district attorney’s office only charge for a third strike if the felony was a serious or violent crime.

It is, however, important to note that at this point of time the landscape gradually began to change. A number of prosecutors had risen to be far more progressive than what Harris was doing in one of America’s most liberal states. This is part of the reason why many people were rather disappointed with Harris’ tenure as Attorney General.

She implemented some reforms: expanded her “Back on Track” program to other parts of the state. After Black Lives Matter took off, she introduced and expanded what her office described as “first-of-its-kind training” to address racial bias as well as procedural justice — earning praise from local newspapers. But these reforms come with their share of controversy too: Harris’ office fought to release lesser prisoners from jails, and later went to arguing against the release of an innocent man from jail. People close to Harris, however, have a different story to tell, citing the fact that she wasn’t even remotely involved in these cases.

Another spectrum of critics go on to cite that she is a woman who is “tough on crime”, an argument which makes perfect sense given her job as a prosecutor, but those same people go on to accuse her of not holding the police accountable, part of which is also true. Yet the fundamental problem with this argument is in her tenure as Attorney General, Harris was caught in the strife between the general public and the police: being a prosecutor there was a huge conflict, something which made her slow down, never stop completely. In that regard, she made the California Department of Justice the first statewide agency to require body cameras and even enforced “first of its kind law enforcement training.” The rhetoric about reform of the Justice System in the States has become even more amplified when she joined the Senate. She introduced a bail reform bill with Senator Rand Paul (Kentucky) that would encourage states to reform or replace their bail systems. In a team-up with Senators Cory Booker (New Jersey) and Tim Scott (South Carolina), Harris also introduced a bill that would for the first time make lynching a federal crime. After the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests over the Minneapolis police killing of George Floyd, Harris spoke favourably of shifting resources from law enforcement to addressing the “root causes” of crime, such as poverty, education, and mental health issues.

Despite her being at the helm of the progressive movement to the White House now, there remains a major problem with her policy, and also what she says now against what she has said before. In the larger geopolitical context, however, that does not matter much given the table is set in such a way that policy comes all on Biden’s plate, what Harris simply will have to do is stand by it: something which might seem a little hard for her but not impossible. All anyone can do right now is simply keep up hope (given it seems that Biden-Harris in their first week have done more to prevent the spread of the virus than Trump has done since March).

Harris’ nomination is symbolic, and even though it doesn’t turn the scales much, it’s sad to see that the first Black woman on a major Party’s ticket came only in the year 2020. But no one should be surprised. Before Biden made an announcement, people had labelled her as being “too ambitious”-something which everyone in Politics is and should be-and although the announcement of her being in the ticket comes at the joy of many, it also invited the podium of the Highest Office of the Land being used to call a woman “nasty”, and question her eligibility to serve on the ticket, stoking Birtherism yet again. The political landscape is a hard one to tread, it’s filled with barbs and pins, it comes with its highs and lows but throughout History, if there is one thing mankind has learned for sure, it is that the only constant is change. And change is a force that never comes quickly, for we all have to wait and watch.

So, let’s do just that.

Wait and watch.