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## U.S. chaos is no gift to autocrats

Maria Repnikova

### OPINION

Is the political disarray in the United States really "a godsend for America's critics" or a "propaganda coup" for them? Is Chris Coons, a Democratic senator from Delaware, correct to warn that the crisis of American democracy "feeds into the playbooks of authoritarian leaders around the world?"

Hua Chunying, the spokeswoman of China's Foreign Ministry, for one, has called out some U.S. officials and politicians for describing protesters in Hong Kong as "democracy heroes" but saying that the Trump supporters who stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 were "riots" and "extremists."

Russia's first deputy ambassador to the United Nations, Dmitry Polyanskiy, denounced on Twitter the fact that protesters who entered the Capitol

referring to the 2014 uprisings in Ukraine, which garnered much support in the West — were being described as "criminals."

The spokeswoman for Russia's Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, has argued that the event "has once again brought our attention to the archaic electoral system of the United States."

On Jan. 7, an editorial in Global Times, a nationalist tabloid controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, declared "an internal collapse of the U.S. political system." Last Wednesday, in reaction to Mr. Trump's impeachment in Washington, it published an editorial titled: "The World is So Different: China is Fighting the Epidemic, the U.S. is Fighting for Power."

And so? Does the deepening of cracks in America's political system actually boost the legitimacy of China and other authoritarian regimes?

The United States' self-portrayal as a beacon of democracy has been contested for many years, well before the Trump presidency — with shocking exposés about American soldiers torturing Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib or the National Security Agency's unlawful surveillance program.

The Trump era has only offered more ammunition to America's critics, including poignant images of immigrant children in cages and George Floyd's death at the hands of the police or apocalyptic scenes of American hospitals overcrowded with Covid-19 patients.

The recent acceleration of the United States' apparent self-destruction might REPNIKOVA, PAGE 11

The New York Times publishes opinion from a wide range of perspectives in hopes of promoting constructive debate about consequential questions.



Incubator for viruses Researchers at a Thai cave complex where scientists are looking for possible links to the pathogen that causes Covid-19. PAGE 3

## China bounces back

CHANGMINGZHEN, CHINA

Factories have reopened, fueling a blue-collar boom to revive its economy

BY KEITH BRADSHAW

The small, salty and pungent, warts through the freshly paved streets near a gleaming new factory.

The factory is owned by a company called Laogamma, which makes a piquant chili-and-soybean sauce famous across China for its power to set mouths watering. In a time of global pandemic, when the jobs of working people around the world hang in the balance, the factory's scents signal opportunity.

Since it opened in March, when China was still in the grip of Covid-19, the factory has struggled to find enough machinery operators or quality control technicians. Now workers are flocking to Changmingzhen, a once-quiet farming town ringed with green mountains and rice paddies, from which young people once fled for better jobs elsewhere.

Changmingzhen stands as a testament to China's stunning post-coronavirus revival — one powered by the cal-



Wind turbine parts outside a factory in Changmingzhen, China, in Guizhou Province. A truck driver at the factory earns \$2,300 a month, production workers, \$1,200.

lused hands of the country's factory and construction workers. With few exceptions, the rest of the world remains in a pandemic-driven malaise. But when China reports economic figures for 2020 on Monday, they are expected to show its economy grew despite having lost early weeks to the lockdown.

On a recent evening, workers flush with money left the factory at shift's end and flooded nearby market stalls looking for hand-cut noodles, bananas and mandarin oranges.

The family-owned company pays its production workers up to \$1,200 a month. "Not bad for workers our age,"

said Wang Mingyan, an employee leaving her shift.

The slight 50-year-old said she received a rent-free apartment, free cafeteria meals and other benefits, with Laogamma competing with other companies for workers. The menu isn't always to her liking, but that's a small price to pay. "When you're away from home," said Ms. Wang, who moved from her hometown more than two hours away, "you just fill your stomach."

China froze a \$15 trillion economy last February. It used brute force to isolate cities and provinces and drag people into quarantine.

Beijing turned to the same set of blunt tools to get the economy going again. It ordered factories to reopen and state-run banks to lend. It told state-run companies to restart.

Now the economy is charging ahead. Government subsidies are fueling new rail lines and factories. One state-owned company, a would-be competitor to Boeing and Airbus, says it will invest \$3 billion in 22 big construction projects.

The government's role makes China's revival distinctly blue collar. The state's levers are most effective in restarting big factories or big construction projects. It has long focused on keeping the working class happy for fear of up-

CHINA, PAGE 4

## Biden maps quick start to address huge issues

WASHINGTON

Series of executive orders and broad legislation to signal break from Trump

BY MICHAEL D. SHEAR AND PETER BAKER

President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr., inheriting a collection of crises unlike any in generations, plans to open his administration with dozens of executive directives on top of expansive legislative proposals in a 10-day blitz meant to signal a turning point for a nation reeling from disease, economic turmoil, racial strife and now the aftermath of the assault on the Capitol.

Mr. Biden's team has developed a raft of decrees that he can issue on his own authority after the inauguration on Wednesday to begin reversing some of President Trump's most hotly disputed policies. Advisers hope the flurry of action, without waiting for Congress, will establish a sense of momentum for the new president while the Senate puts his predecessor on trial.

On his first day in office alone, Mr. Biden intends a flurry of executive orders that will be partly substantive and partly symbolic. They include rescinding the travel ban on several predominantly Muslim countries, rejoining the Paris climate change accord, extending pandemic-related limits on evictions and student loan payments, issuing a mask mandate for federal property and interstate travel and ordering agencies to figure out how to reunite children separated from families after crossing the border, according to a memo circulated on Saturday by Ron Klain, his incoming White House chief of staff, and White House the New York Times.

The blueprint of executive action comes after Mr. Biden announced that he would push Congress to pass a \$1.9 trillion package of economic stimulus and pandemic relief, signaling a willingness to be aggressive on policy issues and challenging Republicans from the start to take their lead from him.

He also plans to send sweeping immigration legislation on his first day in office providing a pathway to citizenship for 11 million people in the country illegally. Along with his promise to vaccinate 100 million Americans for the coronavirus in his first 100 days, it is an expansive set of priorities for a new president that could be a defining test of his deal-making abilities and command of the federal government.

For Mr. Biden, an energetic debut could be critical to moving the country beyond the endless dramas surrounding Mr. Trump. In the 75 days since his election, Mr. Biden has provided hints of what kind of president he hopes to be — focused on the big issues, resistant to the louder voices in his own party and

BIDEN, PAGE 5

## Watch your lyrics, or it's off to jail

LONDON

A paroled British rapper faces court penalties if his words celebrate violence

BY ED CLOWES

The British rapper Digga D can't explain how he lost the use of an eye while serving a prison sentence last year: not because he doesn't want to, but because talking about what happened might get him sent back to jail.

The police here scrutinize everything the 20-year-old musician says in public, whether in an interview, or on a track.

In 2018, Digga D was sentenced to a year in prison for conspiracy to commit violent disorder, after a court case in which music videos by the masked rapper were presented as evidence. In sentencing Digga D, whose real name is Rhys Herbert, the judge also issued an order banning him from releasing



The rapper Digga D, whose real name is Rhys Herbert, has been restricted by a judge on what he can say in his work. Other British rap stars have received similar orders.

tracks that describe gang-related violence.

He must notify the police within 24 hours of releasing new music and provide them with the lyrics. If a court finds that his words incite violence, he can be sent back to prison; parole conditions also limit what he can say publicly about his past.

So when asked in a Zoom interview about how he had lost the sight in his eye, Digga D could only shrug.

Digga D is a leading voice in Britain's drill scene, a subgenre of hip-hop featuring eerie piano melodies layered over droning bass lines and lyrics portraying life in some of the country's most deprived neighborhoods. Arising in Chicago, drill started to take on a new life in London in the mid-2000s, fusing with the city's grime and garage sounds and helping to drive offshoot scenes in places as disparate as the Brooklyn borough of New York and Brisbane, Australia.

But drill's sometimes violent lyrics have led the police and lawmakers to ac-

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