

GIBS forum - Global political risk and impact: The future of politics

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A growing sense of dissatisfaction with the current political status quo is causing a fundamental shift in global politics. The unexpected outcome of the Brexit vote, populism and upheaval in the run up to the American presidential elections and increasing levels of frustration among African nations with unaccountable governments are but a few symptoms of this.

The global political structure is undergoing “a period of considerable challenge and uncertainty, but also stimulus and opportunity,” Dame Judith Macgregor, British High Commissioner to South Africa, told a Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) forum.

“We are at a point where we are going to need to cooperate more, and urgently work out how we reach consensus on issues that require solutions,” she added.

Professor William Gumede, author and Associate Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand’s School of Governance said disruptions experienced in established democracies and a lack of confidence in global institutions has caused many countries to become more inward looking and protectionist.

Brexit and the future of the European Union

The largely unexpected result of the Brexit referendum, where Britain voted to leave the European Union, presented the UK government with a shock result that raised many interesting and challenging trends across the country, Macgregor said.

“It was in many ways a protest vote which followed individualistic rather than party or government lines.”

Macgregor emphasised the need for the government to take note of the public’s concerns raised in the ballot, especially those of migration and discontent with global trade, which “hadn’t benefited everyone.”

While the extraction of Britain from the European Union could take over two years once Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty had been triggered, Macgregor assured the audience the future role of her country would be to “remain a very internationalist Britain, a very multicultural Britain, a global Britain.”

The result of the Brexit referendum was not the scenario Britain’s European Union partner countries anticipated or would have wished for, due to its unprecedented nature and its impact on trade. The decision has reverberated in those countries and Euroscepticism has surfaced. In future, the EU will have to become more competitive and improve its offer to its citizens, Macgregor explained.

American concerns

Brooks Spector, former US diplomat and associate editor of *The Daily Maverick*, drew parallels between political events in Britain and the United States: “The conviction that things are coming apart has created an extraordinary political environment,” he said.

Spector explained that many Americans feel their lives are more at risk from international terrorism than ever before and are convinced that globalisation and its interdependencies are not fair and is afflicting their lives.

“Immigration has been woven into the narrative as something that will engulf the country. This has tapped into a sense that

America is losing the control it had over the world when it was the only global superpower,” he said.

Technology and African political mobilisation

The proliferation of mobile technology across Africa and resultant access to information through social media has resulted in mobilisation at grassroots level as people respond to unaccountable governments, Professor William Gumede told the forum. “This is a positive spin off of globalisation,” he said.

“Societies have changed and young people have mobilised around issues.”

Economic growth and the new era of globalisation

Macgregor said while many are disaffected with globalisation, the world would continue to remain interconnected as people to travel, trade, and build their international expertise. Some issues, such as those of climate change, migration and how to stimulate global growth, could only be addressed on a global level.

“Measures to stimulate the world economy after the recent period of austerity do need to be smarter and more productive,” Macgregor said. She explained that it would be necessary to learn to accept lower levels of growth: “We just aren’t going to have quite the pace and volume of the past, and we have to manage expectations accordingly.”

In the new era of globalisation, governments would have to develop an understanding of their citizens’ desire to be consulted more and have increased control over the process of global interconnectedness. In turn, citizens would need to take increasing responsibility and become more participative.

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