

'The Donald' has trump cards

BY BUNN NAGARA

Donald Trump's presidential campaign had always been expected to crash, but these pundits continue to be stumped and such predictions have proven wrong before.



Powering on: Like him or hate him, Trump has stump his critics and is in the running to become the new President of the United States.

IT was not supposed to last, of course. At least that was what talking heads were telling themselves about Donald Trump's run for the US presidency.

On one level, in a democratic country like the United States, anyone can be a serious presidential contender as long as he has the right amount of cash, clout and connections.

Billionaire tycoon and reality show personality Donald Trump has more of all these than most of the other contenders' put together. Yet, his campaign had always been expected to falter and fail, despite all the signs to the contrary.

Pundits predicting doom and gloom for his campaign have read the wrong signs, or read the signs wrongly. Their assumptions are part of the problem.

Since Trump is not a classic conservative, he is shunned by Republican Party elders and the conservative establishment.

Anyone running as a classic conservative or requiring party establishment endorsement would therefore soon run into trouble.

But Trump is not doing that, in fact quite the reverse. He courts controversy because that is his style, and his public is going for it.

On another level of low-down populist politics, he is reaping the dividends of populism. In case anyone hasn't yet noticed, classic conservative candidates are not doing particularly well this year.

Trump is running as a Republican contender because the party machinery gives him added reach. His brand of individualism, not the party, gives him the edge with strong voter appeal.

Whether his campaign is consciously aware of it or not, that is the best position to be in at this point: make use of the party for all that it can give, without succumbing to the constraints of being a conventional Republican.

That has also meant crossing swords with classic conservative institutions like Fox News. Conservative institutions dislike contenders who ruffle feathers because they are, well, conservative.

The issue, however, is not about being the most loyal Republican or the most consistent conservative, but to win the party nomination and then the presidency. Both depend on the highest public appeal that Trump continues to enjoy.

Sheer populism may not always work, because the mix of conditions in each election season is critical. In this particular season, it has excellent chances of success because of the disarray among both Republican and Democratic contenders.

Besides Trump, Republicans have no strong candidate as party nominee for this November's election. Despite the withdrawal of 10 other contenders, the remaining ones have failed to shine.

Senators Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio are said to be the strongest after Trump. But this is only relative, since Jeb Bush, Ben Carson and John Kasich have not been as appealing as they would have liked.

Cruz is no classic conservative or conventional Republican himself. Some of his rhetoric, whether against President Obama or fellow Republican contenders, have gone off at a tangent and beyond the pale.

Rubio is said to be an impressive, fast-rising contender, which is also to say he is still young and his time has yet to come. He still lacks "heft" or gravitas, things which matter to conservatives in particular.

Without Trump, Cruz and Rubio may not shine any brighter necessarily. The Republican Party would more likely have given more space, however unwittingly, to the Democrats.

The Democratic Party is faring no better than the Republicans. The chief candidates Hillary Clinton and Senator Bernie Sanders also seem strong only relative to other party contenders.

Four have withdrawn from the race: Governor Martin O'Malley of Maryland, (former) Senator Jim Webb, Governor Lincoln Chaffee of Rhode Island and Harvard Professor Lawrence Lessig.

Another 10 individuals, including some businessmen, activists, a lawyer, an artist, a chess player and a former prisoner, are even lesser known than the least familiar Republicans.

Only a few years ago, former Secretary of State Clinton was unbeatable. Trump himself was her supporter less than a decade ago.

But recent years have taken a heavy toll on her. To be ranked alongside Sanders, a self-declared socialist (and thus in the US virtually unwinnable) is bad enough, but she has since compared badly with him.

At the recent Iowa Democratic Caucus, Clinton beat Sanders by just 0.2%. Later at the New Hampshire Primaries, Sanders' 15 delegates and 60.4% obliterated her nine delegates and 30%.

Once it seemed only too obvious that it was time perhaps for a female president. And Clinton seemed among the most eligible, even beyond the matter of name familiarity.

But how times have changed. The novelty of a female president has worn off somewhat, while Clinton's personal issues as Secretary of State also came to the fore.

There was the 2012 militant attack on the US Consulate in Benghazi that killed several US staff including Ambassador Christopher Stevens. Official denials and evasions did not help.

As the controversy trailed off, another concerning Clinton's unsecured email postings surfaced. It taxed her credibility as a high public official yet again.

Trying to claw back the gains she once had, she recently "signed up" scores of top foreign policy experts as potential advisers. However, that seems to have gained little traction so far.

Besides battling each other for the party nomination, Clinton and Sanders may want to remind themselves about how Trump fared in the New Hampshire Primaries.

Trump won handsomely, with 10 delegates and 35.3% of the vote. His closest party rival Kasich had just four delegates and 15.8%, while Cruz, Bush and Rubio each had three delegates and under 12%.

Savvy as he is, nobody can accuse Trump of running a profoundly intellectual campaign. Few if any successful presidential campaigns of the past have been intellectually memorable anyway.

By his actions and his accomplishments on the stump, he is showing the importance of showbiz razzmatazz in US presidential campaigns. Those who belittle that insight may yet live to regret it.

Like many jaded punters, Clinton dismissed Trump's efforts last year as those of a mere "entertainer".

They had said the same thing about another Republican entertainer until 1980 – when Ronald Reagan won the party nomination and then the presidency.

Reagan was also not a "classic conservative" before his White House bid. In Hollywood, he was an actor and a union leader, and later as Governor of California he raised state taxes.

When Reagan won the presidential election he was 69 – the same age as Trump today. Both have their comical moments which appeal to supporters, banking on their status as rank outsiders to "shake up Washington."

In 2007, a black community activist in Chicago was also a rank outsider – until a year later, when Senator Barack Hussein Obama stumped pundits by winning the presidency.

After two terms, the "pendulum" in US presidential politics is swinging towards the Republicans – with Trump adding momentum to it.

He is more brash, loud and newsworthy than any other candidate can hope or want to be. What more does an ambitious contender need?

Such a candidate may have to change his style once in office. And personal change is a Trump forte.

Of course, the outcome of the November election is still far from certain. But that very uncertainty continues to favour Trump more than any other candidate, Republican or Democrat.

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