

Bush Smells Victory while Gore Fights Back

An Opportunity to End Parliamentary Boycott

THERE is a pressing need to revalidate the constitutional provision on 30 reserved seats for women in Parliament at the JS session beginning on November 9. The failure to extend it by another ten years, the prescribed periodicity for quota reservation with a built-in flexibility to improve upon it at the renewal time, an opportunity we have squandered so far, would mean letting it lapse altogether. The implications are an attrition of the Parliament's size and denial of women's presence in the highest representative institution of democracy. Furthermore, it will create a complication, more precisely, a constitutional void, with the Supreme Court perhaps drawn into the picture to contrive a way out under extraordinary circumstances which otherwise look so preeminently avoidable.

Basically, this involves a reversal of the Opposition's boycott of the JS to ensure the two-thirds majority vote in Parliament required to resurrect the quota, which the ruling party singly cannot provide.

If we are to recommend one crisis situation as presenting a most precious opportunity to get things radically better than it must be the stand-off on the reserved seats - the chestnut in the fire, as it were, waiting to be drawn out. The opposition favours an expansion in the number of women's seats in parliament which looks significantly bolstered by a persistent demand from various women's bodies that the increased quota be also filled up through direct election. This is to replace a privilege play by the winning party in the general election that amounts to a mock show of women's representation in the JS. To the best of our knowledge, the ruling party is open to suggestions for an increase in the women's quota of seats in parliament as well as for an improvement in the method of their election to the same. So, what keeps the opposition from attending the JS session with so much of stake developing in the reserved seats' provision?

The likely opposition two-mindedness about the justification of walking back to parliament at this fag-end of its tenure is outweighed by what they are certain to gain from returning to JS. The number of women's seats will go up and the boycott culture which the people have grown weary of will have been left behind at the most opportune moment for the next polls and 8th Parliament to be born of these.

Constitution: Our Article of Faith

THE 1972 Constitution was our crowning achievement that encapsulated the dreams and aspirations of a whole populace emerging out of a successful Liberation War. It promised protection of each and every individual's fundamental rights, promulgated establishment of rule of law; and, more importantly, pronounced the nation's commitment to democracy in its purest form.

Unfortunately in less than two years after the constitution had been framed it received a near death blow from BAKSAL. Then autocratic, semi-despotic and pseudo-democratic forces in power routinely violated its sanctity to meet their evil ends until the mass upsurge of late 1990. Changes of guard almost invariably led to amendment of varied degrees to the constitution. Obscurantism impinged on secular character of it. Simply said, our article of faith had been played football with until people once again took to the streets to get the country back on to the path of democracy. Nearly three decades after its birth, popular and political commitment to the constitution was re-born with the first session of a freely and fairly elected parliament passing the 12th amendment and the parliamentary form of governance was restored.

Regrettably, our politicians, especially the ones in power, remain largely indifferent to the popular wishes and aspirations, thereby undermining the very essence of the constitution in a way. Although in recent times no reckless amendment has been made to it, the people in power have on occasions resorted to distorted and self-serving interpretations of constitutional provisions to further their partisan cause. The constitutional institutions have been verbally attacked and made mockery of. This has been something of an anathema to the constitution, a mirror image of post-liberation ethos.

Our flawed democratic culture is essentially an aberration from the philosophy on which our constitution was originally based. Our political leaders are at fault here. They appear oblivious of the fact that enforcement and establishment of constitutional edicts is indispensable for our democratic future. Their failure in this regard may serve the purpose of some but could derail our democratic pursuit. The Constitution Day, which was observed yesterday, actually came as a reminder, not only of our constitutional rights but our constitutional responsibilities as well.

Toxic Seepage

At a time when water from the overhead tank is not considered safe for drinking, there comes a threat of ground water table being contaminated by toxic waste dumps. We may be on the brink of a disaster due to seepage of waste from dumps all over the city, especially at Matuail, where, on an average, more than 3,000 tonnes of garbage, including clinical, industrial and pharmaceutical wastes, are piled across a 70-acre location, which is very close to the human habitat. The mix of rainwater and garbage seeps through different layers of soil down to the water-table carrying deadly micro-organisms (virus and bacteria) and toxic chemicals.

Some experts are of the view that the rate of seepage in Dhaka is slowed down through the 'consolidated' clay layer and, therefore, the danger of wholesale contamination may not be that imminent as is made out to be. This indeed is a short-sighted view given the ever increasing scale of garbage dumping one sees around. There are certainly some pockets where the ground water-table is being seriously contaminated with dangerous toxic materials. The toxins spewed from tanneries in the city have been another cause for grave concern, but little is being done to mitigate the same.

Apart from arsenic contamination, we have very little research going on in Bangladesh as far as our groundwater contamination is concerned. Given the magnitude of the danger, we demand that the authorities immediately take up the issue and devise a long-term plan to spare the populace a slow death.

IN the last few days before the November 7th US presidential election, the momentum - both from the statistical and attitudinal points of view - has clearly been with the Republican presidential candidate George Bush. Key state polls still show nothing but a tight race, albeit with a slight edge to Bush.

However, this confidence is an important factor in these final days, representing an advantage Republicans have over Democrats: enthusiasm about their candidate. Republicans are excited about Bush in a way Democrats are not about Al Gore.

Republicans inside and outside the campaign are united in their belief that the current dynamic will lead to a Bush win - maybe even a surprisingly easy victory. Democrats remain divided. Some think they can edge out a win with a decent share of the undecided voters, a huge labour and minority turnout, and targeted state victories.

Now that America is finally paying attention, these final days are as much about timing as anything else, as both campaigns seek to catch undecided voters at just the right moment to make the impression that they will take with them into the voting booth.

Both campaigns are using part of their media advertisement blitz to prey on the other candidate's perceived weakness: Gore against Bush on readiness, Bush against Gore on believability. As Gore's campaign unleashes its TV advertisement ripping Bush's record as Texas governor and

Opinion polls have consistently showed that voters, while clearly approving the policies of the Clinton-Gore administration, remain uneasy about the values that the current occupants of the White House present to the world. Unless Bush can successfully exploit this paradox by presenting his case to the small section of undecided voters, his chances of ending eight years of Democratic control of the White House will go down in the dust.

questioning whether he is ready to lead America; Bush's aides are stepping up their inevitability push - an effort to convince the voters that all this talk of a tight race is meaningless and that they are going to win handily.

The contest between the two camps is now more psychological than anything. For the first half of this year, Bush and his team seemed in complete control of the presidential campaign, setting the tone and agenda according to a meticulously planned strategy that consciously portrayed Bush as the president-in-waiting. His popularity peaked immediately after the convention of the Republican party in early August when his opinion poll lead over Gore extended into double digits.

However, this large opinion poll lead was always illusory, inflated



Connecting the Dots
Dr. A. R. Choudhury

in an environment in which most voters were scarcely focused on the campaign or the issues at stake.

When the Democratic party concluded their political conven-

tion a few weeks later, the momentum shift from Bush to Gore was dramatic. Once the voters began to focus on issues, rather than the spin and personalities, the race tilted Gore's way. His ratings increased as the voters started to digest the actual policy implications of a Bush or Gore presidency. On the core policy issues - the economy, the budget, the future of social security, prescription drug provision of the elderly, health care, minimum wage - the Democrats - under the wily leadership of Clinton, have positioned themselves closer to the popular will than the Republicans. All this produced the first clear signs of despon-

ency among Republicans. After months in which they basked in the prospect of a return to the White House, they reacted with dismay.

Fortunately for Bush, Gore's surge in popular opinion didn't last for too long. His performance in the three presidential debates swung the pendulum of public opinion back towards the Bush camp. Gore's overbearing attitude, several misleading statistics (Bush termed them fuzzy math), and stiff posture during the debates didn't sit well with many viewers. Hordes of undecided voters moved towards the Republican camp thereby giving Bush the necessary uplift at the right time.

Can Bush maintain the momentum that he has gained in the last few days to propel himself into the White House? In the end, his main challenge is what it has always been - how to convince the Americans to change their political leadership in an environment of economic prosperity and contentment.

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US Election and South Asia

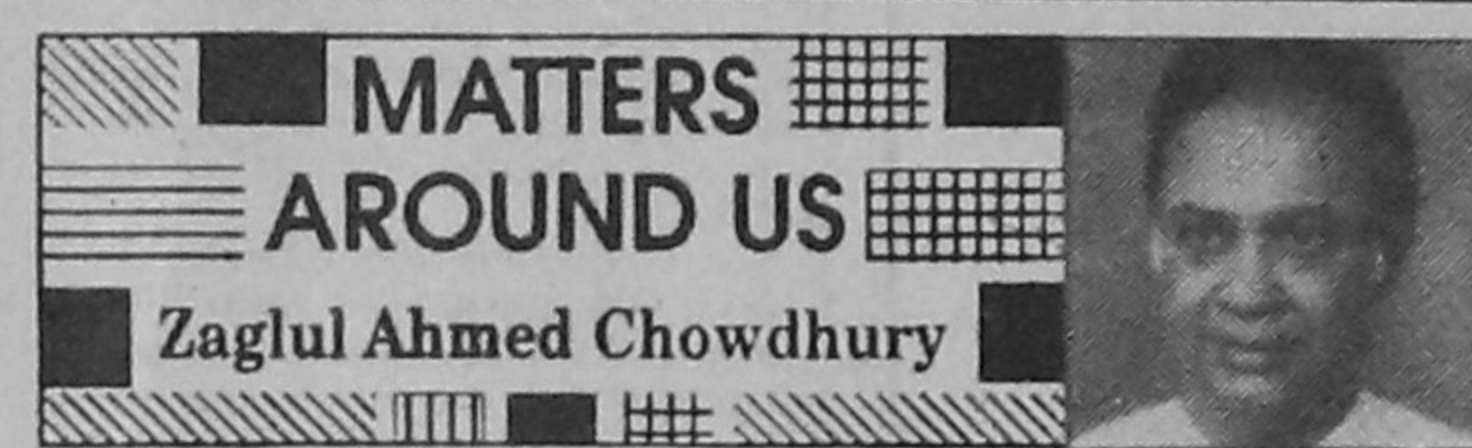
The US attaches some degree of significance to South Asia. The most powerful nation on earth will continue to give importance to this region regardless of who would adorn the White House; and the new administration will work for the welfare of the vast multitude here.

is no longer at loggerheads with the US.

While this situation has helped to flourish democracy across the globe, this has also largely eliminated a deterrence in the form of the superpower Soviet Union which often challenged many American positions in global affairs. The present Russia is no longer a superpower and consequently, America holds somewhat absolute sway in international affairs despite disapproval and opposition from some countries.

As such, the American polls to elect a president now assume more importance than before although the person who sits in the White House has always been a powerful person. US presidential election has always attracted worldwide attention and evidently the degree of interest is greater now for obvious reason - near-monopoly of America in world affairs.

As the nation is set to elect its 43rd president, the campaign has reached a crescendo after Al Gore and George W. Bush are rushing through the key states in a last-minute bid to convince the voters on the need of voting for their respective party nominees. Two



MATTERS AROUND US
Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

candidates are trading nasty barbs about tactics and mudslinging is not uncommon. The latest salvo that was fired at Bush is that he was arrested and had his driving license suspended in 1976 while driving in a drunken condition. Bush's camp has admitted this but questioned on the timing and motive of such an information at this stage. Well, this is once again a part of the milieu.

The elections are most keenly contested since the Kennedy-Nixon battle in 1960. The surveys have put Bush little ahead of Al Gore in terms of popular votes but the Democrat candidate is bridging the gap and this makes the line up to the electoral fight totally unpredictable. Al Gore has received the endorsement of influential 'New York Times' and some other leading newspapers and this is a plus point for the

present Vice President. His rival, Texas Governor, has found himself comfortable in several key southern states.

American election is a somewhat complicated system. The outcome will not be decided by the popular votes but by the electoral votes. The electoral votes is an indirect system when each state has a number of electoral votes equal to its total number of representatives in both houses of Congress. In addition, the District of Columbia has three votes and this makes the grand total 538 and a candidate needs 270 such votes to win the elections. The electoral votes in each state are allocated on a winner-take-all basis and as such a candidate who wins the popular votes in a state also wins all the electoral votes in that state. In any case, the result will be known in next few days.

Al-Gore and George Bush differed considerably on domestic policies on tax plans, education, social security and health. Gore is clearly counting on the performance of the Clinton administration during the last eight years that saw a tremendous propensity and growth in the economy. Bush harps on the need for a change and says much of the

values that were followed during the Clinton era is not that of American's own. This refers to President Clinton's personal scandals and other issues.

On matters of foreign policy and defence, they have both convergence and divergence of views. Both seem more or less same on the issue of Middle East and as they appear to support Israel. Al-Gore wants to engage US in constructive approach to China and Russia while Bush is little different - supporting closer ties with Taiwan and also against placing American forces under the UN programmes.

Gore is keen to pay the due to the UN, but Bush favours the payment only after necessary reorganisation and restructuring the world body.

In South Asia, everybody eagerly watching the American elections like elsewhere in the world. However, interest here is more than many other countries since the United States matters in foreign policy parameters of the countries of the region. It is in a way more so because of the visit of President Clinton to South Asia early this year. Incidentally, that was the first ever visit to Bangladesh by an American president. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid a return visit to the US recently. India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and others in the region are also taking great interest in the election.

For Bangladesh, a change in the governance by the Democrats can make things little different since the Bangladesh PM is fresh

from a visit there and two sides have agreed upon many issues for co-operation and understanding. Should the Republican comes to power, there will certainly be a change in the administration involving the key persons who were associated in the bilateral dealings with different countries. However, there cannot be much difference since there is not much scope for that in the state-to-state relations.

Al-Gore is more likely to succumb to the pressures for labour union and create new hurdles for garments and export business of Bangladesh. The pressure for trade unionism in the export processing zones may further mount. Bush is likely to be less receptive to the calls for additional foreign assistance to developing countries.

A separate South Asian bureau was recently set up on the foreign policy issues of the United States considering the large population of the region. Ms. Robin Rahel was the first Assistant Secretary of State in charge of the desk. Karl F. Inderfurth who makes routine visits to the region succeeded her. Indeed, this bureau reflects greater American interest in South Asia. Washington has, on the other hand, categorised the region as most dangerous flash points in the world because of Indo-Pakistan enmity and their nuclear race. The US, no doubt, attaches some degree of significance to South Asia. Hopefully, the most influential nation will continue to hold this region with importance regardless of who would adorn the White House; and the new administration will work for the welfare of the vast multitude - most of whom live in abject poverty here.

To the Editor ...

Threat to newsmen

Sir, While speaking on the state of politics in the country at the DRU-sponsored Meet the Reporters Programme (DS Oct 08, 2000), Saifur Rahman, MP, the former finance minister hailed newsmen saying, "Only Press is upholding democracy." It's one more feather added to the caps of the courageous reporters. He congratulated the print media and journalists for bold reporting and reflecting the hopes and aspirations of the people. At the same time, he regretted the role of his fellow politicians. The criminals are allowed free hand to do and undo things reported at the behest of Awami League leaders and under the patronage of the administration. There has been no comment from the head of the government on the report of life threatening utterances by the AL leader of Laxmipur in presence of one of the ministers. It's high time that all and sundry should condemn the anarchy prevailing in Laxmipur. There should be an end to the reign of terror unleashed there by Abu Taher, reportedly an AL cadre. How could he utter intimidatory remarks aimed at journalists in presence of a minister?

A F Rahman
Dhaka

Norms are inviolable

Sir, I thank you for your prompt and timely editorial (DS Oct 29, 2000) on the above subject. You have rightly pointed out the ruling party's highhandedness reflected in the way it forced rescheduling of train services in the country's north.

The Railway Act 1890 deals with train operations, including possible offences. As a matter of fact, six-monthly timetables are published for the rail traffic, which must be followed strictly. But the ministers of the ruling party have used the trains as their personal property. It was a people-freedom fighters rally; but in order to make it a success the government machinery, including railway, was used. Under

what rule, the state minister hired the trains?

It appears that the state minister and the railway top brass who implemented the directive of the ruling party have violated the provisions of the Railway Act, 1890. Action may be taken under sections, 42-A, 65 and 121 of the Act and the violation. The perpetrators are also culpable under the Public Safety Act, 2000.

H Rahman, Advocate
Mirpur Road, Dhaka

Monitoring development projects

Sir, Recently the government has nominated the cabinet ministers as chairperson of the district Development Committee to monitor the on-going development projects. Hence, they frequently visit the project sites with their Public Relation Officers (PROs) along with the journalists and TV cameramen. The projects usually include construction of embankments, roads, river bank protection, hospital building, bridges, culverts, deep tube wells etc. During the visits, the concerned officials usually raise several issues regarding the constraints of the projects. The constraints observed are mainly encountered due to the process of land acquisition, delay from the part of the construction company, non-cooperation of the stakeholders and local people's representatives and timely flow of fund. On the other hand, local people sometimes raise issues regarding construction quality, alignment of road or embankment, location of deep tube wells etc.

The ministers as chairperson of the district Development Committee must have some commitments to the local people and issue instantaneous directives to the department for maintaining the quality true to the specification and for quick completion of the project. In response to the requirements raised by the departmental official at the field level, the ministers try to solve some issues immediately at the

field level and instruct the PROs to put up some other issues that need to be solved at the central level. So it becomes also a part of the ministers' responsibility to raise the issues in the proper place as well. The PRO is to note down all the points and besides other duties he/she is to put up the case to the ministers as and when asked by him. The agency at the central level are the respective organisational heads, the ministry of land and finance, the donors (in case of aided project etc. The PRO, usually being a non-technical officer might have some lagging in understanding and collecting the technical information at the field level. On the contrary, if he/she were a technical person it would have been easier for him/her to understand and collect necessary information required to be placed to the proper authority and to remove the bottleneck of the projects for expediting its progress thereby. If the PRO isn't a technical cadre then there is a chance of mistake in understanding and collecting the technical data at the field level. Again, for various reasons it may not always be possible for the minister to deal the matter at central level by himself. The PRO is to contact the agency and discuss the issues raised by the department officials. Due to lack of technical know-how as stated earlier it is not always possible on the part of the PRO to place the problem true to actual requirements, so far the projects are concerned, to the competent authority. However, if the entourage of the minister, were technical personnel he/she could easily place the issues appropriately to the concerned agency at central level. The minister can choose the engineer/technical person from various departments who seems to be competent enough to assist these visits, namely the development projects.

The government should think over it for the interest of the project as well as the people.

Abdul Jalil
46 B, Lake Circus
Kalabagan, Dhaka

OPINION

SAARC's Trading Equations

A Husnain

WHILE the global big powers are actively planning their trade and commerce strategies for the South Asian region, the SAARC members are still dishing with their traditional and historical abhiman stances.

Looking at three of the members of this regional setup, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were a part of former British India, hence one fact stands out (the case for Sri Lanka is also similar, but may be examined separately); India is simply too big for the other members.

Hence India has to take the initiative to encourage inter-member trading within the region, as it has also the largest market in South Asia; and it also leads production-wise. It also has the advantage of historical continuity, as regards the transfer of immovable assets (Pakistan and Bangladesh had to start with a near zero base initially, which has delayed the laying of strong foundation).

Looking at this triangle, with three points of interaction (a, b, and c), six different channels have to operate satisfactorily to increase the volume of imports and exports within the member-nations (now accounting for only 3 per cent of the total exports from the region). The combinations are ab, bc, ca, and, ba, cb, and ac. how each country looks at the import and import with the two other countries.

This working plan between the three nations has also to be acceptable to the other members of Saarc. Hence the number of permutations and combinations is large, and the drafting of the

master plan will need a lot of patience even for the first phase.

This exercise has not yet been taken up since the formal inauguration of Saarc many years ago. The main hurdle is said to be the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan for nearly half a century. In the case of Sri Lanka, the internal insurgency for many years is not allowing it to pay more attention to the prosperity and development of the Saarc region. It is to a large extent due to the break up of the Raj after two centuries of central rule based in Delhi (it is also necessary to study the implications of the Mughal rule in the subcontinent for several centuries).

President Clinton's visit was supposed to be an initial attempt to thaw the situation (to the advantage of the North bloc). The US is now sending strong feelers into the region for multinational trade on a large scale. While India pretends to keep her huge market closed to predators, from outside, the US is pressurising Dhaka for export of fuel and energy through land and sea routes. The Indian PM's recent visit to the White House has generated quite a number of new situations which have to be followed carefully, to judge the trend which will set the style of the decade in this region.

The Bangladesh PM has been in Washington. And Bangladesh should set a new tone in Dhaka's foreign policy. Pakistan is in a sorry plight, economically and democratically, and the western powers have to be sympathetic as that market (approaching 200

million) cannot be ignored.

Thus big brother India is facing a moral challenge to come up to the expectation of the smaller members, to lead Saarc into a prosperous phase, which will noticeably change the per capita income of the citizens of the member-states in the region. It is the decade of change, and New Delhi has to face the changes boldly, and honourably. But New Delhi is passing through a weak political period (as is Islamabad).

As for Dhaka, ironically it appears that the two major political parties are too strong to be of direct and immediate benefit to the nation, due to political infighting and hate campaigns since 1991.

The national leaders in Dhaka have to display a very high level of statesmanship to steer Bangladesh into a take-off position (we are lucky to have reached this take-off stage at last). Since no sacrifice is too great for the sake of the nation, the next general elections may set the tone and direction of the nation's intentions and resolve.

Saarc is passing through a sensitive period, looking globally, and the mandate before the regional leaders is clear enough. What is lacking is the will to act politically. Unless there is an umbrella cover of unity within Saarc, the predatory monitoring by the powerful outsiders may usher in economic colonialism faster than anticipated. The awareness is there, but the concrete action plans have yet to be launched.