

Fascinating US Election

IT has been breathtakingly close going right down to the wire, a little too nail-biting even for the close call prophecies. As if to keep to the pattern of sharply fluctuating fortunes between Gore and Bush at the final counting stages, announcement of conclusive results climactically hinged on a recount of votes in Florida. The margin of difference between the two contenders to presidency narrowing down to less than one per cent of the total number of votes in the state that crucial recount was necessitated in Florida before drawing a curtain on the final count.

The US presidential race, 2000 has been unique on quite a few counts: first, it has proved to be a cliff-hanger along the entirety of the electoral process - encompassing desperate campaigning dashes to the finishing line and the neck-to-neck final counting almost bracing up to scrape the half a million absentee ballots in the US military manning overseas posts and among the American expatriates. It turned out to be fascinatingly dramatic, and in effect, tense and nervy, too, for the rest of the world watching the spectacular waning and waxing of fortunes between Bush and Gore right down to the last-minute posting of tallies. There the people of the US and the rest of the world have had a nerve-racking experience, only in slightly varying degrees. That is the charm of a democracy in action.

By far the most unique feature of the electoral outcome is the US voters' recognition of peace and unprecedented economic prosperity during the last eight years under Clinton matched by a craving for change. The winner has to pay heed to this underlying message of the popular verdict.

Our heartfelt congratulations to the winner in a closely-fought contest and we wish him success through his tenure into the new millennium. We hope that in matters of strengthening US-Bangladesh ties he will not flinch from carrying forward the positive tenor that the outgoing US President Bill Clinton had set for the expansion of our bilateral ties.

New Telecom Bill

MONOPOLISED by the state-run Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTTB), the telecommunications sector in the country has been the most inaccessible domain to private entrepreneurs so far. But, certain developments in recent times suggest that the days of state monopoly are numbered. The government has already decided to strike a deal with WorldTel for installation and maintenance of 300,000 new land-based telephone connections. Now, news reports say that the telecom ministry is processing a bill for the introduction of National Telecommunications Act, 2000 envisaging an empowered and independent Telecommunication Regulatory Commission. The bill, when approved and enacted into a law, would effectively end the government's tight control over the telecommunications sector. In the proposed scenario, the BTTB will just be a public sector entity operating side by side with private operators like cellular phone companies. The level playing field, as the new law visualises, would entail healthy competition and thereby ensure better services for the subscribers who, until now, have been held hostage to BTTB's whims.

Over the years, tight state control has retarded advancement of the country's telecom sector. On the other hand, lack of accountability and transparency has turned the BTTB into a den for corruption, mismanagement and malpractices. The installation charges and call tariff in the country are among the highest in the world while services rank amongst the worst. Moreover, willingness to pay the charges doesn't essentially mean access to basic telephony. The waiting period between submission of a demand notice and installation of connection, according to a recent World Bank survey, could be as long as 13 years. In the face of growing displeasure amongst subscribers and increasing demand amongst people to have access to telecommunication network, the government has finally decided to leave behind old ways. Indeed, it deserves a pat on the back.

In this era of greater interconnectivity, increased private sector participation is imperative for a rapid enhancement of the telecommunications infrastructure. It is hardly possible for any government to solely finance adaptation to the changing needs of time. Thankfully, the government has realised this sooner than later.

What about Compensation for Jarina?

BIMAN authorities have suspended six of their employees from work in the wake of an incident of luggage pilferage at the ZIA on Saturday last. In the stealing of the arriving passenger Jarina Khatun's savings from her suitcase pauperising her public conscience has been stirred with an attendant wave of sympathy for her. But there has not been any development in terms of compensating Jarina for her loss which we demanded immediately following publication of the news about her plight. While welcoming BIMAN's departmental action we would like to ask: when is her loss going to be indemnified? Safe delivery of air passengers' luggage should be a normal affair, and there has to be an agency, or authority, responsible solely for this purpose. Why do people have to complain of burglary and other hassles which they experience while arriving in Bangladesh through ZIA? Since operations at the ZIA have not yet assumed the giant proportion of those in many other international airports, the basic services here ought to be of a certain quality - easily. The authorities must live up to the expectations of the passengers. The Jarina Khatun incident has brought into focus the abject lack of supervision within the airport compound. And the message would be lost if Jarina's plight does not help improve the process of luggage-handling at the very least.

Women's Agenda in Bangladesh: A Political Discourse?

They were making recommendations for the sake of recommendations. They either need not worry or care about it because the political parties would take care of the rest. How can then one expect that the political parties, which would decide and shape the course of Bangladeshi women's future in the 21st century, would be willing to accommodate women's demands when the male-dominated society at large is least serious about it? Isn't it natural then to ask the question that has the women's political empowerment ever been in the political discourse of the country?

including the liberation war of 1971 that gave Bangladesh a distinct heritage and destiny. Liberation meant hopes for democracy, humanism, justice and equity. And therein lay the seeds of women's emancipation and women's rightful place in the running of the newly established state. However, the countervailing trend - strong and entrenched masculine values embedded in the gendered political parties and patriarchal state apparatus created, defined and sustained by men, prevailed over the ideology on which the liberation war was fought. As a result no endeavours were made to make space and an enabling environment to make the politics women-friendly. As a matter of fact, women were effectively barred from taking part in what was meant to be only a male domain. The women's question was not simply raised in any meaningful way. Rather it was dealt with in a clear cut patriarchal and patronizing way as evidenced by the process women were accommodated in the highest decision making of country's political structure.

It is tragic that the question of women's political empowerment could be settled with a few bhavris or chachis (interesting that they had to be married signifying the strong male linkage) in the parliament through a constitutional amendment. No attempts were made to nurture the potentialities of the nascent women leadership who had emerged through the mass movements, especially the movement of 1969, and the liberation war of 1971, within the party structures or in the electoral process. If history is any guide then it is hardly an endeavour to discover that how very differently the male student leaders and female student leaders who fought side by side in country's historic movements were treated by the leadership. How unjust and how cruel the process had been can be easily discerned from the fact that yesterday's male student leaders, all along, have had the chance to be at the helms of country's affairs whereas the female stu-

dent leaders created by the same process have now mostly disappeared in the shadows excepting may be a few who turned themselves as NGO leaders (that also is a very recent fact). How very unfair it is that those who took part in changing the course of our history have now no say in influencing our national politics. Second, the issue of women in politics has had very little intellectual inputs either by the women's organizations, the political elite or the civil society. Despite the recent hullabaloo that is being made over the question of women's reserved seats in the Parliament and plethora of workshops and seminars on women's issues the theorization of women's input into the political process has remained largely

unaddressed. The customary pejorative have been that the constitution does not restrict women from taking part in the electoral process of the country without paying any heed to the deeply embedded masculine values and patriarchy in the state apparatus that impede their unfettered participation. Indeed the women's organizations and women activists have put up a tough fight against such propositions having created a little dent here and there at the societal level. But by and large there have not been any serious debates as to whether or not the influx of women into politics would transform politics or it alone can make the government more responsive to women's concerns and interests. At the functional level the later concept perhaps have made a few minds turned around but at the conceptual level there is total intellectual vacuum.



PANORAMA Dilara Choudhury

The faith that women can transform politics has been questioned and researched in varying forms in the developed nations. these dimensions so that we (the country) can break free from the typical mould set by patriarchy, which propagates that women's particularistic morality, intellectual inefficiency, physical vulnerability, and high degree of emotionalism make them unsuitable to govern. It is time that we have a deeper look at women's political culture and internalize women's involvement in politics, especially at the grassroots level and community work. Without appreciating women's input into politics there can never be an abiding faith that their inclusion in the political process indeed is beneficial and it can help bringing about a change in country's masculine dominated political agenda. If there were no such faith then the matter would indeed be treated trivially. It is at this context I would like to mention how the issue is being addressed by the society at large including the political leadership.

But not in Bangladesh. We have never analyzed how women's desire for broad social reforms, their tradition of sacrifice within the families and their sense of duties and responsibilities can help change the very nature of politics (defined by men) of fierce competitiveness, hierarchy, formality, ritualism, rigidity and emphasis on self-interest (Bystydzienski: 1995). We have never considered that large-scale entry of women would not only broaden the parameters of governance but also can help mitigate the confrontational politics of our country in the context of women's special qualities in maintaining social relations and their negotiation and compromise skill. Obviously then there is an urgent need for deeper appreciation of society, I find that the timely women's agenda is being dealt with in a very casual manner. Apathy and highest degree of insensitivity prevail when it comes to the present women's demand regarding representation at the national legislature. It becomes extremely difficult to push women's cause when the political parties, civil society leaders assume that the entire environment and institutions are gender-neutral when in reality they are not and work in favour of men. This is an arena where the women's organizations face an uphill task. In this respect their task is stupendous i.e. the movement needs to convince not only democrats but also the left and the left leaning politicians and the civil society leaders about the significance of women's input into country's politics and highlight the correct modus vivendi for women's participation in it.

Eventually, when they agreed to make recommendation for enhanced number of women's directly elected reserved seats most of them started to play a number game as if it was a trivial matter, and to my horror one of them said 'why increase it to sixty-four? Make it hundred or more. We know that the political parties would never agree to it.' Implicit in this statement was the fact that they were making recommendations for the sake of recommendations. They either need not worry or care about it because the political parties would take care of the rest. How can then one expect that the political parties, which would decide and shape the course of Bangladeshi women's future in the 21st century, would be willing to accommodate women's demands when the male-dominated society at large is least serious about it? Isn't it natural then to ask the question that has the women's political empowerment ever been in the political discourse of the country? I leave the judgment to the readers.

bringing qualitative change in Bangladeshi politics.

I would argue that since there is a lack of deeper understanding about how the male-female power relations should be arranged the vital issue of women's representation is being treated in a piecemeal manner and without any serious thoughts. The careless and negative statements of various politicians from both the major parties as well as the Prime Minister about women's effective representation in the parliament bear and depict how they have internalized the significance of this vital issue. Unfortunately, this is also evident among majority civil society leaders who are supposed to mediate between the state and the citizens (in this case the women). I discovered this casual treatment of women's effective representation in the national legislature while interacting with a number of civil society leaders in a recent workshop. First, the group had to be literally coerced to admit that special arrangement was needed for making women's parliamentary representation effective. Second, they simply could not grasp that large number of women parliamentarians could not only address women's concerns and interests but also could contribute in making the parliament more effective.

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Strange Finale to a Strange Election

Ashfaque Swapan writes from Berkeley, California

Of course, political pundits had a field day. With the advent of 24-hour cable news channels, the species has proliferated, and every hour of the day and night pundits pontificate on what the electorate thinks and why. But most analysts hedged their bets when it came to predicting who will win. Bush was slightly ahead in most nationwide polls - the margin varied in different polls but all were within the margin of error.



Bush



Gore

Each state has to be won individually, and it's a winner-take-all system (except Nebraska and Maine, which have nine electoral votes together). This means that if Gore wins in California by as much as a single vote and latest projections (I am trying to say this with a straight face) indicate he will win the state he gets the state's 54 electoral votes. This is where Gore got an edge pre-election national polls gave a misleadingly rosy picture for Bush when many electoral college votes were really up in the air. National polls that gave a lead to Bush included his home state Texas, for instance, where he has a whopping 30-point lead.

On the other hand, Gore won in many of the larger states including California (54 votes), New York (33 votes) and most of the New England states, which gave him a shot at winning the magic 270 electoral votes. In the complicated math that followed, Florida with its 25 votes has become crucial for the ultimate winner.

Simply put, whoever becomes the next president has to win Florida. With a difference of barely a few hundred votes between them another issue has kicked in this unheard-of presidential election. State law in Florida requires that if the difference between two candidates is less than half per cent of the votes cast that's over twenty thousand votes an automatic recount takes place.

Meanwhile all pre-election major polls had given Bush the edge, while it turns out that thanks to his massive lead in California, Gore seems well set to end up winning the popular vote. It is not a good time to be a poll-

ster in the U.S. now, to put it very, very mildly. The bizarre turn of events is a fitting finale though that is hardly the right word at this point to a strange, frenzied campaign. On election eve, a whole slew of states remained toss-ups, and both campaigns went crazy trying to figure out the possible permutations and rescheduling last-minute campaign stops to help their candidate add that extra fillip which will tilt the state in their candidate's favour.

As the countdown began for the final lap of the electoral race for the world's only remaining superpower or hyperpower, as the French slyly say the two main contestants scrambled for a mad rush to touch as many bases as possible. Gore went on a gruelling 30-hour political sloop that took him to seven cities in the far-flung states of Iowa, Missouri, Michigan and Florida before returning to Carthage, Tennessee, where he cast his vote.

Bush barnstormed through Tennessee, Wisconsin, Iowa and Arkansas and returned to his

home base in the Texas capital of Austin. A strange paradox has haunted this presidential election: it is one of the most tightly contested presidential elections since 1960 when Democratic candidate John F. Kennedy beat Richard Nixon by a whisker, yet enthusiasm for the polls this time around is so low that about half the electorate is expected to sit at home for this one.

Of course, political pundits had a field day. With the advent of 24-hour cable news channels, the species has proliferated, and every hour of the day and night pundits pontificate on what the electorate thinks and why. But most analysts hedged their bets when it came to predicting who will win. Bush was slightly ahead in most nationwide polls but all were within the margin of error.

This complicated electoral math has given rise to the bizarre possibility that the next president may lose the popular vote and still get elected and now Bush seems to be the most likely candi-

date for that dubious distinction. It has happened previously in this country three, most recently in 1888. As pundits and pollsters spent sleepless nights, the electorate seemed far less enthusiastic. To be sure, the political pundits had a lot to say about that as well. One pundit decorously put it as a choice between "character" and "competence." If truth be told, reality is less pretty. It seems fair to say that a substantial part of the electorate probably finds the choice unappealing it is a choice between the shallowness of Bush, who runs out of thoughts when required to speak for an extended period and ties himself in knots when explaining his own tax and social security programs, and Al Gore, who had three makeovers in three debates so that all that intelligence and grasp of detail seems focused on one issue Al Gore, who can't make up his mind who he is. Having said that, passing any comment on the tendencies of the U.S. electorate is an exercise fraught with peril, as pollsters and network media have discovered the hard way. It was not long ago that political pundits across the nation wrote a premature obituary of President Bill Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, only to receive a smart rap on their knuckles by the electorate. Another reason the average voter is disillusioned maybe the degree to which the presidential political process has been an over by handers and political spinmasters. A candidate who runs for the presidency in this country has to cater to a diverse electorate. What, indeed, do an avid environmentalist in the sylvan state of Oregon, a single mother in an inner city, an affluent suburban voter in the

bedroom communities that encircle many metropolitan areas like a donut, and a gun-loving conservative rural resident in the deep south have in common? Not much, and presidential candidates get around this problem by resorting to the most hallowed of political skills fudging the issues and promoting themselves with fuzzy advertisements of how nice, lovable individuals they are, and packaging themselves according to the ministrations of political consultants and pollsters.

Amid this tightly orchestrated campaign, consumer activist Ralph Nader has stirred up the pot, much to the chagrin of the two-party duopoly, whose minions have refused to let him participate in the presidential debates. Not since maverick Texas tycoon H. Ross Perot in 1992 has a third party candidate created so much consternation. This time around, the Republicans were delighted, because Nader's support hit Gore in Oregon.

At the end of it all, all told, a staggering \$3 billion was spent in this year's presidential, congressional and gubernatorial races. As the day of reckoning has come, it's not only the politicians who are nervous. Pollsters are eating humble pie.

In the previous election, political scientists used models to predict the outcome of the presidential election several months beforehand and one model came closer to the actual tally than the exit polls. This year, a few months back, several political scientists presented models all predicted a Gore victory, the difference was in degree. Bush was leading the polls by 20 per cent at that time.

In a strange juncture of a very strange election, it is the pollsters who have been beaten by the political scientists in the popular vote. And the nation is still waiting to find out who will win the electoral college and be the next president.

Now evidently the Punjabis are out to demolish the Bhutto influence in politics (now overloaded with the Afghan refugee crisis). But the other services, the armed forces, financial institutions, the private sector, agriculture are also monopolised by the Punjab. The inherent weaknesses of the other provinces is a sad reality, magnifying the huge disparity. The British canal system in the Punjab increased the Punjab leverage. Earlier, even the One Unit concept did not work in the then West Pakistan. Huge hydro and gas projects have not yet created a situation towards a more balanced disparity.

Pakistan's solutions lie within, with the Punjabis; and with the big landlords (feudal zamindari system, which is extensive in Sindh also).

Pakistan can never return to political stability unless and until the Punjab-majority shadow over the nation is demoralised (Opinion, DS, Nov 2).

The break up of Pakistan leading to the loss of East Pakistan and emergence of Bangladesh is also related to similar conditions prevailing since 1947 to 1971.

SMS Zaman, Ex-Member, National Board of Revenue, Advocate, Supreme Court

Political solution for Pakistan

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To the Editor ...

PM on ZIA

Sir, Our powerful prime minister talks through all the time, with blistering attacks on all and the sundry, sparing none (even the judiciary), but why she is so soft on ZIA, namely the ZIA International Airport Dhaka, where the crooks and gangsters are running an open empire of fleeing and harassing the passengers inside and outside the airport?

There are several security agencies working there under government supervision and control, but they are messing up the operation clean-up, and there is no sign of professional efficiency in a government which takes pride in its performance. The introduction to Sonar Bangla, on alighting at the airport, is a disgrace to national pride, and a black spot on the authorities who manage the airport. How many SPA cases

have been recorded at ZIA? The SPA should be scrapped if it cannot be applied without fear and favour. If we cannot run an airport, how do we expect to run a country?

Ali/Zabr Dhaka

Separate lane for rickshaw

Sir, It is being observed that in many roads, separate lane for rickshaw is being constructed by placing concrete block which I consider a good move to control the unruly rickshaw-pullers to some extent. But these rickshaw lanes are very narrow moreover it creates parking problem. Therefore I would like to request the authorities concerned to make the lane littler wider so that at least two rickshaws can ply freely and there are enough space for

another to park.

Anvir Adil Khan 41, Eskaton garden Ramna Dhaka

Retention of English

Sir, This is about language controversy that often erupts with such intensity that it clouds our rational thinking. The stock arguments of persons who oppose the retention of the former official language need not be repeated, but these do not stand to reason in view of following facts:

English language has become a Lingua Franca and is most widely used all over the world as means of easy communication. Our neighbouring countries have not discarded it, rather, they have assimilated it in their own culture. Since we have already an

advantage of knowing such a useful language and our students have to learn it in order to study, say, Engineering, Medicine, Law, etc. how can we reverse the process? For example, can we discard thousands of cases reported in English language law journals which are absolutely necessary especially in our courts?

Population explosion in a smaller territory is our main problem. About three million Bangladeshis now work and live abroad relieving pressure at home also by remittance of money. They may now constitute about two per cent of our present population. Without knowledge of English, they could not have achieved this. However, it is a pointer to easing the problem of educated unemployed by means of imparting knowledge of and training in English. A Bangladeshi national is expected not to forget his culture and the

expatriates have successfully projected it abroad from time to time.

We should not commit the same mistake made by Muslims of this subcontinent which had to be rectified by Sir Syed Ahmed about one hundred years ago.

SMS Zaman, Ex-Member, National Board of Revenue, Advocate, Supreme Court

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