

# The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S.M. Ali

Dhaka, Friday, December 22, 2000

## Self-reliance in Policy Formulation

THAT no self-respecting country would like its policy agenda to be set by a multilateral organisation such as the World Bank or IMF cannot be in question. Such a scenario would not merely be hurtful to the sovereignty sensibility of a country it must also be regarded as out of tune with the high place that sovereignty of nations has been accorded in the UN Charter. Moreover, it could be deemed as being antithetical to the very notions of economic or political liberties across the board which the international organizations seem to prize so very much.

It is also being increasingly felt by countries at the receiving end of what is being dubbed as 'donor-driven policies' that policy ownership is important for a country to move ahead with its reform programmes.

Having said that, we turn to the 'policy inroads' alleged to have been made by the Bretton Woods institutions in our country's economic management parameters. The reasons why we are being 'told to do certain things' by the World Bank are not far to seek, though. We have had a vast reservoir of talent, know-how and expertise always in a state of readiness to be pressed into service for purposes of national policy formulation. Bangladesh's list of highly qualified, committed and patriotic civil society leaders, economists and planners compares very well with that of any country in the South or South East Asian regions. And, they have been no lock-jaws either, ideas having torrentially flowed out of them whenever the situation demanded. But most of those obviously got lost into the ether.

Take the instance of the huge output documented by the task forces set up by Prof Rehman Sobhan as an adviser back in the 1991 caretaker government which contained detailed policy guidelines for accelerating the process of national advancement. This was to be unceremoniously consigned on to the cold storage by the successor elected government. Neither the then prime minister Khaleda Zia nor Saifur Rahman, her finance minister, turned over the pages of the task force reports to see what was in them, let alone try to implement some of the recommendations.

Almost as a rule there has been no coordination between the think-tanks or research bodies and the government ministries and agencies, so that most of the intellectual wealth generated from time to time went down the drain creating a void in the process which courted extraneous stuffing. Then we accepted all sorts of conditions just to let the money in knowing fully well some of them could be difficult to fulfil for the 'social or political cost' they entailed. And, as we flunked on them down the line we would invite fresh conditions on us.

However, many of the conditions imposed by the World Bank are not *per se* against our national interest, such as the ones demanding we curb systems losses in WASA or PDB. Why did we wait for the WB to spell these out for us when they were realities staring in the face? Likewise, we should have placed the banking sector reform, legal reform and governance reform high on our national agenda of our own volition without the World Bank having to din these into our ears.

We fully share the spirit of self-reliance in policy formulation which our economists voiced at the meeting on Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Initiative (SAPRI), Bangladesh, held at the office of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) on Monday last. But so long as the shortcomings we have highlighted above are given a short shrift we shall keep courting counselling from outside quarters, whether we like it or not.

IT has now taken on the form and content of a well-established and widely observed annual commemoration. Our Victory Day is both an occasion for reverential remembrance and for joyful celebration. On this historic day we pay homage to the martyrs and gratefully remember the sacrifices made by the millions. The day is also a celebration of victory in a struggle drenched with blood, sweat and tear that made us an independent nation. It is an occasion rich with both solemn ritual and festive abandon.

At the time of our liberation war it was said by many in foreign media that, 'if blood is the price of freedom, Bangladesh has paid more than its due.' The blood sacrificed and suffering undergone by the people were part of a collective enterprise that was not only home-grown but spontaneous as well. It is now part of the folklore of our liberation war that in sheer number the illiterate rural freedom fighters far outnumbered the urban literate ones. For that reason and because of the missions assigned to them the number of casualties among them was also higher. As a group, the freedom fighters drawn from the rural poor shed more of their blood than was due. This is so both because of the circumstances of their participation and the 'independence dividends' eventually enjoyed by them. Being away from urban centres they were the least politicised or organised, to begin with. They did not have much comprehension of the underlying causes of the conflagration nor could envision what freedom would mean for them or aspire after a goal of their own. Yet their dedication to the patriotic struggle was complete and participation wholehearted. But strangely, though not unexpectedly, at the end of the nine months' struggle the brave sons and daughters of the 'soil' who survived simply melted away into the villages from where they came. Those among them who attained martyrdom remained buried in unknown graves or were preyed upon by vultures and other carnivores.

In the annual commemoration of victory and the homage paid to the martyrs of the liberation war there is hardly any mention of these heroes and heroines belonging to the common mass who gave so much for so little. Every year the newspapers publish the worn-out photos of defence personnel, civilians and intellectuals who became martyrs in the cause of freedom. There's no doubt that these groups of martyrs fully deserve the recogni-

Everything about these commemorative programmes is in order except that they don't tell the whole story. Majority of our martyrs who came from the villages remain unsung and unknown. Theirs is a tale of missing millions, missing from the collective memory that suffers from selective amnesia. It is true that ours is no longer a history of emperors, kings and the rise and fall of dynasties. But nor is it a history of all the people irrespective of class, caste or creed focussing on nation-building in peace and war. History is still being written in the images or interests of those who rule and sequester the benefits of ruling.

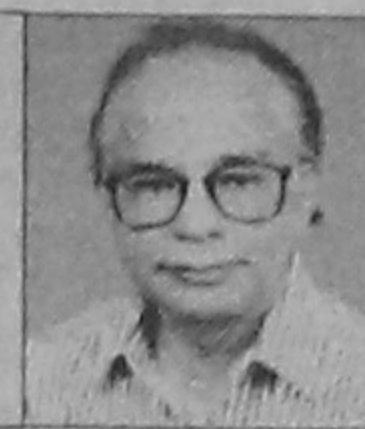
tion and honour that they are getting from the nation. When their contributions and sacrifices are discussed in seminars, meetings and in the mass media the nation, particularly the new generation, is reminded of the debt of gratitude that is owed to them. Everything about these commemorative programmes is in order except that they don't tell the whole story. Majority of our martyrs who came from the villages remain unsung and unknown. Theirs is a tale of missing millions, missing from the collective memory that suffers from selective amnesia. It is true that ours is no longer a history of emperors, kings and the rise and fall of dynasties. But nor is it a history of all the people irrespective of class, caste or creed focussing on nation-building in peace and war. History is still being written in the images or interests of those who rule and sequester the benefits of ruling.

Bangladesh is not an exception in presenting a fragmented history of the past, particularly dealing with people's struggle for freedom and independence. Dominant groups, particularly the urban elite including the

## Our Martyrs

### IN MY VIEW

Hasnat Abdul Hye



middle-class, enjoy a primacy in the conventional historiography that has long been characterised by academic elitism. Originating as the ideological product of British colonial rule this elitism survived the end of colonialism and was later assimilated into neo-nationalist forms of historical discourse. Elitist historiography of the neo-nationalist type that assigns a superior role to the urban elite (including the middle-class intelligentsia) also gives almost exclusive credit to this class for the achievement of both national consciousness (nationalism) and freedom. While it is a fact that the urban elite acts as the catalyst for developing national consciousness (nationalism) by virtue of their occupying vantage points culturally, socially and politically, it is a distortion of fact to claim that the struggle for freedom is waged only or even

mainly by them. The travesty and shortcoming of this elitist historiography is revealed by its failure to assess and put on record the participation of the non-elite mass in wars of liberation. This intellectual inadequacy follows directly from the narrow and partial view of politics espoused in the elitist approach because of its class character. As a result what clearly is left out of this unhistorical historiography is the 'politics of the people.' The subaltern classes and groups comprising the mass of the working class and the poor in the rural areas who are the majority of the principal actors i.e. freedom fighters, are relegated to the background or pushed to oblivion as has been the case in Bangladesh, by and large. This is the characteristic fate of most of the elite-driven populist movement that rides on the back of the mass in the name

of their emancipation.

Beginning from the early eighties there has been a growing awareness about the politically incorrect and historically unfair character of the biased tradition of recording the past in this part of the world. Inspired by the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, particularly those in his *Prison Note Book* an academic movement was initiated by Ranjit Guha for writing history in South Asia from the perspective of the subalterns, i.e. those who are not 'elites' (including the middle-class intelligentsia) and are considered of 'inferior rank.' The subalterns have the general attribute of subordination and as such can only be understood or defined properly in the context of a binary relationship where 'the other' is the ruling group that dominates society, politics and the economy. Subaltern studies is, therefore, an attempt to put the class (binary) relationships under different contexts in proper perspectives. They tell the story of the non-elite in their struggle to survive under various forms of exploitations and their occasional dare to challenge these forms of subordination, partially or in totality.

In Bangladesh we have so far only a few sporadic and anemic written forays into conceptualisation of the historiography of the subaltern following in the footsteps of the South Indian Studies. Beyond such pious wish and tentative loud thinking nothing concrete or substantive has taken place in any of the branches of knowledge where the new paradigm is applicable. Even in imitation we have proved to be poor, shallow and dull laggards.

It is in the backdrop of this intellectual vacuum and misrepresentation that we remember our martyrs and recall the history of liberation war year after year. The elite and the middle-class intelligentsia glorify their own contributions and the sacrifices of those belonging to their class. The vast majority remain consigned to oblivion or are relegated to the footnotes of history. But there is a glimmer of hope, faint though it may be. Where our historians have failed and academics are now merely toying

with the idea as latecomers, a young couple has reproduced the story of the subaltern's role in the liberation war. Tareq and Catherine Masud's *Mukitir Katha* is a historiography in celluloid that sets the record straight by looking at history from below. This documentary along with a short one on the role of ordinary poor women not only adds a missing and poignant dimension to our history of liberation but highlights the incredibly courageous role of our rural women. Since subalterns are subordinated by reasons of class, caste and gender, these two documentaries are doubly revealing of the facts of subordination by class and gender.

Antonio Gramsci, the pioneer in subaltern ideology, envisaged a six-point strategy for undertaking wide ranging studies to cover the field. In the introduction to the methodology of the subaltern studies, he wrote: 'As long as the subalterns are not integrated in to the State their history cannot be part of the history of the nation.' But in order to be integrated into the state they had to be part of the history first. In other words, their contributions and sacrifices had to be acknowledged before their rights and roles can become firmly entrenched. Such integration can be a matter for the long haul, but as the Chinese sage said long ago, 'every long journey starts with the first step.' The Masuds have taken that giant step forward. It is for the intellectuals and academicians to rewrite our history in the mode of the paradigmatic shift suggested by Gramsci. The political correctness and intellectual rigour of the new approach should overcome ideological inhibitions for the queasy. If this is not palatable and persuasive enough for those sensitive about the radical ideology of Marxist Gramsci, the following excerpts from the prison diary (a pure coincidence with Gramsci's *Prison Note-Book*) of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Protestant theologian executed by the Nazis in 1942, may be quoted as an alternative but with the same force of rhetoric: 'to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of those excluded, under suspicion, ill-treated, powerless, oppressed and scorned, in short those who suffer, is the true history of mankind.'

Ultimately, the case for a new historiography departing from the prevailing elitist one rests on neither ideology nor dogma but elementary justice and fair play.



Majority of freedom fighter came from the villages: A still from *Mukitir Gaan*

## Friday Mailbox

### Appeal for honorary citizenship

Sir, We have recently read about the contributions to the war of liberation by the freedom fighter, W. A. S. Ouderland, a Dutch-born Australian. He is the only foreigner to receive from the Government of the people's Republic of Bangladesh, the Gallantry Award of 'Bir Pratik'. Two writers, including Abdul Gaffar Choudhury, have associated me with his contributions as his wartime aide.

His contributions were enormous, both in the field and in strategy. During the nine-month occupation period of 1971, we used to consult and take decisions which would contribute in any form to the liberation war. Accordingly, we took into confidence two management trainees, Abdus Salam and Humayun Kabir Khan, and terminated their services, only to facilitate them to receive guerrilla training in India. After liberation, they returned from India and they were re-instated. There were some executives in the Bata-Tongli site from West Pakistan and we had to be extra cautious.

Mohammed Newaz, a retired colonel from the Baluch Regiment was the Personnel & Public Relations Manager of Bata-Lahore. He was the brother of Captain Shah Newaz, the trusted lieutenant of Netaji Subash Chandra Bose. These two brothers had two distinctly opposite political views, one for united India and other for divided India. Col. Newaz was senior to Lt. Gen. Niazi and Lt. Gen. Tikka Khan and he was highly respected by both of them and his introduction of Mr. Ouderland to these two generals was a great advantage for him to carry out in due course of time his desired mission to help Mukti Bahini as he had easy access to them (the two Generals) and he was taken as their 'trusted friend.'

Mr. Ouderland was so determined to help the Mukti Bahini that he changed his residence to a secluded place, sent his wife to Australia, emptied one water tank on the roof of his house to store arms and ammunitions and took incredible risks with his life. Usually at night, many Mukti Bahini used to visit him at his residence. He often granted leave to his bearers to keep his house empty. At his request, I shifted my family from Dhaka to Bata-Tongli to live in a house within the factory premises.

I received the Gallantry Award of 'Bir-Pratik' on his behalf from the Government on 15<sup>th</sup> December, 1992. At my request, the Government subsequently sent the Award to our High Commission in Canberra, Australia and the then High Commissioner, Maj. Gen. Shamsul Huq, in a befitting ceremony, arranged presentation of the Gallantry Award to Mr. Ouderland, where his wife and their only daughter were also invited for which their return air tickets and hotel accommodation were arranged by the High Commission. Special permission had to be obtained from the Governor General of Australia as otherwise no Australian citizen is allowed to receive any gallantry award from any foreign country.

In 1972 I wrote to the Bangladesh Government to grant honorary citizenship to Mr. Ouderland in recognition of his contributions to our war of liberation. In reply, I received a written communication from the Ministry of Home Affairs that my proposal/request could not be considered. In the recent past, the Government has granted honor-

ary citizenship to Gordon Greenidge of West Indies, former Bangladesh Cricket Coach and Miss Valerie for her selfless contributions in setting up a hospital for rehabilitation of the paralysed at Savar, Dhaka. It is my firm conviction that the extraordinary contributions of Mr. Ouderland deserve consideration for recognition and I would thus appeal to the government to consider granting honorary citizenship to him.

K M Abdul Hai  
Former Director,  
Bata Shoe Co. (Bangladesh) Ltd

### Preaching to India?

Sir, With reference to your editorial 'Vajpayee's Irresponsible Comment' (Dec 13th), as an Indian I find it hard to digest the preaching on secularism from the intelligentsia of an Islamic country which, itself, does not subscribe to the concept of secularism. You have taken a lopsided approach by ignoring the sentiments of Hindus, and highlighting only one viewpoint. It must be clearly understood that the disputed structure in Ayodhya was a symbol of the invasion of India, and Indians cannot be denied the right to regain their self respect lost as a consequence of that experience.

Thus before pointing the finger at India, which is home to people of all religions prospering due to a tolerant society, you had better put your efforts towards helping to improve the plight of minorities of your own country.



Rajeev Kumar  
Mumbai, India

### Diplomatic licence

Sir, I was appalled to read in Khaleej Times the irresponsible and reckless remarks made by the deputy high commissioner of Pakistan in Dhaka regarding the 1971 East Pakistan Tragedy. Since reading the report I believe, the diplomat has been recalled from Dhaka by the Pakistan foreign office.

This man unfortunately reflects the personality traits of many of Pakistan's senior diplomats: arrogant, ill-informed and pompous. They are the bottom of the heap as far as international diplomatic behaviour is concerned.

The Pakistani military government would be wise to carry out a thorough review of the foreign office and introduce a merit-based promotion system. Otherwise men like the said deputy high commissioner will be flying our flag for us all over the world, with unbridled vanity and incompetence. The army should take this man to task and remove him from government service.

The Dhaka incident should be a wake-up call for Pakistani diplomats so that in future they will be more sensitive to their hosts' sentiments when they are abroad and take their work seriously and professionally.

Aliza Ahmed  
London, UK  
Courtesy: Khaleej Times

## Who Elected George W. Bush?

In democracy, conflicts are acceptable in the interest of consensus. But controversy is bad because it erodes confidence and diminishes consensus. Who elected George W. Bush will be forgotten soon, provided he can handle the controversy surrounding it. In the first one year, that remains to be the biggest challenge of his 'accidental' presidency.

### CROSSTALK

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan



either by the elder Bush or by his mentors Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon. He also suggested that as part of that design, president-elect's brother Jeb Bush, who is the Governor of Florida, stood by ready to deliver certification, and, if needed, the votes of Florida's state legislature.

So, while the Republicans are happy that George W. Bush is coming to the White House, the Democrats and non-partisan Americans attribute his victory to a narrow ideological majority on the US Supreme Court. It means that the new US president is going to have to overcome enormous doubts and scepticism surrounding his election to the Oval Office. The great conserva-

tive American writer Robert A. Nisbet aptly stated the task ahead of George Bush when he differentiated 'power' from 'authority'. 'Power,' he said, 'was based upon force.' Authority is 'based ultimately upon consent of those under it.'

In a way, the most critical peculiarity of election 2000 has been the bifurcation of power and authority in the office of an elected president. George W. Bush hasn't been elected by popular votes. The Supreme Court ruling leaves doubt whether an effective recounting of votes in Florida could have swayed electoral votes in favour of Al Gore. That means, if not for the Supreme Court ruling, Bush's

election spreads on the thin ice of quite a few subjunctions.

More than anything, the experience of 2000 gave the American people a chastening glimpse of how the supposedly best method of power transfer could be beset with its own limitations. Not that electoral deadlocks are unheard-of in the US history, but never before in its 200-year history did the Supreme Court intervene in elections in which the court itself was a central issue. At a time when the presidency and Congress have been rocked by scandals, Americans needed one institution they could trust. By all means, it appears that the Supreme Court's interference in the election process came as a blow to that trust.

One sure-fire outcome of the presidential elections this year is that while the US Congress and the Senate stood divided, the divisiveness also plagued the people and the courts. The Florida Supreme Court was split 4-3 when it ordered recount of the

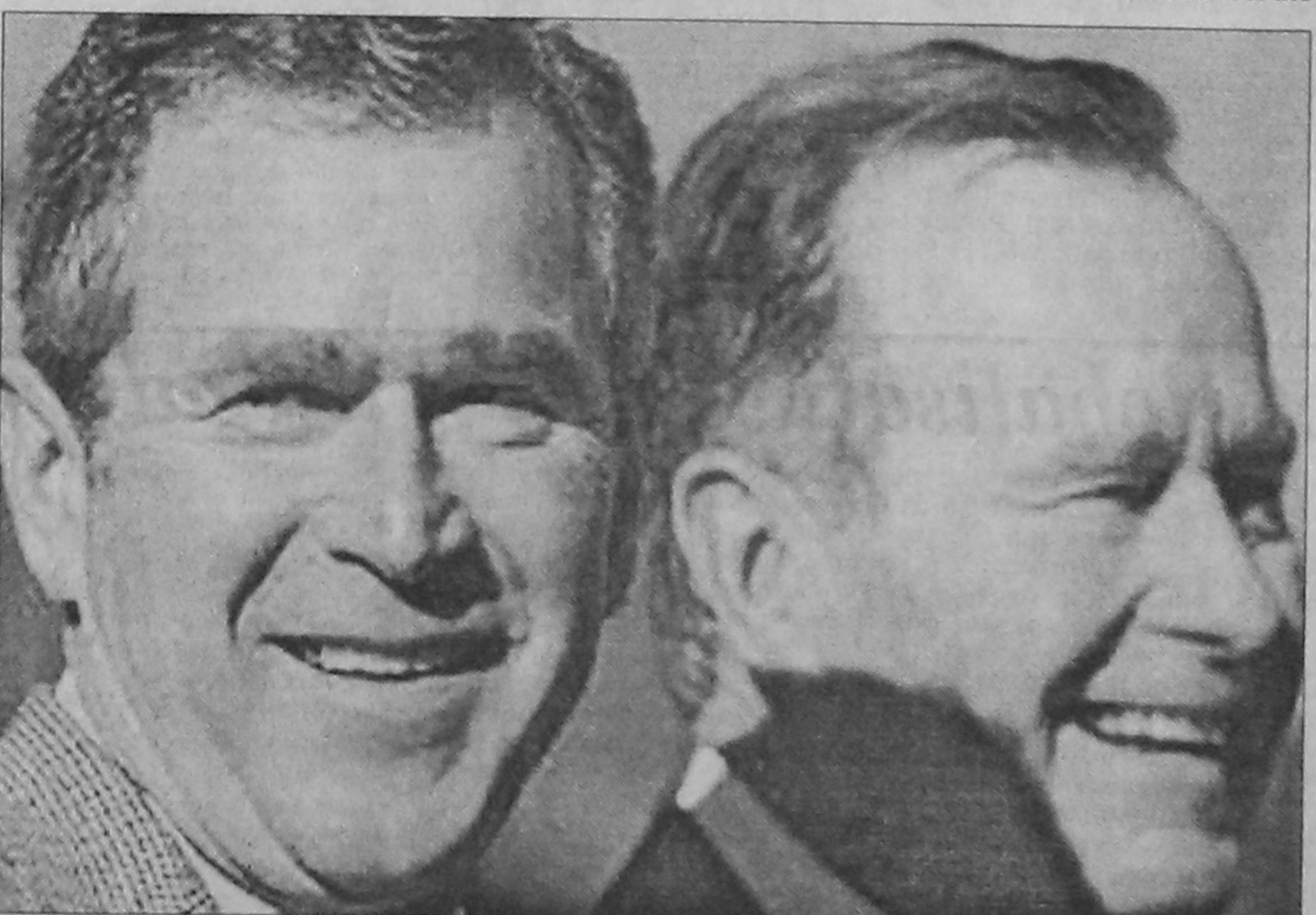
undervotes in Florida. The US Supreme Court was divided 5-4, when it overturned the order of the Florida Court and ruled in favour of George W. Bush.

As the country tries to recover from the throes of these divisions, there is a subliminal question ringing in the American minds. Who elected George W. Bush? The most appropriate answer is that he has been elected by the system. The people who voted, the politicians who contested, the electors who corroborated, and the justices who differed from each other in their deliberations, they all worked to support that system. And in spite of the delays and difficulties, that system ultimately worked.

Then again it also worked to prove that although the crisis of power was overcome, the crisis of authority could still be a problem. It seems that George W. Bush already knew it when he unveiled his transition slogan, 'Bringing America Together'. He is going around asking Democrats to join his cabinet to show his willingness for a government by consensus. He also understands it fully well that unless he succeeded in bridging the rift, which runs through America, his power as president might lack in the authority of a national leader.

A similar realisation also dawned upon the Democrats before Al Gore gave his concession speech. Party stalwarts like Mario Cuomo and Jesse Jackson wanted to fight, but National Committee Chairman Edward Rendell and Senator Robert Torricelli wanted to quit. Al Gore had to decide if it was the right time for him to quit. Not only did he choose to quit, but also asked everybody to close their ranks behind the president-elect and support him.

That is where democracy scored its victory in the end. Even if there was a deadlock in the elections and a sustained period of political bickering, what mattered is that the transfer of power went on smoothly. In democracy, conflicts are acceptable in the interest of consensus. But controversy is bad because it erodes confidence and diminishes consensus. Who elected George W. Bush will be forgotten soon, provided he can handle the controversy surrounding it. In the first one year, that remains to be the biggest challenge of his 'accidental' presidency.



One columnist has even argued that there was a dynastic design at work in the ruling of the Supreme Court, seven of its nine justices being either named or elevated either by the elder Bush or by his mentors Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon.