

LETTER FROM EUROPE

Election 2000 and Democracy in America

So, finally the legal wrangle is over and America has got a new President-elect and God willing (perhaps I should have left God out of this bizarre goddess affair), the world's most powerful democracy will have a President on January 20, 2001. Thanks to a craftily-engineered "coup" mounted by the Republican controlled Federal Supreme Court, for the first time in many decades, the Republican party will not only occupy the Presidency, but also control both houses of Congress (the Senate because of Mr. Cheney's casting vote). In other words, all organs of government the executive, legislative and the judiciary will be in the hands of the same party. (The only Supreme Court judge who came out unblemished was the dissenting judge, Justice John Paul Stevens.) Yet, latest opinion polls indicate that most of the Americans are glad that this unhappy chapter (the post election squabble) of their recent history is over and that they are quite happy with the outcome. They seem to have accepted the results of the election with surprising stoicism in spite of their doubtful legitimacy. During this episode, most people seemed to be interested in achieving the "finality", not justice. But in certain quarters questions have been raised about the health of democracy in America. Others have even gone further and cast doubts on the nature of democracy practised there. Is it a constitutional democracy (government of the people, for the people and by the people) or an oligarchy-in-disguise (a government of the people, for the people but by a powerful few)?

In 1832, the French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, "A perfect liberty of mind exists in America just as long as the sovereign majority has yet to decide its course. But once the majority has made up its mind, then all contrary thought must cease, and all controversy must be abandoned, not at the risk of death or physical punishment, but rather at the more subtle and more intolerable pain of ostracism, of being shunned by one's fellows, of being rejected by the society". What is extraordinary about this statement is that it is still valid after one hundred and sixty eight years, as Al Gore has just found out, because it seems that the Democratic party bosses will not nominate him to run in the next presidential elections.

when the founding fathers pompously declared, "We, the People of the United States", they really meant only the European-American property-owning males. Actually, the founding fathers were not particularly concerned about the introduction of full democracy. Their primary concern was to put in place a system of government that would work in those very special circumstances. Women of all races, the poor and the minorities were excluded. In spite of the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1869 (nearly one hundred years after the Declaration of Independence), which stated that "the right to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of race, colour or previous condition of servitude", the Southern states invented ingenious legal devices such as the "grandfather clause" and imposed complex poll taxes and discriminatory literacy or understanding tests to keep the minorities, especially the African-Americans out of polling booths. Unfortunately it was not until 1965, nearly one hundred years after the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, that the Voting Rights Act of 1965 suspended these tests. The federal government was also authorised to protect the voting rights of the minorities. The Nineteenth Amendment (1920) finally gave women the right to vote. In spite of all this, while in many countries of the world, voting is not only a right but

also an obligation of a citizen, voting in the US, in reality, is a privilege, which is granted and often manipulated by the powerful at their will and discretion. One has to go through a lengthy bureaucratic process in order to register to vote and again that registration must take place thirty days before an election. While in most European democracies, a citizen is automatically registered by the government to vote (in Australia and New Zealand a citizen is not only registered by government but also compelled to vote by law), it seems that in the American democracy, a citizen has to fight against all sorts of odds to establish his right to vote. In spite of all this he stands a good chance of being disenfranchised if he belongs to the minorities or is poor and/or elderly. While in the US, the election day is a working day, in most other democratic countries of the world, the election day is a full or half holiday so that the citizens can exercise their right to vote without seeking special leave for this purpose. No wonder, the US has the dubious privilege of having the lowest voter turnout rate in the western world except Switzerland. So many obstacles are placed to obstruct an easy exercise of the right to vote that often the poor, the elderly and the minorities, (who do not have enough education, time and perseverance) cannot exercise this so-called sacred right and that suits the dominant group fine. As mentioned before, important

changes have taken place in the political arena, which, at least in theory, have given equal rights to the women, minorities and other disadvantaged groups. But have these changes been as profound or as far-reaching as one would like to think? Is America today a real democracy or is it still a crypto-oligarchy perhaps more broad-based than before? Well, pause for a moment and consider a nation where: 1) money is the principal factor that determines the nomination of a candidate in an election for any major political office; 2) the voting function itself is not simple and automatic but for all practical purposes is a hurdles race for the underprivileged; 3) voter rolls are often purged in such a manner that voters belonging to a particular ethnic community are disproportionately disenfranchised; 4) the highest court of the nation prevents the recount of tens of thousands of votes cast largely by the minorities, poor and elderly; 5) there are no uniform electoral laws, no uniform procedures and standards so that they are open to manipulation by the powerful; 6) sub-standard voting technology (flawed machines) is used in poor and minority areas so that the votes are rejected by election supervisors (often appointed on partisan lines) at the time of counting them; 7) the nation's confidence in the judge as the impartial guardian of the law has been shaken; 8) opinion polls are often manipulated by a few people; 9) expedi-

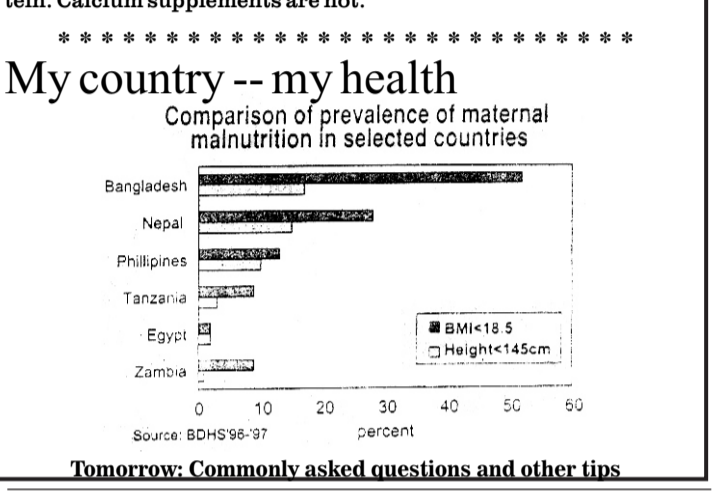
ency is more important than principles, and then decide whether this country's government can be considered as a democratic one, in the strictest sense of the term. In order to be fair, at the same time, the reader may also consider whether in practice, it is at all possible to have a really democratic government (government of the people, for the people and by the people) anywhere in the world. It is up to the reader to decide upon the nature of American democracy. Although I do not like the inherent hypocrisy of the American system, I cannot but admit that the system, despite its imperfections, seems to have adequately addressed the succession issue by guaranteeing a smooth transfer of power and therefore, its continuity. The succession problem, as any student of history knows, has plagued most human civilisations and eventually destroyed them causing fratricidal wars. For better or for worse, the magic (or the strength, if you like) of the American system lies in its resilience. In 1832, the French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, "A perfect liberty of mind exists in America just as long as the sovereign majority has yet to decide its course. But once the majority has made up its mind, then all contrary thought must cease, and all controversy must be abandoned, not at the risk of death or physical punishment, but rather at the more subtle and more intolerable pain of ostracism, of being shunned by one's fellows, of being rejected by the society". What is extraordinary about this statement is that it is still valid after one hundred and sixty eight years, as Al Gore has just found out, because it seems that the Democratic party bosses will not nominate him to run in the next presidential elections. The message is: Do not challenge the system. If you do, you are a goner.



Dr. Rubaiul Murshed All health information to keep you up to date

Around the world Good news for Patients having chemotherapy Undoubtedly getting chemotherapy is awful. Many patients have to bear tidal waves of nausea and insistent fatigue. But for lots of men and women, another side effect is equally traumatic: that is 'hair loss'. Thankfully, a recent study suggests that this distress may become a thing of the past. That trial put an experimental gel to the test. Researchers at Glaxo Wellcome rubbed it on rats with cancer before treating them with chemotherapy. Half kept their coats; the rest experienced some hair loss. By contrast, 90 per cent of the rats that didn't get the gel lost all their fur. Researchers say the gel temporarily stops cells in the hair follicle from dividing, shielding them from chemo. They are hopeful that one day the gel will be available as a hair product that a patient would apply right before getting chemo. But there are still hurdles to jump.

Health and nutrition It's better to get your vitamins from food than from supplements. This is almost always true. Foods provide a nutritious combination of nutrients (vitamins, minerals, protein, fat and carbohydrates) that may act in concert with each other. For example, dietary protein increases the body's absorption of calcium; Milk foods, excellent sources of calcium, are also good sources of protein. Calcium supplements are not.



Anti-Indian Riots in Nepal

...The other side of the coin is the unemployed angry Nepali youth burning Hrithik effigies and destroying anything Indian that he can lay his hands on. The anti-Indian riots will subside and things will normalize. But the anti-Indian feelings will not only continue to simmer but augment. The solution lies not in invoking the India-Nepal Treaty of 1950 but by stop taking Nepal for granted...

by Anees Jillani

I have never liked the latest Indian-cum-Pakistani heart-throb Hrithik Roshan; and have not been able to understand as to how he became so popular just by starring in one movie unless it has something to do with his bulging biceps. However, this does not mean at all that I would love the people of Nepal burning his cardboard effigies, attacking businesses, calling for strikes and getting killed to protest Hrithik's allegedly saying in a television interview that he did not like Nepal or its people. Hrithik denies making any derogatory statements about Nepal and calls upon the people of Nepal that unless they see proof of the interview, they should not go by hearsay. Several people have so far been killed and many injured; cinemas across Nepal have suspended the screening of Hindi films following calls by students groups for cinemas to boycott all Hindi films for ten days. Private cable operators switched off television channels showing Hindi movies and other Hindi programmes. A major wheel-jam strike has been called for two days on January 2nd and 3rd in this regard by more than seven leftist parties. Frankly, I am not surprised by the reaction and the ensuing riots. The naive ones would keep shouting from whatever forum they could find to explain that Hrithik never said these things about Nepal; what they fail to realise is that it would not change things even if the Indian actor divorces his newly-wed wife and declares to marry

the Nepali actress from the Nepal royal family, Manisha Koirala. Any intelligent person should have seen this coming and the fact that India was not prepared for this is a poor reflection on the policy-making mechanisms and the hundreds of think-tanks operating all over India. Nepal is one of the loveliest places in the world with some of the most innocent people that one could still find in this age of globalization. Perhaps partly due to this innocence, it remains one of the poorest. With a population of over 23 million, only 11 per cent are urbanized. Its per capita income is \$220. Its literacy rate is 36 per cent; only 16 per cent have access to adequate sanitation and 71 per cent have access to safe water. It is a land-locked country and thus totally dependent on India for its external trade which has resulted India yielding immense leverage. Kathmandu's relationship with Beijing has always been a sore point with New Delhi; at times, India has reacted to improved Beijing-Kathmandu relations by refusing to renew its trade and transiagreement. In the late eighties, India did not renew its treaty with Nepal that resulted in almost an 18-month long economic blockade



Bollywood star Hrithik Roshan (inset), angry youths burning his effigy in Kathmandu.

of the country. As if purchase of Chinese weapons or building of crucial strategic roads by the Chinese are not enough, some Indian politicians of Nepalese origin in the northeastern Indian states once in a while call for Greater Nepal. Nepal is the only Hindu Kingdom in the world. Historical, geographical, religious, social

and cultural ties are as close as they could be between the two neighboring countries. Almost all Nepali politicians of the senior generation, and majority of the intellectuals, including the present PM, have been educated in Indian universities. The Indo-Nepal border is peculiar in the sense that it is open and one can literally just walk

across. Many years ago, when Indian PM AB Vajpayee was leader of the opposition, he criticized the Rao Government in the Lok Sabha by saying that it is so inept that it had managed to strain ties even with Hindu Nepal. One would really like to ask Mr Vajpayee as to what is happening now. He should have realized a long time ago that mere flashing of communal motifs are not enough to develop brotherly relations; if it had been so simple an affair, East Pakistan would never have become Bangladesh and the Deputy High Commissioner of Pakistan would not have been kicked out from Dhaka in such disgrace.

The Government of Nepal tried its best to convince India to change its unreasonable stance but to no avail; the result is that the summit has indefinitely been postponed and the money has simply been wasted. And the money spent on fountains and white-washing is not so important: what is more significant is the pride of a very proud nation that has been hurt. As if this was not enough, following the hijacking of IC-814 in December 1999, the whole Indian machinery and particularly its media ridiculed the security obtaining at the Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu. If it had been a day-long, week-long or even a month-long criticism, the nation could have stomachached. However, it continued for ever. Indian Airlines in an unprecedented move called off its flights to Kathmandu from New Delhi, Bombay, Varanasi and Calcutta. Whoever in the Indian Government thought of this move should be awarded Bharat Ratna for spoiling relations between India and Nepal and for hurting the Nepal economy in an acute fashion; according to one estimate, Nepal was incurring a loss of at least Rs 2.5 million every day. Tourism has always been one of the biggest sources of Nepal's revenue; and Indians constitute the bulk of the tourists. Go to any of the Indian-owned four casinos in Kathmandu (Casino Nepal; Anna; Everest or Royale) and you are flabbergasted by the number of Indians doing nothing but gambling and enjoying the free drinks and food amidst several deafening Indian songs playing simultaneously in the same hall; Nepalese are not allowed in the casinos. Visit any shopping centre and you are constantly bumping into Indian rather than Nepalese shoppers who ironically end up mostly looking at Indian goods: Nepal is flooded with Indian products and you would be lucky if you can find a toothpaste or a soap made in Nepal. If the Americans, the European community and the Chinese do this to the Indian markets, then the Hindutva forces led by RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal and Jan Jagaran attack McDonalds and KFC and break thousands of Coca Cola and Pepsi bottles to show their Swadeshi feelings. The other side of the coin is the unemployed angry Nepali youth burning Hrithik effigies and destroying anything Indian that he can lay his hands on. The anti-Indian riots will subside and things will normalize. But the anti-Indian feelings will not only continue to simmer but augment. The solution lies not in invoking the India-Nepal Treaty of 1950 but by stop taking Nepal for granted simply because it is a Hindu Kingdom and small in size. It may not be a nuclear power with missiles but it has plenty of national pride.

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by Jim Davis

