

Young voters feel ignored

Political parties keep to hackneyed themes

MOST of the one crore and a half new faces that have come on the present voters' list are first-timers past the golden voting age of 18. And if the total number of voters in the 18-25 age group is taken into account this would comprise at least 30 per cent of the national electorate.

This new generation of voters with such a numerical clout could change the calculus of traditional voting patterns. Theirs may be the swing votes capable of turning the table on one or the other major contender for political power. They are the post-1971 generation. To them national independence is far too settled a fact of history and geography -- 30 years since the birth of Bangladesh -- to be the subject of any controversy. They do not want to live in the past; they wish to forge ahead by evincing a keen interest in the present and what the future holds for them.

But happily, as they wrestle with the basics of life in a state of relative economic underdevelopment, they are not suffering from any discrimination as most of their forebears in their youth had done in the Pakistan period vis-à-vis their counterparts in West Pakistan for lack of opportunity. And this wonderful sea-change has occurred in the mindset of the present generation of youngsters because of their self-confidence as proud citizens of an independent and sovereign country, belief in democracy, not to mention exposure to the audio-visual media, and the liberating impact of IT technology on them. They are experiencing an explosion of finer aspirations within themselves, so that their frustration at not being able to have the aspirations met is that much greater today.

The youngsters are beholden to what the 21st century has on offer for them but are despairing of the potential bonanza eluding them as they lose years to campus violence and student politics propped up by the political parties. The lack of computer, laboratory and other facilities keeps slowing down their pace of learning.

Caught up in such a frustrating environment beset with corruption and lack of employment opportunities as they gaze into the future, the youngsters are either taking the get-rich-quick route of their elders at home or raring to set foot on foreign soil at any cost. That is as far as the lucky ones among the young with some educational background go; a large majority of their counterparts in the lower economic bracket are but have-nots though, with little to look forward to by way of a future.

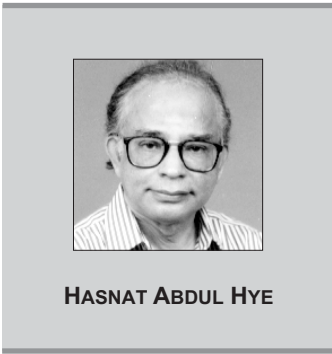
Do the manifestoes of political parties contain specific programmes designed to address the needs, hopes and aspirations of the young voters? They do not. Instead, what we have are broad generalisations emphasising the importance of IT and that of secularism as a sign of modernity in the lists of pious wishes showcased by the political parties.

The electioneering is more focused on character assassination or vilification of institutions than on concrete plans for tapping the vast reservoir of youth power for development purposes.

A sampling of the mood among first-time voters suggests that while they are upbeat about their new-found status they are somewhat turned off by the unimaginative style and content of the election campaigns. This cynicism among young voters, especially the first-timers, does not bode well for the election process or consolidation of democracy as such. For, it is the turn-out of voters which will determine the representative character of elections consequently reflecting on the credibility of the electoral process as a whole.

It is, therefore, incumbent upon the political parties that in the remaining days to the polls they treat the younger generation as a huge block of voters and relate to them accordingly for making up on their lost ground with them so far.

Rhetorics of ishtehar



WITH election just around the corner, it may seem too late to write about the *ishtehars*, manifestos announced by the two major parties. The *ishtehars* were made public with due fanfare only three weeks before the election, as if almost as an afterthought. The whole exercise, the announcements and present commentary, cannot but appear as having little more than academic importance now. But this, too, may serve a purpose.

Both the major political parties have been in power for similar length of time. It may, therefore, be argued that the public already has a good sense and adequate insight of what they stand for. More importantly, the performance of the two parties in government is on record enabling the public to judge what they are capable of delivering. While both of these views have some validity, it should be pointed out that a party's manifesto is not wholly a repetition of the past. It evolves (at least it should) from incorporating experiences, past and present and tries to be abreast of time with a dash of vision. A party to be relevant cannot be anachronistic holding onto old shibboleths and ideological hang-ups. Nor can it be tied to the here and now following the dictates of expediency. With changing time a party's manifesto has to renew continually. This does not require opportunistic revisionism but pragmatic additions and subtractions. As neither of the major parties is beholden to any doctrinaire ideology such modifications or reforms in programmes should not present intractable problem.

For the BNP, a party to the right of

the centre, the formulation of manifesto this year involved some difficulty because of its alliance with parties of the far right, which espouse religious causes. It has resolved the predicament by including an innocuous announcement in the manifesto that no law that is repugnant to Islam will be passed if it comes to power. The announcement is a devious one insofar as it pays lip service to religion without having to adopt doctrinaire postures. Realising the sensitivity of the issue Awami League, which

religion, all the other programmes of action are non-ideological in the sense that they deal with solutions to problems of temporal nature. Here both parties have come up not only with a collection of similar programmes but also in a manner that does not complement each other. The programmes also appear fragmentary, not adding up to a coherent whole. It is understandable that political parties will try to win votes by appealing to special

interest groups. But since no

traditionally given to local government bodies for revenue income. The decision to hand these over by the AL government to youth groups under the Department of Youth benefited a particular interest group while depriving the local government system. This type of conflict of interest will become endemic if ministries for every conceivable interest group are established. In a different context, the same can be said about rise in public expenditure if the number of MPs is increased from 300 to 500. One of the common

through law, local government bodies will continue to be unstable and weak. At best they will be a sop to local people, at worst a subversion of the democratic ethos.

Law and order have been recognised as important by both parties and commitment have been made to improve prevention of their breakdown and the disposal of trial of offenders. Here some shortcom

ings are palpable. Though both parties pledged to President Carter that they will not resort to hartal in

their five years' record in governance there is very little in these regards to assure the public that they mean what they are saying now. Though the AL government took some steps with regard to separation of judiciary from executive and towards an autonomous public media, progress in these respects were stalled.

Over the last ten years, during both parties' governance, various reforms programme were introduced or proposed at the behest of donors and multilateral institutions. The attitudes of both parties have been ambivalent to these programmes while in power. As a result programmes like privatisation, public sector expenditure and financial sector reforms have had lacklustre performance so far. The absence of any reference to this vitally important reform programmes in the manifestos indicates an ostrich-like attitude, which does not augur well for their future. If the parties are not able to convince the electorate about the need and justification of these reforms and are afraid because of their short-run repercussions, they will never be able to go beyond giving lip service. For instant popularity the parties may thus postpone the inevitable and with higher cost to be paid in future. This may be good electioneering but not good politics.

Democratic governance is not only about having popular support, it is also about progress that offers equitable benefits to all. Since there cannot be benefit without cost, the parties have to calculate and demonstrate which programmes have greater benefits than costs in future. Politics having short-run compulsion makes this exercise difficult. But unless the politicians engage in this painful task they will never be able rise above the lowest common denominator in politics. This failure will inevitably be at the cost of public interest. A party's manifesto should blend rhetoric with reality and the short run with the long run. It cannot be said lightly that in the long run we are all dead. There will be a new generation in the long run, as there has always been.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

IN MY VIEW

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announced their manifesto a few days later than the BNP, was quick to affirm that no law that is against the Holy Koran and *Sunnah* will be adopted if they are elected. Because both the commitments are the same, in letter and spirit, the BNP having announced their first screamed 'foul' and alleged that their manifesto had been hijacked! Apart from the identical nature of the agenda on religion, it is the superfluity inherent in both the statements that invites criticism and even ridicule. The commitment on religion by the two parties seem to indicate that either laws that are not in accordance with the tenets of Islam had been passed in the past or are likely to be adopted in future and hence the declaration. This is sheer legerdemain as everyone knows that no anti-Islamic law was passed in the past nor is it ever likely in future, whichever party may come into power. The infantile use of the religion card by both the parties is pathetic.

Apart from the commitment to

programme can be implemented without the involvement of more than one agency or ministry of the government, the ideal approach is not to keep it as parallel to the mainstream. Integrating the special with the mainstream with proper safeguards for the former can bestow more benefits on the stakeholders and in a more sustained way. From this point of view setting up of separate ministries for freedom fighters, garments and expatriates as proposed by the BNP appear as mis-conceived. Leaving aside the question of rational strategy within a holistic framework, such proliferation of ministries and departments will increase the size of government rather than reducing it as is the need of the hour. Moreover, in the absence of additional revenue income of the government new ministries claiming its share from present level of public resources will weaken other interest groups through transfer of resources. For instance, hats and bazaars and open fisheries of certain size were

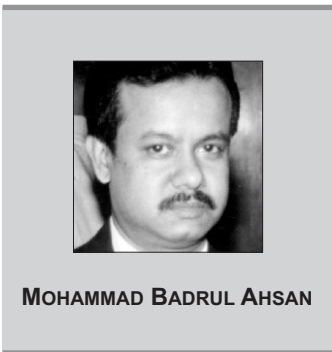
features of the manifestos announced by the two parties is that there is no reference to source of financing the new or strengthened programmes. This is not only most irresponsible but deceitful too.

Both the parties have declared their commitments to local government bodies and in this respect there is continuity with the past. But in spite of this and despite a more than a hundred years' history, local government bodies have languished under successive regimes. Ironically, they fare better under non-political government perhaps because of the fact that government of the day does not apprehend any threat from them. Under political governments there is always a strong undertone of apprehension over the powers delegated to local bodies and reluctance to give them more autonomy. As long as the conflicts of interest and tension among ministries, MPs, bureaucrats and elected representatives of local government bodies are not reconciled on a permanent basis

future they are silent about this phenomenon that threatens law and order directly much to the suffering of law abiding citizens. One has to conclude that what the parties could pledge to a foreign dignitary they are reluctant to commit to their own people. Silence about using students in politics and patronisation of students cadre indicate the reluctance of major political parties to stamp out a major source of terrorism that not only affect law and order adversely but also vitiate the atmosphere in campuses. While setting up of special courts, as proposed by the BNP, will help in the speedy disposal of cases, silence about some black laws like Special Powers Act in both manifestos reveal the attitudes of the parties to rule of law particularly in its basic rights context.

Both parties have declared their intention to give autonomy to state-run TV and radio, constitute independent anti-corruption commission, separate judiciary from executive and appoint ombudsman. In

Death from the sky



THE scenes were as though lifted from Hollywood movies, until their horror unfolded much later. Two planes rammed into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York within an interval of less than twenty minutes, and razed to the ground one of the world's architectural wonders. Within roughly an hour's time, the towers, which took seven years to build, crumbled within the blink of an eye, spewing smoke, dust and splinters of glasses, and etching one of the most lingering images of dreadful disasters in the minds of television viewers around the world.

Another plane swooped in on the Pentagon, cart-wheeling into one of the five wings of America's military heartland, and a fourth plane crashed in Pennsylvania. By 10:00am the paroxysm of disasters had numbed with panic two of America's important cities, sending a shudder across the nation. The irony of the whole thing was that airplanes laden with passengers would be hurled at buildings packed with people in a predetermined ecology of destroying innocent lives.

It was a bolt from the blue in the true sense of the words. Unsuspect-

ing Americans went about their normal business of life until the strikes came from the sky. For moments, America wobbled on the thin line between life and death; those who had been late for work or left the buildings for something narrowly survived. Others must have sat down before their computers, turned them on and dialled to check their voice mails before death exploded in their face.

No words will ever capture the horror of what happened in the

Major League Baseball cancelled its games, and nuclear power plants went to top security status. The White House and all federal office buildings were evacuated, and Vice-president Dick Cheney hurried to a bunker on the White House grounds. President Bush went to a nuclear shelter in Barksdale, Louisiana. The aircraft carriers USS John F Kennedy and USS George Washington, along with seven other warships, took up positions off the East Coast.

in-law for 30 minutes, all that time telling how much he loved his wife and child, and vowing that he was going to go down fighting the hijackers. A commercial real estate broker called several times from the 86th floor of one of the towers to tell his wife that he had been trapped but okay. He told his pregnant wife that he did not know if he was going to make it and wanted her to know how much he loved her. Others called to utter pretty much the same thing to families and friends, as if in the

at the wrong time?

What happened in America destroyed more than life and property; it shook the foundation of human decency. It is not the question of who killed and who died as it is a question of what transpired. There have been desperate moments in history, which called for desperate actions, and atrocities shrunk and expanded within that rule of engagement. During the French Revolution, the September Massacre cost 1,200 lives, whereas

an eye for an eye. But it also has a lifecycle that perpetuates hatred, which can turn the whole world blind.

America has vowed to avenge the attacks on its property and citizens, and its wrath has concentrated on one renegade man of Arab origin named Osama bin Laden. Niccolò di Bernardo Machiavelli, the 16th century Florentine statesman and political philosopher, argued in *Il Principe*, "Men should be treated either generously or destroyed, because they take revenge for slight injuries - for heavy ones they cannot." When Timothy McVeigh bombed a building in Oklahoma City killing hundreds, he was hunted down and sent to the gas chamber within the limits of justice: one man to die for killing so many.

America's manhunt for Osama bin Laden has already begun, and the world has rallied around it in its "crusade" against terrorism. Nineteen men of Arab origin are said to have died with the four planes, which exploded in three US cities, and Osama will be just one more name on that list if he is caught, tried and executed for allegedly masterminding this grisly plot. That will be justice.

But will it eliminate terrorism? God knows the answer. Terrorism is like a disease that must be cured in the cause, not in the effect. If anybody carefully listened to those desperate calls from the mobile phones, this is exactly what the callers must have wanted to remind us. It is never too soon to hate, and it is never too late to love. Terrorism is rooted in hatred. It must be uprooted only in love.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

Last week's carnage in America was a sad reminder that despite the progress of civilisation, man's capacity for brutalities had not diminished within that rule of engagement. This time it came riding on chariots in the air, hijacked by men whose hearts had been steeled by the anguish of a peculiar despair. Revenge has a moral code of its own, its baseline starting with an eye for an eye. But it also has a lifecycle that perpetuates hatred, which can turn the whole world blind.

serene lights of that Tuesday morning. It was as if the sky had given up its ugly secrets, when bits of plane, office furniture, glass, torn limbs, whole bodies, flocks of charred paper would rain down on earth. Slowly the steel would soften from heat of the burning jet fuel, and the girders, 244 of them forming the perimeter of each floor, caved in one by one. The two towers imploded, and collapsed, leaving an uncanny void in the Manhattan skyline.

The chaos in New York was symptomatic of the hell that broke loose in the rest of America. The Sears Tower in Chicago was evacuated, as were colleges and museums. Disney World shut down and

Subdued in that turbulence of catastrophe were the feeble voices, which had erupted from mobile phones of victims entering the gorge of death. All of them frantically called friends and relatives as if to mark the rite of passage from fantastic life to fiery death. One passenger called just before his plane slammed into the World Trade Centre, screaming that a stewardess had just been stabbed. He must have been overwhelmed by his sense of helplessness in his captivity in the air, and called in delirium for one last time knowing that death was approaching in the looming sight of the tower.

Another passenger of another flight talked to his wife and brother-

mean season of death only consolation was to let others know that one could love.

Somewhere in the rubbles and the heaps of ashes those loving people disappeared. Some went up in flames; others blew up into pieces or got crushed under tonnes of wreckage. But why did they have to die on a bright clear day? If some terrorists had masterminded this attack on America, what arithmetic of retribution justified this annihilation of the innocents? One fails to comprehend the perpetual calculus of crime and punishment in this carnage. What wrong had these people done other than being on the wrong flight or in the wrong building

only three men got killed in the Boston massacre during the American Revolution. Nearly 2,300 people were killed during the attack on Pearl Harbour, and the USA exacted its revenge at a usurious price. The bomb on Hiroshima wiped out between 70,000 and 80,000 lives.

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PHOTORIAL

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PHOTO: STAR

Campaign in the kitchen

Woman agents of respective candidates are approaching prospective female voters at their households. A good sign for this still-young-democracy indeed! Everyone, irrespective of man and woman, is getting conscious of their right -- adult franchise -- and more involved in the process. But the voters apply this for ensuring their other rights which, of course, are many, including women's rights. Shall those to be elected remain conscious of it -- their duty -- or just forget as most of their predecessors did?

Candles in the wind

HASAN FERDOUS

ON Tuesday, 11 September 2001, America saw a nightmare unfold live. Those killed in the terrorist attacks were ordinary people, the little people, far removed from the world of power and politics. Those who took the four planes down to their death plunge might have believed they were on a holy mission and their deaths would be rewarded in an after-life. I don't know about any after-life, though I know pretty well that in this life, on this perched earth, 'life' will never be the same again for most of us. Among the thousands perished, at least eight were from Bangladesh.

Salahuddin Chowdhury was not scheduled to be in the building at that hour. His wife was due to give birth the same day in the evening. In order to be with her, he switched his duty hours and went to the Trade Centre for the morning shift. He did not know death would descend on him with such a fury. Now his son would never know the father he could be.

No one knows where was Sabbir Ahmed at the time of the blast. He never called. He never returned home either. A sign posted by his three children at the "memory wall" in Amory says, "we need our father in our lives."

These are only a handful of names. There are so many lost faces and so many untold stories behind each of those faces. As I sit here in my Queens apartment and watch the faces flash across the

Abul Chowdhury, also from Bangladesh, was on the 103rd floor of the tower at the Windows on the World restaurant. After the first tower was hit, he called his wife. "We have been hit by something. I am getting out right now," he said. We would never know how far he could get out. That was the last his wife heard from him.

Nurul Huq and Shakila Yasmin, recently wed, had gone around seven to their usual duty spots at Marsh & McLennan Company. Nurul was a computer consultant, his wife an assistant at the help desk. They would never get an opportunity to raise a family.

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screen on my TV set one after another, I cannot help but ask, why? Why?

Last Friday, America and the rest of the world remembered those fallen and missing with a candlelight vigil. I stood at the corner of Third Avenue and 43rd Street in Manhattan, holding a tiny candle. Fifty or so Bangladeshi-Americans were there, too, each holding a candle. As we huddled together, trying to keep the flickering flame alive, two Americans came from behind. They asked for spare candles, stood next to us and held our hands. Another American, a young black man, came from the other side of the road. He said one of the American flags we were holding was upside down. He set it right, patted on someone's shoulder and quickly left with a kind smile on his face. A casually dressed young man, probably of Middle Eastern-origin, stood behind the group and muttered, "Good, this is good."

At once all barriers were gone and we were united by a bond of common humanity. Almost at the



PHOTO: AFP

America mourns, America remembers...

same time everywhere all across America, people had lit candles, held each other's hands and said a prayer. A bond was created, uniting all peoples and all communities.

Those who had perpetrated the attacks thought America would become weaker. They did not know

the power of grief. Death has only brought its people together. Grief has made them closer.

Hasan Ferdous, from Bangladesh, lives in New York and works for an international organization.