

Who is closer to White House?

BRIG GEN JAHANGIR KABIR, *ndc, psc (Retd)*

BY the courtesy of global reach of the media I was leisurely watching the second Bush-Kerry debate Saturday morning live from Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, along with the Americans and rest of the world. I could not have done it cheaper if I wanted to hear the lowest of public office contenders (Member of Union Council) in Bangladesh.

Sudden facelift for Senator John Kerry following the first debate at Miami University put the election race in a dead heat. The second debate with variable opinions both on BBC and CNN has not given indication of favour to either candidate. If public opinion continues to swing towards Kerry even after the second debate, President Bush may have difficulty in generating enough momentum despite advantages of incumbency and onslaught of TV commercials. Kerry, the traditional underdog, is slowly but surely emerging for a hot race.

It was rightly termed as 'bread and butter debate' as it mostly dealt with the economy and welfare of the people. Americans are keen to preserve their jobs and pockets at a time of recovery from years of recession. Both agriculture and manufacturing industries are under squeeze from cheaper imports. A farmer told me early this year, if the golden oranges of Florida are not protected from cheaper Brazilian imports, in five years time oranges will be no more from the Sunshine State. Declining but powerful agricultural lobby is still a slug shot in American politics.

With oil price crossing \$52 a barrel, the struggling mammoth aviation industry is in greater trouble now and the pockets of highly mobile Americans are further taxed. Before trade war on steel products could hardly cool down America is bracing for yet another war with Europe on Airbus subsidies. In spite of cheap money made available by Federal Reserve boss, Alan Greenspan and tax cut by the President to the 1% rich, job creation is slower than expected. Outsourcing is another snag of preserving jobs at home. Americans are on a spending binge with cheaper money, dollar is under tremendous pressure due to deficit financing above 5% of GDP. On such a dull economic picture if the president is spending \$200 billion on an avoidable war in Iraq, people might seriously question his reelection bid. The debate leaves enough space and time for thought. But then, politics is not exactly

American bread. Many citizens think it's a business of experts; their job is to work hard for dollars. Four years ago they did not raise a whimper when a marginally defeated

rich are the paymasters, the huge middle class decides the election, not the poor. Media is nearly the only means to have the feel about the campaign and of course, lots of

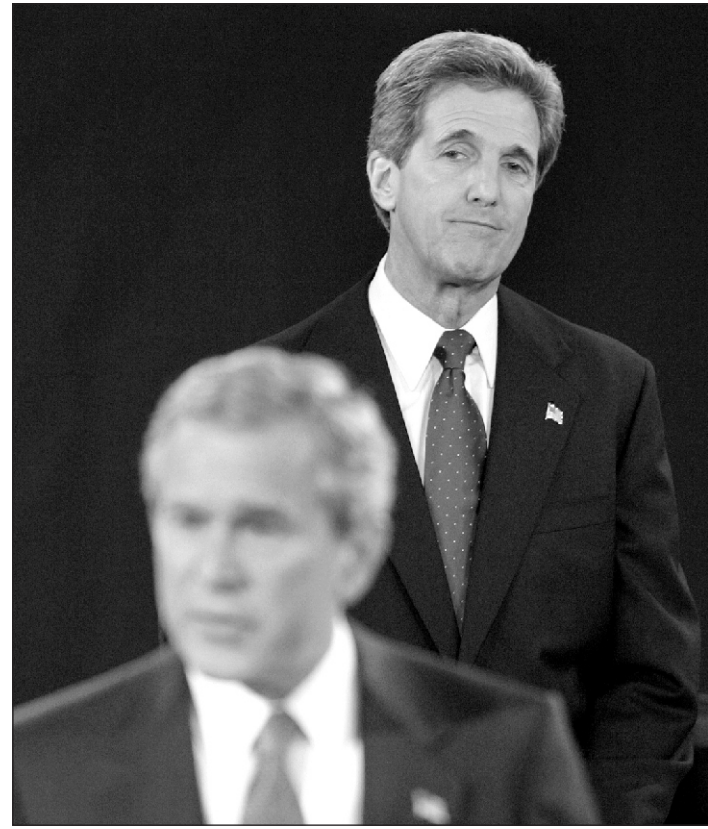
minorities. Only exception to the rule is the community of rich and powerful Jews who bargain in every election for more than their number suggests.

Born in a family of super rich and hyper influence, the President was trying to give the look of crown prince awaiting coronation in the debate. Bush has not learned defeat. Son of a president and grand son of a senator he feels that the White House is part of his natural inheritance. While debating Al Gore four years ago he could not care to remember a South Asian leader's name and still propelled to power. He did it once before to defeat incumbent governor Ann Richards of Texas in 94. In a close election it does not really matter to Americans who is the president. Lobbying, not election, is the heart of American politics.

But then, his mantra of rich be richer to help the poor had not created enough jobs. Three million jobs had gone to cheap labour countries and still outsourcing. Corporate culture is not built on patriotism or philanthropy but fiercely aggressive profiteering. Welfare of the people and the unbridled capitalism that Bush is pursuing are not always compatible. The poor are poorer today and should be less forgiving to Bush if only they care to vote. Meanwhile, the concluding remarks by the Senate Committee that Saddam had neither WMD nor al-Qaeda connection have enormously damaged President's ability of judgment. War, economy or job, almost nothing is coming right for President Bush. If debates are indicative, Bush may have hard sale this time. But he is not a challenger but a formidable incumbent.

Media may have brought the debate to many homes. Expecting Americans to underwrite peace and justice globally is tantamount to failure of the rest, and somewhat culpable meanness of the failed ones. American society is known for consumerism, philanthropy reveals only to grease the market forces. Justice can not be ensured by begging, but ensuring. Where is the global resolve? Sir Winston Churchill once said, "I have not been made Prime Minister to liquidate British Empire". Time has changed; but surely, none is seeking the White House to liquidate American interest. The bottom line is -- between the two only styles and periphery vary; no calling for bread for the third world without hard work. And that propelled me to the computer this morning.

The author is a freelance writer



Senator John Kerry (in the foreground) listens as US President George Bush at the second debate on October 8 at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri.

But then, politics is not exactly American bread. Many citizens think it's a business of experts; their job is to work hard for dollars. Four years ago they did not raise a whimper when a marginally defeated candidate found his place in the White House by cunning legal move involving the Supreme Court. But it had neither eroded their confidence on the judiciary nor their loyalty to the presidency. Poorest of the lot on whose bread and health care Kerry is trying to make election issues are least interested in voting.

candidate found his place in the White House by cunning legal move involving the Supreme Court. But it had neither eroded their confidence on the judiciary nor their loyalty to the presidency. Poorest of the lot on whose bread and health care Kerry is trying to make election issues are least interested in voting. And five million felons who are mostly blacks are not allowed to vote. While the

pollster gurus working overtime. Senator Kerry was not the first Democratic choice. Exhausted Al Gore shied away; popular Senator Hillary Clinton thought Americans were not yet ready to offer the chief executive's job first time to a Lady in a war torn environment. Senator John Kerry filled in; but not necessarily a poor choice. Democrats have a large vote bank among the

The challenge of governance

ABMS ZAHUR

UNDERPERFORMANCE of governance is evident in many areas of our national life. Without improving key governance dimensions like rule of law, corruption, regulatory regime, voice and democratic accountability it is not possible to increase rapidly our per capita income and improve other social indicators. It is unfortunate that Bangladesh's improvements in the governance realm are not keeping pace with the progress achieved in some areas of economic and social policies. Such gap in governance efforts implies that management of political regime has become a central constraint to further economic growth, consolidation of democracy, and attainment of social peace in society.

A modest growth in income cannot guarantee better rule of law or improved voice and accountability. Misgovernance has serious implications such as unattainability of growth path, suffering of pro-poor strategies, lack of foreign investment, setback to democratisation, inability of the political regime to effectively meet the challenge of governance resulting in security lapses and threats from internal and external forces and suffering of country's image.

The concept of governance has changed a lot from the days of Plato and Aristotle when it meant the task of running of government. Since 1980s governance is seen mainly as an institutional capacity building initiative. The UNDP uses the concept more in terms of human rights based conceptualisation of development. UN approach to development places governance at the centre of attention, because rights mean involvement in the political process of deciding things. How this process is structured will affect the degree of realisation of rights.

The concept of government is more 'performance oriented.' It examines the capability of polity to mobilise and manage its social capital to strengthen 'public realm.' It implies more as a 'regime management' that emphasises the notion of legitimate authority and control. The routines, practices and language through which political domination is legitimised and technology of power is created, often provide a key to understanding state of governance in society.

Governance in a 'new democracy' like Bangladesh is a complex and challenging task. The analysts differ in their views about various determinants of governance crisis. Some lay emphasis on mismanaged public sector, corruption and

political patronage. Some others attribute it to distracted politicians more concerned with 'polls and popularity' rather than critical needs of the society. Some give more importance to the need for 'business friendly regime' and some stress the need for an independent judiciary. Whatever may be the difference of opinion about determinants of governance, the analysts agree that there is serious governance deficit in Bangladesh and its progress, particularly in controlling corruption or in terms of institutional quality (particularly at the political and administrative levels) is highly disappointing. Critical issues indic-

at the implementation issues. In fact, the main burden for providing and maintaining human security for all citizens falls on the political sector.

Control of corruption: The term 'corruption' is commonly defined as the abuse of public office for private gains. The data provided in the World Bank, TIB and other surveys show that the extent of corruption in customs and income taxes, police and lower judiciary, transport and city governance is. Corruption in the public banks, insurance and regulatory bodies is glaring; political corruption in obtaining nominations, bribing party leaders and

vested interests and political cronies are trying hard to frustrate some concrete progress achieved so far. Without a much bolder approach and concrete action the government will fail to forge ahead. It may be stated that the cost of inaction would be substantial.

Political leadership People have questions about political leaders' motivations and moral integrity. Politics is under the control of morally questionable people, further degrading political participation. Party politics is gradually becoming highly armed, factional rather than deliberative democracy. Though political violence has not risen to the level of civil war frequent politically motivated killings continue.

Political reforms For good governance reform of political parties has become essential. Without strong, accountable and effective political parties and institutions democratic governance cannot be achieved. The leaders of major political parties must refrain from promoting divisions in society at large. If they are not careful at this stage political parties will degenerate into personalistic hereditary self-serving political entities incapable of satisfying the expectation of the people.

Good governance may be extremely complex. If democracy functions properly people need not take their grievances to the streets because elections, lobbying, and normal legislative processes allow airing of all points of view. The highest ethical requirement of political leaders is their contribution to creating and maintaining justice in their society. Without justice there is no moral, and subsequently political legitimacy. As indicated earlier the international community should support our national efforts for improved governance and 'governance for development' includes eradication of abuse of power, politicisation of the administration and law enforcement. Thus it would not be correct to interpret any unsavoury comments of the donor community as interference in internal affairs. Let us not be upset by these remarks or observations. Already the government has wasted a long time dilly dallying on the pressing agenda.

Misgovernance will destroy all the good efforts of the government. The government must try harder to save the country from falling into abysmal confusion.

The author is a retired joint secretary

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ative of the deficit in governance in Bangladesh are as follows:

Law and legal institutions: The legal system in Bangladesh continues to be complex; reforms so far have been scanty; weaknesses in the country's legal system are affecting maintenance of public order and undermining the confidence of the people and the foreign investors in our political leadership and bureaucracy.

Rights of citizens: Police administration has been accused of corruption, misuse of power, violation of human rights and other abuses. It has lost its credibility and general acceptance as a protector of security and rights, reforms in the police administration are long overdue. There is an urgent need to raise the police force as a non-political, efficient and people-friendly state apparatus.

Law and order: A high power monitoring committee composed of cabinet ministers and senior officials has been set up to monitor law and order situation. Disruption crimes (speedy trial) act 2002 has been introduced for speedy trials on certain offences. However, dominating public perception remains that police and criminal justice system are inefficient, complex and highly corrupt. The main task ahead of us is to ensure the implementation of existing laws. We urge the political leaders to take a hard look

National branding can help Bangladesh

ASIF AHMED

ON December 31, 2004, the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC) will end and with it the quota system for international trade in textiles and clothing. As a result, trade in these sectors will undergo a fundamental change. By 2005 the sector will be fully integrated into the WTO General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and all quotas will have disappeared. Bangladesh, with a share of garment exports in total merchandise exports of 75% is at the risk of facing higher unemployment and deeper poverty. In fact, majority of developing countries with the exception of China, India etc risk losing heavily from the final liberalisation of trade in textile and clothing. To face this challenge as well as to increase the growth rate and to have positive and sustainable impact and poverty, government, donors and policy makers are constantly looking for ways to increase export as well as the exportable products portfolio from Bangladesh. They are looking for short term strategies to face this immediate challenge and also for long term strategy to develop exports as a tool to fight poverty.

When looking at strategies to increase the national exports, decision-makers typically consider options such as promoting priority sectors, encouraging investment, the role of ICT (information and communication technology), market research and promotion campaigns. Developing a "National Brand" and managing it to increase export revenues is usually furthest from their thoughts. A positive national image is an essential ingredient for export promotion, and also for investment promotion. Should countries invest in national branding as part of the image-building strategy?

National branding consists of developing an image and communicating it, both internally and externally, based on a country's positive values and perceptions that are relevant to export development. The brand concept, once

researched, tested and defined, is then used as the basis of targeted promotional campaign when encouraging trade, tourism and inward investment.

Very few countries have successfully launched a national brand. Even developed countries do not find brand management an easy task. Hardly any research is available on branding initiatives in developing countries. The Journal of Brand Management has documented the importance of national branding in the export strategy process.

The experience of countries with successful national brands suggests that there is a 'best practice' way to decide on the relevance of national branding (or re-branding). This involves the following steps:

The first step would be confirming the readiness of the country. We will have to understand that whether national branding is a strategy to adopt that will bring a competitive advantage that is, improve country's overall export base. We will have to find out answers to the questions like: Which national values are relevant for products or services being exported? Are there sufficient companies and production capacity to justify the effort? Are benefits likely to be higher than costs in the long run?

The second step should be creating a working group. We will have to consider including politicians, civil servants, industry representatives, media, educators and figures from sport and the arts. We will have to decide whom we are trying to influence and confirm how these target groups perceive our nation. The country will have start by identifying and defining their critical audiences, both internal and external.

The third step should be identifying the internal and external perceptions/images (positives, negative, neutral, none etc) of the country, and identifying the discrepancies between the external and internal perceptions/images.

Then we will have to identify the positive values that could be associated with national branding of products and services. The

working group should trace some existing best practices/models for national branding which could be useful to study further for inspiration and guidance.

A 'core idea' should emerge, from which a branding programme can be developed. "Find out what you've got that makes you different, then create something around this. Sun, sea and sand are not a core idea, they represent commodities and there is no margin in commodities trading. Differentiation is more effective when it comes to food, architecture and culture," according to branding guru Wally Olins.

The final step, where lies the major challenges, should be coordinating the presentation of the core idea. The team will have to ensure that key public and private sector entities dealing with tourism, investment and export development convey the core message in their marketing programmes.

Once the core idea has been developed, modulate it for each priority audience. We will have to take steps in differentiating the messages. Steps should be taken to create a visual idea, which we can also put into words. The words should encapsulate what the concept stands for in different circumstances.

The government will have to take the decision whether it wants to run the programme or not. A better long term solution would be to create a structure that is going to be there when the government changes. The challenging task would be ensuring that the brand is promoted among local audiences as an asset and protect its credibility through establishing and managing standard for usage.

'National branding' signifies a considerable investment. Most importantly we will have to understand that it is a long-term initiative. A 20 year time frame is realistic.

Asif U Ahmed is Deputy Project Director (Programmes) of JOBS-a project funded by USAID/Bangladesh and implemented by IRIS Centre at the University of Maryland.

MAHARASHTRA ASSEMBLY POLLS Clash of two aging titans

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

WITH only three days left for the October 13 assembly elections in Maharashtra, India's ruling Congress and main opposition BJP have braced themselves for the crucial battle to control the second most important political state and the country's commercial capital Mumbai.

Congress, its major partner Nationalist Congress Party led by Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar and other allies, which have ruled the state for the last five years after dislodging Shiv Sena-BJP combine in the previous assembly polls in 1999, are seeking to renew their hold on Maharashtra while the saffron alliance is banking on anti-incumbency to regain power.

Rebellion in the ranks of all major contenders for power Congress, NCP, Shiv Sena and BJP has coloured the assembly polls making them perhaps the most-watched suspense electoral soap.

Opinion polls by two leading television news channels NDTV and Aaj Tak have come out with contrasting assessment of the Maharashtra electoral outcome. While NDTV-Indian Express poll projects a fractured mandate with no clear majority for either Congress-NCP or Shiv Sena-BJP combine, Aaj Tak-ORG-MARG predicts comfortable majority for Congress-NCP alliance with 165-175 seats in the 288-member state assembly.

The elections are equally significant for Congress and BJP. This is going to be the first major electoral outing for Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government headed by Manmohan Singh since its win in parliamentary polls four months ago.

In a way, say political analysts, the polls in Maharashtra will be a measure of the people's response to UPA government. If Congress-NCP holds on to the state for another five-year term, it will provide further weight to Manmohan Singh government.

For the opposition, a positive outcome in Maharashtra would boost its morale after the stunning defeat in parliamentary elections and enthrone for future assembly elections in some other states like Bihar and Jharkhand early next year.

Taking lessons from general elections this year when the party's campaign of "India Shining" and "feel-good" urban-oriented voters flourished, BJP and Shiv Sena have decided this time to emphasise on bread-and-butter issues, farmers' suicides, malnutrition deaths among poor tribals and power shortage in Maharashtra, party leaders said.

If Congress manages to retain Maharashtra, the stature of party chief Sonia Gandhi's image, which has grown by leaps and bounds since she renounced the post of Prime Minister in May this year, will grow further. But failure to do so is likely to not only rejuvenate the opposition but increase the decibel level of dissent within UPA, say analysts.

Maharashtra, now with the second largest number of 48 parliamentary seats after Uttar Pradesh (81), has been traditionally a Congress stronghold but its hold has been weakening since the middle of 1990s yielding place to Shiv Sena and BJP.

The parliamentary polls in April-May this year saw Congress-NCP hold on the state being eroded significantly and the gainers were the saffron alliance and it remains to be seen if after five years in power, the ruling combine is able to overcome anti-incumbency. Taking lessons from general elections this year when the party's campaign of "India Shining" and "feel-good" urban-oriented voters flourished, BJP and Shiv Sena have decided this time to emphasise on bread-and-butter issues, farmers' suicides, malnutrition deaths among poor tribals and power shortage in Maharashtra, party leaders said.

Congress-NCP as well as Sena-BJP came out with joint poll manifestoes desperately doling out sops



PHOTO: AFP

Thousands of labourers and tradesmen in Mumbai are employed mostly on a daily basis in the construction industry with no safety measures.

for farmers promising free power and waiver of outstanding loans, crop insurance and facilities for slum dwellers in Mumbai.

Shiv Sena-BJP was first off the bloc releasing their list of candidates even as Congress-NCP struggled to finalise their seat-sharing arrangements and infighting and pressure from allies delayed Congress' list of nominees for the elections till the last minute. Compulsions of coalition politics forced Congress finally to settle for contesting 154 seats, their lowest in Maharashtra's history.

The Shiv Sena will be contesting 167 seats, BJP 117 and the remaining left to their smaller allies.

The rebel force is haunting Congress, NCP, Shiv Sena and BJP in the elections and all the four parties are trying hard to minimise the damage from the rebels by either expelling them or trying to

persuade them to pull out of the fray. Despite the promise fielding new faces in elections, Congress finally retained most of the sitting members of the assembly, apparently to avoid large-scale rebellion in rank and file and to prevent entry of big number of rebel candidates in fray.

Congress is particularly concerned over the rebels as many of them had crossed over to smaller parties like Bahujan Samaj Party and Samajwadi Party, which rely mainly on backward caste votes, in the parliamentary elections causing considerable erosion in Congress support base especially in Vidarbha region of Maharashtra where Sena-BJP did exceedingly well.

Backward castes (Dalits) are estimated to make up about 13 percent of the state's population, which is significant in terms of electoral considerations, and they are viewed as having the power to

determine the outcome in 120 of the 288 seats.

There is recognition in Congress and BJP circles that a surge in BSP's electoral performance could affect all the four major parties with Congress being the hardest hit.

The BJP is also trying to regain control of Mumbai where 34 assembly seats are at stake after the saffron alliance suffered virtual rout in parliamentary elections this year, being able to win only one of the six seats.

While BJP is focusing on votes of a large number of non-Maharashtrian people in Mumbai, its ally Shiv Sena is seeking to hold on to its traditional base among Marathis. But Sena's often strident pro-Marathi posture has tended to put off a large chunk of non-Marathi voters in the metropolis.

The elections in Maharashtra is also set to become a clash of two aging political titans of the state -- Sena supremo Bal Thackeray, 78, and NCP chief Sharad Pawar. For Thackeray, the coming elections could be the final chance to prove his clout and regain power for the saffron alliance. But his illness forced him to cancel most part of his electioneering, giving a jolt to Sena-BJP's prospects.

On the other hand, Pawar needs a win in the elections to retain his stature and bargaining power vis-a-vis Congress, with which he parted ways five years back protesting Sonia Gandhi's bid for the post of Prime Minister, in national politics.

The Maharashtra poll is also likely to determine the course NCP would take in view of demands coming from within the party from time to time for merger with parent party Congress, analysts say.

One of the interesting facets of Maharashtra assembly elections is the presence of a large number of relatives of veteran politicians in the fray, so much so that politics in the state seems to have become a family affair.

Sons, daughters, brothers, brothers-in-law and cousins are in plenty among the list of candidates of all the major parties. Then, most political families also appear to hedge their bets with different members managing to secure nominations from different parties to keep the options open, analysts said.

Pallab Bhattacharya is the New Delhi correspondent of The Daily Star.