

Bush-Kerry face-off : Democracy in action



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

AMONG some of the laudable traditions set up by the United States to extol, expand and operate the principles and practices of democracy has been the convention of holding debates between the major Presidential candidates on the eve of election. The American people, who are relatively less involved in active politics than citizens of many other countries, generally look forward to watching this gala spectacle on television screen. This provides the candidates their best opportunity to propagate their principal objective of winning support of voters in the election. They also present an assessment of situation both at home and abroad and explain their programmes of action for the next four years, if elected. The voters, on their part, finally get to size up the candidates in their mind and make their decision in favour of

the candidates of their choice. The first time I had the privilege of watching such a debate was between the two illustrious figures, namely John F Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon, in 1960 while I was a probationer Foreign Service Officer studying in America. It was a grand debate to which the American people paid, surprisingly, much more attention than expected. The quality of Presidential debates has since been maintained at a high level and it overshadowed most of the campaign efforts of the candidates themselves. The first debate between the two contenders took place this time on the 3rd instant. According to most observers, the Republican challenger, John Kerry, performed better and helped gain his popular rating, which was a dismal low, almost close to that of President Bush. President Bush appeared somewhat tired on the stage and as such exhibited less dexterity in countering heavy onslaughts and a barrage of questions from his opponent. Presidential aides sought to explain later that Bush's posture could have been due to his visit to the flood affected regions in Florida earlier in the day. However, the President made up profusely in the second debate, on the 8th instant, in which he exhibited more confidence, better preparedness and even assumed

CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

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a special style of delivery. Kerry, on the other hand, maintained well his reputation as a seasoned debater and forcefully carried on his arguments. Viewers rated the second debate more highly than the first one and credited both the candidates with almost equal score. As for the substance of the debates, war on Iraq evidently seized the principal focus of attention. The President reiterated his support for the war in Iraq and claimed that Saddam Hussain had posed a threat to the United States and that the world was better off with Saddam in gaol without power. He argued that even if no stockpile of weapons of mass destruction was found in Iraq, there was evidence that Saddam had maintained his scientists and facilities in full readiness able to produce WMD at a short notice. Saddam intended to use them and



invaded Iraq in a colossal act of misjudgment and deception. Though Kerry was not opposed to war in Iraq and shared the belief that Saddam had posed a grave danger to the world, he said he would have waged the war differently. He would have gone to Iraq only after all other possible means had been exhausted to rid Iraq of the WMD and done so only after forming a real grand coalition of nations. This would allow the United States to effectively share the burden of war with others. President's claim of having secured international support through a coalition of forces of some 30 nations in Iraq was dismissed by Kerry, stating that 90 percent of casualties in Iraq were suffered by American troops and also 90 percent of funds for the war were provided by the United States. Kerry asserted that the war in Iraq was a matter of choice than one of necessity, and claimed that \$200 billion (actually \$120 billion so far) spent on the war could have been better utilised by providing greater employment, better medicare and more educational facilities at home. The most severe criticism leveled by the President was that his adversary had been inconsistent, wishy-washy and uncertain in his pronouncements and decisions. The American people would not accept a Commander-in-Chief (President), who would keep on changing his mind. He slighted the idea of Kerry's ability to operate in Iraq with the international community in what Kerry claimed to be a wrong war, in a wrong place and in a wrong time. The President pointed out how John Kerry had voted for the war and later made a volte-face and opposed the same war, unless he was inconsistent and indecisive. Kerry sought to defend himself by asserting that he was

not wishy-washy and admitted that he had initially made the mistake by supporting appropriations for the war, though for different reasons, but reiterated that he would have conducted the war differently and would be able to lead it to peace. The two candidates agreed that the greatest danger that the world would face in future was proliferation of nuclear weapons and expressed grim determination to fight terrorism both at home and abroad. They clashed on the US policy in Korea and Iran and also on domestic issues on employment, tax cut, medicare, education and other social services. Both of them, however, lauded the valiant role played by the US troops in Iraq and pledged to institute better homeland security measures to make America safe for its people. The two contenders also made it a point to assure that America would be stronger at home and Kerry expected America to be better respected abroad. The most interesting episode that came to my mind took place at the end of the first debate when the moderator asked both the candidates to make some comments about each other. Though the two candidates shook hands cordially and hurled big smiles at each other both at the beginning and end of the debate, albeit for the camera and the audience, they had some words of praise for each other. Kerry lauded the role of President's wife Laura Bush which was reciprocated by the President speaking well about Kerry's daughters. Something flashed in my mind then. I wondered when would we attain the stage and witness our leading political figures meet cordially and have some nice words to say to each other, even it were for public consumption only!

M.M.Rezaul Karim, a former Ambassador, is a member of BNP's Advisory Council.

Potentials of leather sector remain unutilised

JALAL UDDIN AHMED

Leather is one of the promising and hundred percent export-oriented sectors of the country. From this sector, the country is enjoying more than 250 million US dollar as export earning every year. Bangladesh with its small geographical existence is however rich in its hides and skins production due to huge consumption of meat by its inhabitants. Presently it produces 180 million square feet of hides and skins most of which are being exported in the form of crust and finished leather and minor percentage in products to earn foreign exchange. Leather industry of this country is age-old but the infrastructure as well as its overall performance do not meet the expectations. There are about 220 tanning industries throughout the country, out of which about 190 are concentrated at Hazaribagh tannery block of Dhaka city. And it does not make sense to the general industrial people that how could it be possible to continue such huge industrial activities within this unplanned and small industrial area of only 60 acres. There is not a single positive point to say in favour of the industrial infrastructure of these tanneries. In 1973-74, the sectoral export earning was Tk 1,140 million and now, twenty years later, it is more than Tk 15,000 million a year. The figure could be increased by three to four times if its infrastructural developments could be made as desired since long. The management of this sector is not up to the mark. No quality management, no floor management, even no trade management are in tune with present day tannery management. Nobody perhaps cares for this. Those engaged in tannery management seem very much fond of traditional way of working. No innovation, no risk taking and there is not much market exploring either.

Everybody is for bank money. But the repayment system is not healthy. But having all these negative windows the sector still stands high and is contributing a huge amount of foreign exchange to the national exchequer. We have seen high opportunities in the sector. But we need to create good management groups, competitive and professional marketing wing and a healthy production line-up. Let's look at what happened and what is happening in the outer circuit of this sector. Outer circuit means public and private bodies who are engaged for the development of this sector. The public bodies like Export Promotion Bureau, Board of Investment, Customs, Leather College, and some others are doing their job within the framework and policy of the government. They are working as controlling and supporting bodies. Lots of activities and numerous reports we have been watching since long from various agencies. The International Trade Centre (ITC), Geneva has been trying to develop the leather sector business over the last couple of months. It is heard that this agency is trying to establish a footwear design and development centre titled as Leather Service Centre (LSC), the homework of which has already been completed. Recently, a council named Leather Sector Business Promotion Council (LSBPC) was formed under the direct supervision of commerce ministry. It's a long awaited forum, which could enlighten and bring the tanners on the highway of international leather business which can make them competitive internationally in the field of leather trade. But if it goes under the clutches of the middle-men or opportunist groups them all the expectations will go in vain and it would create another burden for the sector. Every government wants to develop the country's socio-

economic base through development of its existing infrastructure. But then the entrepreneurs, the business groups, public bodies, donors and all other related groups should work concertedly. There should not be any gap between the bodies engaged in the purchase, production, marketing and so on. The leather sector of our country is facing serious drawbacks due to its poor industrial infrastructure, its back dated management practice, its inadequate marketing and technological drawbacks. Question may arise how can we overcome the problems and witness see a healthy and wealthy leather sector. Answer is simple, like: a) Infrastructural development by setting up a CETP (central effluent treatment plant) for a Leather City is a must. We can be hopeful as Bangladesh Small & Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) has undertaken a programme for shifting the Hazaribagh tanneries to a planned and CETP based Leather City near Savar. b) The management system of tannery business should attain an optimum quality to match the TQM (total quality management) leading towards ISO standardisation. c) The marketing management as well as its arrangements should be made competitive and professional. d) All the above activities would fail if the production process and productivity of this business do not meet the optimum desire both from qualitative and quantitative points of view. So technology transfer and development should be the priority. e) Product diversification is necessary both for increased earning as well as creating more and more employment.

Jalal Uddin Ahmed is Assistant General Manager (Development and Expansion), BSCIC, Dhaka