

Drive against institutional corruption

ACC needs more resources

A very welcome step brought about by the new dispensation as a result of the change of 11 Jan 2007 was the reorganisation of the anti-corruption commission.

Since then the ACC has taken some forthright steps to address the issue of corruption, although its focus has been primarily on individuals, in high places in particular, and not so much on corruption in the institutions and establishment of the government.

A noticeable feature of its operation has been the ACC's effort to not only detect cases of corruption and prepare those for prosecution it has taken upon itself the task of playing a leading role in combatting corruption. It must be made clear that combating corruption involves much more than only detection and prosecution of graft cases. Bringing to book the corrupt and ridding the society of corruption are two aspects of the issue that the state should deal with. But we feel that the former ought to take precedence over everything else that the ACC thinks it ought to do in this regard.

And while it is going about detection of corruption cases it must concentrate as much on institutions as individuals, which have been plagued to such an extent that it smeared the image of the country. But from reports appearing in The Daily Star, this aspect has not been addressed with the vigour that it deserves, not because of lack of intent but more because of certain limitations the commission has to face.

No wonder that the commission is going slow in investigating cases of corruption in government institutions. That is why we maintain that not only must the anti-graft body be fully reorganised, it must also be so empowered that would invest it with the capability to put focus on all sectors of the society and the government, without having to depend on others. We feel that it should be provided with the full complement of manpower and other resources, and the human resource level be improved through crash course training programmes.

Without appropriate reform where it would not have to depend on any ministry for its operation, ACC may be hard put to fully succeed in its objectives.

Bobby Fischer's passing

He was more than a chess genius

Bobby Fischer, arguably the greatest chess master that ever lived, died on Thursday last at the age of 64, leaving behind not only a wealth of beautiful games but also many interesting episodes and incidents inseparably linked to his presence in chess tournaments. He loved the game so much that he developed an intense dislike, or even hatred, for the detractors (in his perception) of the royal game.

Fischer, the evasive and elusive genius, was a prodigy whose class as a player was evident well before he grew up to be the man with great determination, tenacity and single-mindedness. He stood alone against the Soviet domination of world chess at a time when there was nobody to challenge the "super-scientific" Russians. Fischer believed that the Russians were taking advantage of their numerical superiority in big tournaments. He might have stretched his imagination a bit too far, but it is of course true that the Russian grandmasters were supported by a team of analysts and experts, while Fischer relied solely on his playing strength. Even at home, he never enjoyed a stable life as he was anti-establishment right from the beginning. He quit chess when FIDE refused to accept his conditions for the world championship match with Anatoly Karpov in 1975. Fischer sounded overtly aggressive or even self-centred, but nobody should overlook the truth that FIDE introduced the same rules that Fischer had suggested for Karpov's match with Victor Korchnoi in 1978! The big casualty of this failure to act in time was the chess genius -- Bobby Fischer. He left chess when he was still in his prime.

He won the title match against Boris Spassky in 1972, quickly dubbed as the "Match of the Century" quite convincingly. It also ended the Soviet hegemony in the post-Alekhine era, albeit for only three years.

As a player, he had a universal style. He could handle the unfathomable complications of the Sicilian Poisoned Pawn with remarkable ease, while his technical play in the Exchange Variation of the Ruy Lopez was almost effortless. Fischer's games will ever remain a source of immense pleasure to his countless followers.

Fischer always stood against what he thought was wrong, and in almost all cases he was right! We join the chess players across the world in condoling the death of this super master.

A Roman diary



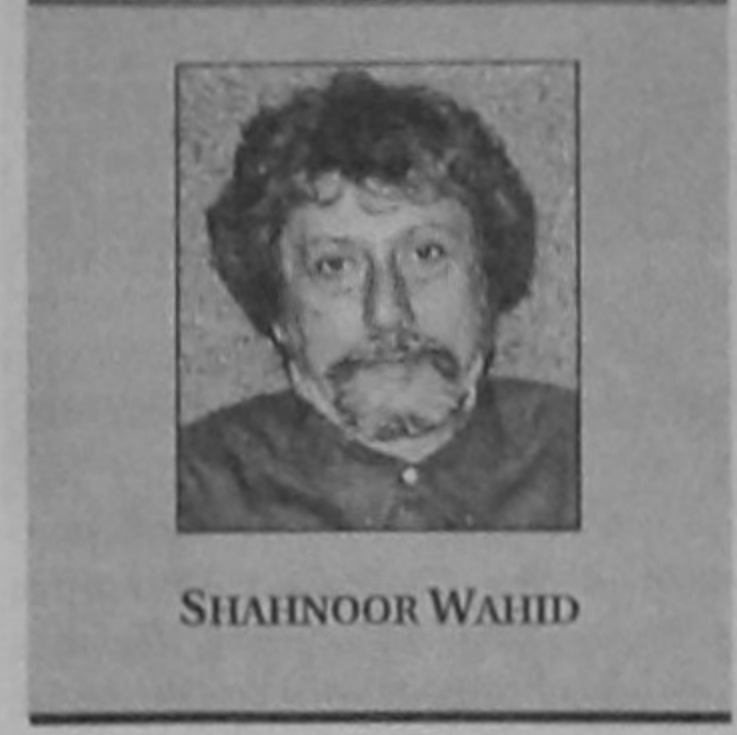
M.J. AKBAR

INDIA is the world's latest quotation mark. Nepal has become a question mark, Sri Lanka an oversized exclamation mark; and Bangladesh is imprisoned between brackets, the space for leeway decreasing by the day. Pakistan is teetering towards a full stop. China has turned into yesterday's paragraph: still impressive, but with the contradictions becoming evident through cracks separating sentences.

What a wonderful feeling to be an Indian at that moment in history when the world begins to applaud as India comes within reach of that long-promised tryst with destiny, and shifts imperceptibly towards the centre of the stage. The auditorium is packed

with distinguished Roman faces and eager journalists. The launch of the Italian edition of my book, Blood Brothers (published by Neri Pozza as Fratelli di sangue), is the excuse. They have come for another glimpse of the Indian story. The book is a portrait of the heart of India, pumping blood to its veins through valves distinct in faith but united in purpose. Italy is waking up to a question that has been asked and answered in India for a thousand years, that runs through three generations of blood brothers: how can different faiths live together? There are many convoluted answers. Here is a short one. It takes two sides to make war. It also takes two sides to make peace.

The weights on the panel for



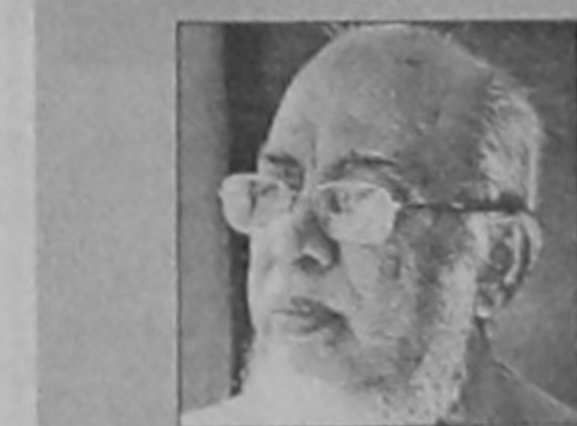
SHAHNOOR WAHID

IT seems our destiny is intertwined with the political parties of the country. We shall go up if they perform well. We shall go down if they fail. We could not yet evolve a system where we could run the affairs of the state without the meddling of the burgeoning groups of corrupt people who go about flashing cards of various political parties.

We are yet to find upright and courageous leaders like Tajuddin Ahmed, on whose shoulders we had leaned with great confidence in 1971. Where have men like him gone? What do we have now? What kind of political parties do we have at present? Let us have a look at them and judge for ourselves.

When a political party falls into disarray, and its upper floors begin to shake dangerously, then is the time for one to look at its foundation. If the base is found to be built of low quality cement, brick and rod then nothing would

Treading unfamiliar ground



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

THE US presidential election is still almost a year away. But the aspirants to be the country's forty-fourth president have already been in the race for more than a year. George Bush's two-term presidency has resulted in a total mess, with its inconclusive wars, chronic deficits and continuing erosion of America's lofty liberal values. Therefore, as the prospects of a Republican candidate entering the White House any time soon have significantly receded, attention, both at home and abroad, is now focused on two front-running Democrat candidates -- Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Houssein Obama.

More so, because both of them are unusual candidates for the US presidency, which is traditionally the preserve of a male of Anglo-Saxon stock.

Apparently, there is departure not only from tradition but also with regard to the nation-wide identity of the contestants, most of who are new faces and weren't

Dissection of political parties

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

In our anatomy, we have discovered the existence of four kinds of political parties in this country and taken the liberty to dissect them one after another. The first kind is a political party that removes a senior person from the Home Ministry to appoint a corrupt-to-the-bone, half literate, half smuggler-half politician, who would do and undo things at the beck and call of the young Turks in the party. That he did without batting an eyelid, and lied his way through the press after every meeting with the senior-most officials of the law enforcing agencies.

make it last long. The hurriedly built foundation would wobble under the pressure of the floors above, and one day it would implode with a mighty sound and spectacle.

Usually, the upper floors of such parties are crowded with people of questionable antecedence who join it to make crores in the shortest possible time. Eventually, they take the party down with the weight of the black money they thus accumulate. The top-most chamber, where the brain is supposed to be, is found to be either empty or fatally damaged.

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politician, who would do and undo things at the beck and call of the young Turks in the party. That he did without batting an eyelid, and lied his way through the press after every meeting with the senior-most officials of the law enforcing agencies.

Being in charge of the Home Ministry, he would gladly negotiate with murderers -- Taka100 crore for safe passage out of the country! Then he would say he has discovered a Hindu JMB terrorist! Next he would smile and say "Go" to killers to throw grenades on a public meeting of the opposition. And then he would pull out a ghost and spin an incredible story to dodge the press!

The first kind is a political party that would allow anybody with ill-gotten money to become MP, and allow him to plunder the state resources. The first kind is a political party that would see a gravedigger's son becoming a

billionaire in five years just by being near the feet of the chairperson (it is hard work indeed). This is the kind of party that would look the other way when Tarzan of the Forest would sell off thousands of trees and animals to make a few crores. This is the kind of party that would look the other way when question papers of civil service examinations would be found on sale in New Market.

Then you have the other kind, the second kind of political party, that has a solid foundation, built years ago, with good quality cement, bricks and rod, but never could add many floors above with shiny tiles or stone slabs. Once upon a time, such parties had plenty of brain on the top floor, but over the decades have lost the luster because the surviving leaders lacked brain and relied on "trump cards" for gaining political mileage.

These leaders had taken everything for granted when they were

in power. Actually, they were afflicted with a disease called "Complacency" that gradually robbed them of their vitality and zeal for a fight when it mattered. Before their eyes, nondescript people, people having no past record of doing politics, built parties and seized power.

Such a party, in their desperation, would go to any length to go to power and, accordingly, negotiate with deposed autocrats, debauched technocrats and deformed religious groups. The second kind is a political party that would line up men and women with no political past and yet ask them to pay money up front in exchange of nomination. The more the merrier. Necessity is the mother of negotiation.

The second kind is a political party that had failed to send the killers of their leader to the gallows, and put the war criminals on trial. They are now crying hoarse for the same, forgetting their own inability to do so. This is the second kind of political party that suffers from brainlessness thereby forgetfulness of the gross mistakes made by them, and of the wheeling and dealing of the big brass in the party.

The third kind of political party that we have at the moment began on a shaky foundation decades ago on flawed premises. These parties look expressively different from the first two kinds as far as ideology, language, alle-

giance, attire and approach are concerned. The first two kinds do not have an ideology anymore, other than, of course, going to power and enjoying the perks to the hilt. The third kind, on the other hand, has an ideology and a mission. They are ready to wait decades to fulfill that mission. The third kind is a political party that lacks brain in the upper most floor hence they suffer from the delusion of being the sole agent of religion in Bangladesh.

There is yet another kind of political party in this country that does not have any ideology, vision or mission. They are built on the surface, having no foundation whatsoever so that the weak structure above can be shifted any time. In fact, these parties willfully want to exist as B-Team, and negotiate with the bigger parties when it comes to joining them to form a government. They remain happy playing the role of scavengers, like the hyenas do after a big kill -- lapping up the entrails.

There are many of them at the moment and many more are coming up here and there as the season is perceived to be good for sprouting. Time will tell when such parties would become mature enough to go for the big kill. Their prowess will be put to the test in the upcoming election.

Shahnoor Wahid is Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

PERSPECTIVES

The US constitution, in its first amendment, prohibited state support for the establishment of a religion -- a stipulation further articulated and reinforced by Thomas Jefferson, the third US president. However, much of the recent invocation of religion can be attributed to the increasing enthusiasm of the fundamentalist Evangelical Christians. Their activities were openly promoted by the Republicans during Bush's presidency, which, inspired by the neo-conservatives, produced a heady mix of religion and politics.

involved in politics previously at a national level. Yet, the politicians with the most realistic prospect of capturing the Democratic Party's nomination are, of course, Hillary Clinton, a woman, and Barack Obama, an African-American. Both are first timers in each category. Even if a female and a black American had contested earlier for the top office, they weren't either credible, or serious, contestants.

But, this time round, the contest between Hillary and Obama has been most exciting to watch, and both seem to mean business. Hillary Clinton, the Senator from New York, is a well regarded candidate and saw until recently a well-choreographed campaign with confidence and thorough preparation. The popularity of her husband, former president Bill Clinton, among the black electorate, as well as a swelling number of women supporting her are Hillary's principal source of strength.

For quite sometime, Hillary Clinton maintained an aura of invincibility after winning two early primaries -- prompting many to believe that her nomination as the Democrats' presidential candidate was all but assured. However, in recent months, her early lead has suffered a setback as Obama overtook her in the Iowa polls, and could leap ahead of her. Even in the state of New Hampshire Hillary was locked in a neck-to-neck struggle with Obama.

Clinton learned long ago that the race for the White House is not for the swiftest but for one with staying power and grit to slog through to the finish despite embarrassments and reversals. Bill Clinton went on to crown himself "the comeback kid," though he came in second in New Hampshire. As his wife's campaign stumbles and loses momentum in the same state her aids are recalling how Bill got through his near-death experience, to portray Hillary as the

"comeback girl." But, in the meantime, Hillary's campaign is facing a wave of defection of her supporters to Barack Obama. Hillary is clearly now wobbling as her backers turn to Obama and the aura of "inevitability" about her nomination fades.

Barack Obama does not have much experience in elective office, nor are his achievements in the Senate considered remarkable. Nevertheless, he is charismatic, and brings into the contest a refreshing face and a record untarnished by political sleaze. His multi-racial heritage, his vibrant youth, and exposure to several cultures in his chequered early life are seen as assets when reaching out to other nations and to people of other religions.

According to William Daley, Bill Clinton's secretary of commerce as well as a prominent Obama backer: "He (Obama) is an extremely talented young fellow who I have watched grow. He can strongly convey to the

world that there is a different generation and a different style about America."

As described in his best-selling book, Dreams from my father, he was candid in admitting that he was the son of a Kenyan Muslim and a white Christian American mother. His parents divorced and his mother remarried, this time to an Indonesian student. Obama accompanied the couple when they moved to Jakarta, where his early education started.

Although Obama is not shy of his Muslim ties, he categorically stated that he was a Christian. Yet, a smear campaign on the internet paints him as a closet Muslim who, as a child, attended a madrasa in Indonesia where Taliban-like extremism was taught -- an allegation that can be fatal for Obama in post nine-11 Islamophobia of America hope that in the country's post-9/11 climate the mere suspicion of his Muslim connection will ensure his defeat.

Such a notion is reinforced by another unusual feature of the current campaign; the degree to which religion has permeated electoral politics. Several commentators have already highlighted the contrast in this regard between Europe and America in the 21st century. While Christianity is losing its hold on the European population, as evidenced by cathedrals empty of worshippers, religion

in America has assumed an increasingly greater role and primacy in public life.

All candidates in the current election express their piety and their devotion to their faith and also try to outdo each other in their religiosity -- a recent phenomenon and uneasy development in a country that is supposed to have ironclad separation between religion and affairs of the state.

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Mike Huckabee surged forward in the polls in Iowa on the strength of his religious background. This trend has already distorted the secular character of American polity. Unless checked, the entire civilisational achievement of the great nation will be at stake.

Big (red) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

BYLINE

Perhaps it should be the other way around, but that would be far less interesting a spectacle. A literary festival is the space between ego and alter ego. Give an author a stage and watch a peacock dance. Some do it elegantly enough. Those with borrowed plumes never stop short of the Bhangra. The best, a rare few, sit on a stone in the corner of the stage, either waiting for Godot or chuckling at themselves.

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The book is a portrait of the heart of India, pumping blood to its veins through valves distinct in faith but united in purpose. Italy is waking up to a question that has been asked and answered in India for a thousand years, that runs through three generations of blood brothers: how can different faiths live together? There are many convoluted answers. Here is a short one. It takes two sides to make war. It also takes two sides to make peace.

the discussion about the book are heavy; Sandro Gozi, president of the Italian-Indian Association; Dr. Roberto Colaninno, president of Gruppo Piaggio; Dr. Guidoberto Guidi, president of Ducati Energia and Dr. Giuseppe Marra, president of GMC. Italy's businessmen are more interested in India than Italy's politicians. That is the good news. The future is bright.

Businessmen succeed because they can read a balance sheet with bifocals. They also use night vision. They will not rev up the engines without foreknowledge of roadblocks in the night. I was asked direct questions. Let me mention two. What could sabotage India's growth? And what ever happened to Gandhi?

Honesty demanded candour. Growth would be sabotaged only

if there was continued neglect of the undergrowth. Growth was incompatible with poverty, or that corrosive, besetting sin, communal violence. The reason is not virtue. Morality is important, but pragmatism is more effective. Conflict is injurious to economic growth. Mumbai can have either riots or a booming stock exchange, not both.

As for non-violence: it was a brilliant strategy against an "invincible" empire. It is a hopeless glue for a nation state. The state cannot turn the other cheek against secession or terrorism.

One should have expected the favourite question of TV, print and radio journalists. What is common between Italy and India? I can think of two attributes immediately. Both Italian and Indian men are in love with,

and in awe of, their mothers. And both drive cars in the heart of the city with the imperious impatience of maniacs. The Italians have an advantage though. Don't bother if you are hit by most cars in a city like Torino. The car will get hurt. The small car is not only alive and well in Italy, but has all the impishness of a brat.

One could also suggest a unique sense of logic common to elements of both societies. The logic of the room-service waiter at the friendly, gracious and very pretty Hotel Locarno in the heart of Rome, once a boutique residence of filmstars on a Roman holiday or on Hollywood business, was irrefutable. Twice he responded to my request for a bucket of ice and soda by saying that he could not take my order because his phone was not working.

The third conversation was at his initiative. He, considerably, made the call. The phone was working now, he said, with more than a hint of triumph. I wanted to check how we had managed to communicate on a variety of subjects on the two previous occasions when his phone was not working, but decided that the dialectic might be in contraven-

tion of some labour law. I decided to let sleeping telephones lie.

Every human being has a friend. But only a few are privileged to have a friend like Dr. Pippo Marra, the large-hearted baron of a flourishing media empire. Roman doors never remain closed before him. He had the imagination to start an Arabic news service that has become a hit across the Mediterranean: Italy is divided from the Arab world by a calm sea.

His company shot to international fame when al-Qaeda chose to deliver its last message through his Arabic service. A cynosure of the media, he was the architect of the generous attention that Blood Brothers received. He offered me the ultimate hospitality, the liberal gift of his time. The highlight of his program for me was a football match, AS Roma versus Torino FC, at the famous Roma ground, in the second of the two encounters between the teams in the knockout Italy Cup.

If news had spread that I was going to see Romano Prodi, it might have provoked a yawn or two. When people learnt I was going to see Totti, even friends could not disguise their envy.

Prodi is a mere prime minister. Totti is a genius, star of Roma and sun of Italian football.

And how that sun dazzled! He did not come on the field till about ten minutes after half time. Roma were still two goals in deficit from the previous game. The score-sheet was as blank as an accountant's face. Play was stopped. Totti arrived. A thunder-clap from Zeus roared down from the stands. Suddenly, touch, weave and thrust shifted the dynamic of a game that had plodded down narrow furrows.

Totti flicked the ball, darted across, changed position. The field became wider side-to-side and shorter goalpost-to-goalpost. The Roma midfield and front line became touched with mercury. They found the net thrice in quick succession before Torino could understand what was going on, and then banged the ball into the net a fourth time after Torino lost their will.

Totti scored his 200th goal in Italian football and received a standing ovation. I expect a standing ovation from my son when I eventually receive the signed Totti shirt that Dr. Marra has promised to parcel.

It is mildly reassuring to be

addressed correctly. Italians call people of the Islamic faith "Mussalmano," rather than the inelegant British "Moslem" or the absurd "Saracen." Crusaders used Saracen because they thought Arabs were children of Sarah, Abraham's wife. Mecca owes its origins, however, to Hajr, Abraham's second wife. In such a fragment of language lies history. Arabs ruled Sicily till the 11th century.

Thoughts on a literary festival in Torino. The last temptation of an author, creator of characters, is to become a character actor in front of peers. Authors tend to write from the head and speak from the imagination.

Perhaps it should be the other way around, but that would be far less interesting a spectacle. A literary festival is the space between ego and alter ego. Give an author a stage and watch a peacock dance. Some do it elegantly enough. Those with borrowed plumes never stop short of the Bhangra. The best, a rare few, sit on a stone in the corner of the stage, either waiting for Godot or chuckling at themselves.

M.J. Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.