

# Davos lesson: More investment for higher rice productivity

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REAZ AHMAD

As the curtain fell on this year's World Economic Forum in Davos, leaders from across the globe left the Swiss ski resort with a plethora of new ideas about how to cope with a looming global economic recession, and fight hunger. The head of Bangladesh's interim government also returned home, gaining the world community's confidence in his government's firm resolve to handover power to a people's government through credible national elections in 2008.

Dr. Fakhruddin's commitment to democracy was re-spelt before an international hi-profile audience amidst much applause, at a time when the home economy is bleeding. An overwhelming majority of impoverished Bangladeshis now find it difficult to survive with their income-level grossly mismatching the prices of basic necessities, particularly rice, the staple.

Bangladesh has never seen

such an output shortage-driven price hike of rice since the 1998 deluge that had engulfed two-thirds of its landmass. Even then, the import-line was so efficient and prompt that prices of coarse rice varieties had not jumped so high. Now that prices have shot up to an unprecedented level, there is no "quick-fix" answer to it.

A Boro boon may offset the situation to a great extent. Channeling of more funds on research and development (R&D) of our staple should be one priority focus once we get over the present crisis. That's the message we got from Davos last weekend.

From the same Davos podium, the world's richest man, Bill Gates, announced a grant of \$19.9 million over three years to initially help place improved rice varieties and related technology into the hands of 400,000 small farmers in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Farmers are expected to achieve a 50 percent increase in their yields within the next 10 years.

The announcement made on Friday (January 25) on behalf of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation would enable the International Rice Research Institute (Irri) to acquire new funding to harness major scientific advances and address some of the biggest unsolved problems in agriculture. Irri's new project will help develop and distribute improved varieties of rice that can be grown in rain-fed ecosystems -- where farmers have little or no access to irrigation -- and withstand environmental stresses such as drought, flooding, and salinity.

Irri will draw on its past success in improving incomes for millions of poor farmers to reach its ultimate goal -- more than 18 million households benefiting from improved rice varieties that will generate income increases and help lift farmers out of poverty. Irri will work closely with other national and international agricultural research centers, including the Africa Rice Center. In addition,

the project will build the capacity of researchers and seed producers in poor rice-dependent countries.

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Now that Irri, the Philippines-based world's leading rice research and training center having offices in 13 countries including one in Dhaka, is getting the resources to pursue ways and means for higher productivity in rice, Bangladesh needs to take immediate measures on how to get the maximum benefit out of it.

As Irri is an autonomous, non-profit institution focused on improving the well being of present and future generations of rice



are now facing major production pressure and rising prices that threaten Asia's continued economic growth.

A team co-led by Irri scientists made a key breakthrough in 2006 with the discovery of a gene that allows rice to survive up to two weeks flooding with minimal yield loss. Varieties without this gene that are subjected to more than a few days flooding can be completely ruined. The gene, known as Sub1, has been bred into several popular varieties -- which in the absence of submergence behave exactly as the original variety -- and these are already being tested in rice fields in Bangladesh and India.

Even Bangladeshi farmers who were devastated by Cyclone Sidr in November last year -- which was so fierce that no rice crop could fully withstand it -- can benefit from new varieties with sufficient tolerance of submergence, salinity, and stagnant flooding. Such varieties can mitigate the immediate effects of severe storms and offer yields that will avert hunger until the next harvest, claimed a recently issued Irri news release.

Rice is a food staple for 2.4 billion people and provides more than 20 percent of their daily calorie intake, and up to 70 percent for the poorest of the poor. In order to meet the projected global demand for rice production in the 21st century, the world's rice production must increase by nearly 70 percent -- from 520 million tons today to nearly 880 million tons in 2025. With nearly all irrigated rice-growing lands already in production, there is considerable potential to increase rice yields on rain-fed lands.

While Bangladesh gets a little over half of its total yearly rice production from irrigated Boro, the rest comes mainly from rain-fed agro-ecological system. As Irri's project targets the poorest rice farmers in Africa and South Asia, who have little or no access to irrigation and who are totally reliant on sufficient, timely rains, its high time Bangladesh gets itself involved in the rice R&D process.

Bangladesh's rice growers and agricultural scientists should also get their due shares of neo-science exposures to develop national capabilities using Irri resources, as the Institute has recently received a flurry of grants -- \$ 4.7 million from the government of Japan, \$ 1.45 million from Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in combination with the Eiselein Foundation, and \$ 1.5 million from the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

Besides, the country needs to pool its own funds to invest on rice R&D so that we don't become too vulnerable to natural calamities. We can brave one or two routine floods a year, or a big-time Sidr once a while.

Reaz Ahmad is a Cochran Fellow of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), and a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

## Dirty tricks in politics

On the election day in Nevada on January 19, automated phone calls on behalf of Senator Hillary Clinton went to the houses of democratic voters, in which Senator Obama was described as supporting a Republican agenda and being in favour of storing nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain in Nevada. In the last debate, Senator Obama denied the allegation raised by Senator Hillary Clinton.

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

DIRTY tricks are being used in the campaigns of the presidential hopefuls of the Republican and Democratic parties in the United States. There is a long way to go to get nomination of the party concerned to contest presidential elections in November this year.

This is the beauty of the elections in the United States. Registered voters of the party concerned, not by the party hierarchy, select representatives. Candidates will undergo a difficult journey to pass the test to get nomination for the presidential elections as they are facing 4 phases of elections, which will terminate at Denver, Colorado, for the Democratic Party's nominee on August 25-28, while Republican nominee selection will end up at Minneapolis, Minnesota, on September 01-05.

The politics of desperation turns out to be ugly. Desperation is what the people of the US witnessed when Senator Hillary Clinton's campaign co-chairman raised the issue of Senator Obama's admission in his book, Dreams from my father, that he had used marijuana and cocaine while he was teenager, saying, "Republicans might have a field day questioning when Obama last used drugs, and even whether he had been a drug dealer."

The co-chairman was asked to resign. Senator Hillary apologized to Obama. This happened a couple of days ahead of the voting in Iowa on January 3.

Voters, particularly Democrats, see it as a dirty trick, especially since Senator Hillary is always complaining about the "politics of personal destruction." Former Senator Bob Kerry, who endorsed Senator Hillary, also attacked Senator Obama by saying: "I like the fact that his name is Barack Hussein Obama and his father was a Muslim and that his paternal grandmother was a Muslim." His comments were also seen as negative and racially tinted. Bob Kerry also apologized to Obama.

On the night before the primary elections in New Hampshire on January 8, Senator Hillary's teary-eyed and broken-voiced confession to a group of women of New Hampshire CNN

and NBC TV replayed that the pressure and attacks do sometimes get her several times, which worked to her advantage. This scene drew attention of women-folk, particularly old women, who rushed to the polling booths to rescue Senator Hillary.

This is another dirty trick. This clearly demonstrates of the weakness of the candidate to withstand pressure during the election cycle. In that case, how she will take the responsibility as the president of the United States.

Senator Obama told the Reno Gazette Journal on January 14: "I mean, I think Ronald Reagan changed the trajectory of America in a way, you know, Richard Nixon did not and in a way that Bill Clinton did not. I think it's fair to say that Republicans were the party of ideas for a pretty long chunk of time there over the last 10-15 years, in the sense that they were challenging conventional wisdom." Senator Obama neither praised Ronald Reagan nor supported the entire agenda of the Republican Party. Both Bill Clinton and Senator Hillary Clinton distorted the statement

of Senator Obama. This is what Bill Clinton reportedly said: "President Reagan was the engine of innovation and did more, and had a more lasting impact on America than I did. In the 90's, the good ideas came out from the Republicans."

In an editorial the Washington Post of January 24 said: "In spite of the explanations by Senator Obama that did not stop the Clinton campaign, which went up with a radio ad yesterday quoting Mr.Obama out of context. This episode does not speak well for Mrs. Clinton."

Bill Clinton also gave distorted statements about Obama's position on the Iraq war. Obama never supported the war. On the other hand, both Bill Clinton and Senator Hillary supported the war in Iraq. Senator Obama shot back on January 21, accusing Bill Clinton of distorting some of his statements.

Being a two-term president, Bill Clinton has been vitiating the political climate during the campaign trail. In the debate on January 21, Senator Obama sarcastically said: "I can't tell who I am running against sometimes."

ity, if any, of Senator Hillary Clinton.

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The Clinton campaign, also through the internet, circulated distorted a claim that senator Obama was a Muslim who had connections with extremist Muslim groups. That is a travesty of truth. It is fact that Senator Obama was brought up in the environment of a Christian family, and he follows the Christian faith.

The same dirty trick appeared in 2004 when Senator Kerry of the Democratic Party contested against George Bush of the Republican Party. The so-called Swift boat veterans for truth distorted Kerry's military records. The group had connection with the Republican Party and had contributed to the Bush-Cheney campaign.

Senator Kerry, who endorsed Obama in a letter to many democrats, a copy of which endorsed to this writer, criticised the attack and warned Democrats of the consequences.

From the Republican side, there is not much mudslinging, but there are dirty tricks that happened against Senator John McCain, a Vietnam veteran. McCain was attacked because he divorced his wife, who raised the couple's three children while he was a prisoner of war in Vietnam.

Secondly, his second wife, Cindy, is a drug addict. McCain had fathered a daughter, Bridget, a black child, out of wedlock. The fact is that the daughter was adopted from Mother Teresa's orphanage in Bangladesh. A Group called "Common sense Issues" began automated calls in South Carolina, saying that McCain had voted to use unborn babies in medical research.

Actually, Senator McCain voted on research stem cells gathered from embryos. He is anti-abortionist in the Senate.

This is the dangerous smear campaign in American politics that peddled distortions and falsehood.

Recruitment is about getting the best person for the job. In most of the countries, it is usually dealt with by the Public Service Commission (PSC), whose remit is enshrined in the Constitution. Recruitment should be fair, which means that the PSC should be genuinely independent. It can be harder to ensure fairness in a decentralised system, which is why many developing countries resist devolving recruitment to line agencies.

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

GOVERNMENT jobs belong to the country's people, not politicians, and shall be filled only with regard to public service," said Theodore Roosevelt, first US Civil Service Commissioner (1889-1895) and the 26th president of the United States (1901-1909).

To recruit the people the country needs, the department or the respective authority must expand its outreach to all parts of the country so that it gets a highly skilled workforce which can represent the country's diversity, and can advance national interests. To do so, recruitment should be fair.

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The Commission is charged with maintaining the purposes of civil service systems, merit selection, tenure and an independent Civil Service Commission. Independent civil service commission only defences against politics.

The Bangladesh Public Service Commission (PSC) is a quasi-judicial body established under the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and works under the provisions of the Articles 137 to 141 of the Constitution of Bangladesh, and certain other rules and regulations made by the government.

Although it has gone through various amendments since 1981, including elimination of political patronage, encouragement of efficiency and introduction of staff training, the Bangladesh Civil Service Recruitment Rules, 1981, laid down the procedure for recruitment to various services of

## Let merit count in the Bangladesh Civil Service

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the republic. The requirement to consult the Public Service Commission is a constitutional one as envisaged in Clause (2) of Article 140 of the Constitution.

The implementation of government policies and projects is the duty of the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS); a corps of trained administrators who form the nation's most influential group of civilians.

Although, according to the constitutional obligations, the Commission is only responsible to the Parliament of Bangladesh for its actions, and the recommendations and the decisions of the Commission can only be reviewed or replaced by the president of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, the civil service remains divided, politicised and corrupted.

Political sympathy and partisan activity are now required as conditions for appointment. Fitness for office is given far less consideration, thus, the quality of public service is seriously affected in Bangladesh.

Nobody finds the factors that contribute to the success or failure of public sector programs important. Why should ensuring merit in public appointments be an important element of public service? What can civil service specialists contribute to the debate about corruption and patronage?

The partisan recruitment of BSC examinees according to the interest of political parties or other beneficiary groups, leakage of question papers frequently over the years, and taking of bribe by members, officials or staff of the Commission are among the most raised allegations against the Commission, and have contributed to a massive erosion of trust and credibility of this constitutional body.

In addition, irregularities in BSC examination, allocation of seats in groups with bribe, ensuring of success in the preliminary test with bribe, copying and solving questions outside the exam hall, replacing of examination scripts or documents, corruption in viva voce, giving of high marks to the target candidates, calling of candidates to Commission after viva voce, changing of marks, and leakage of BSC results are some obstacles in getting genuine administrators to serve the country.

One reason for holding general elections under neutral caretaker

governments is that some civil servants back one of the political parties in the hope of being awarded lucrative postings and other benefits.

Many observers believe that tackling corruption in the civil service will reduce the corruption everywhere, as the civil service sector is the real wheel of country's administration.

The present government is aware that the primary way by which corruption can be tackled in the long term is to target the development of a merit-based, suitably rewarded civil service. The PSC has been reconstituted by appointment of a new chairman and other members, and has planned to develop a strategic perspective for improving the quality of the civil service, beginning with recruitment and promotion policies and practices.

It has already cancelled the viva voce results of the controversial 27th BCS examinations after reviewing newspaper reports and various allegations about the examination in order to restore confidence in the public mind and establish transparency in the recruiting process for public jobs, and immediately rescheduled the viva for all successful candidates of the written examinations.

After a time lag of two and a half years since the circular for the last BCS exam was issued on June 28, 2005, that for the 28th BCS exam, has just been published on January 23.

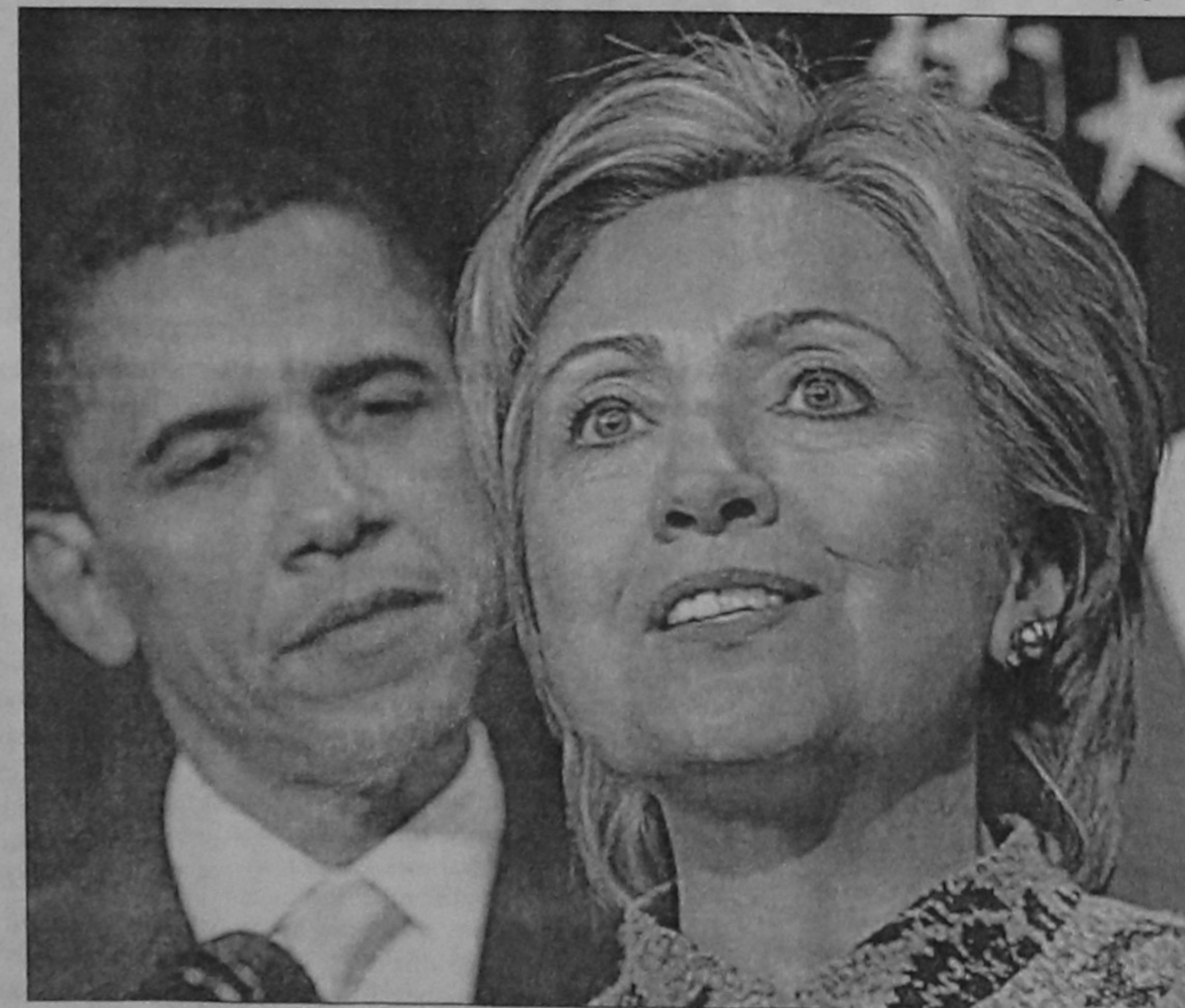
Although the latest circular disappointed everyone, and should be reviewed, as it said that only graduates aged 30 years or below as of January 1, 2008 can apply for the 28th BCS examinations, there is great public expectation of getting really meritorious civil servants as they are core functionaries of the government.

2008 will be a remarkable transition phase for the nation if the PSC can finish all the recruitment processes of the 28th BCS examination during the tenure of this non-political government.

Ripan Kumar Biswas is a freelance writer based in New York.

### Notice

The credit for the picture used for the article "Bird flu control strategy" published on January 30 was not given. It was taken by Tanvir Ahmed, Drink New. The author is regretted.



Who is saying what about whom?

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, former Bangladesh diplomat writes from Virginia.