

Paint it black

LETTER FROM AMERICA

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FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton

Who would have thought that the Clintons would take a page out of Karl Rove's playbook and use it against Hillary Clinton's Democratic presidential rival Barack Obama? Yet, that is exactly what they did in South Carolina. "Bush's Brain" Karl Rove popularised the smear tactics of hitting an opponent where he/she is supposedly strongest. After Vietnam War hero, Senator John McCain, won the New Hampshire primary over candidate George W. Bush in 2000, Rove floated sinister rumours that McCain committed treason while a prisoner of the Vietnamese for 5 years in Hanoi, and that Brigitte, his dark-skinned adopted daughter from Bangladesh, is actually his own daughter with a black prostitute. Bush went on to win the next primary in South Carolina and the Republican nomination in 2000. During the presidential campaign of 2004, to contrast himself with the Vietnam War-dodging George W. Bush, when the Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry decided to flaunt the chest-full of medals he won for his bravery in Vietnam, Karl Rove enlisted the services of the so-called "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth," who in television commercials falsely and maliciously claimed that John Kerry was no war hero and was unworthy of those medals. For some inexplicable reason, Kerry campaign did not counter the fallacy for two full weeks, until voters had concluded that from absent rebuttal from Kerry, the allegations must be true. With

Kerry's strength neutralised, George W. Bush was re-elected president. Born in Hawaii of a black Kenyan Muslim father and a white Christian mother, with formative years spent in Indonesia, Senator Barack Hussein Obama of Illinois is running as a transformational candidate. A person of biracial heritage, he transcends race and is running a non-racial, America-unifying campaign. He appeals to blacks and whites alike. That is why he won the Iowa caucus earlier this year, although Iowa is predominantly white, and came in a strong second in New Hampshire, which, too, is predominantly white. If Senator Obama had won the New Hampshire primary, which he was predicted to do, the campaign for the Democratic nomination would have been over. Hillary Clinton's last minute emotional plea and "crying" apparently moved enough women voters to hand her a narrow victory in New Hampshire. The next primary was to be in South Carolina on January 26, and that is where the Clintons decided to adopt Karl Rove's tactics. To deflect criticism of Hillary's Senate vote that authorised Bush to attack Iraq, President Clinton called Obama's well-documented opposition to the Iraq war a "fairytale." About 50% of the Democratic primary voters in South Carolina are black. With polls showing Obama ahead of Hillary Clinton by double-digit numbers in South Carolina, the Clintons decided to inject race into the contest and project Obama as just another "black" candidate. As the nation was getting ready to

celebrate the birthday of slain civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Hillary Clinton pointed out that without the white President Lyndon Johnson, civil rights legislation would not have been enacted for the blacks. In other words, despite fine speech making by Dr. King, without Johnson, blacks would not have attained civil rights. The not-so-subtle message for Obama was: You, too, make fine speeches Barack, but remember, without a white president (Hillary) to back them, blacks will not make any gains. Former President Bill Clinton had kept a low profile in his wife's presidential bid until her defeat in Iowa. Instead of acting like the elder statesman of the Democratic party, he began acting more like a surrogate, executing hatchet jobs on behalf of his wife. With the intervention of Bill Clinton, Hillary's campaign became Bill's campaign. Bill Clinton reminded the voters that the controversial and polarising civil rights leader, Reverend Jesse Jackson, too, had won the Democratic primary in South Carolina in 1984 and 1988. They formulated a perfect strategy to diminish Obama's expected victory in South Carolina: If Obama wins South Carolina; it will be only because he is black, just like Jesse Jackson! Barack Obama's campaign theme was to transcend race and appeal to whites, blacks, Latinos and the rest of the population. If the Clintons could paint him as only "a black man," that would neutralise his appeal with other segments of the population. Devious like Karl Rove, yes, but a brilliant strategy nonetheless. Unfortunately for the Clintons,

that strategy backfired in South Carolina. The Clintons' low blows upset many voters in South Carolina and several prominent Democrats all over the country, who advised the former president to "chill." The polls predicted a Obama victory by about 10%. In the actual contest, Obama trounced Hillary by 55% to 27%! Obama won 78% of the black vote. John Edwards won 40% of the white vote followed by Hillary at 30% and Obama at 24%. In the thirty years that I have followed American politics closely, I do not recall any other candidate who inspired Americans of all shades, especially the younger Americans, like the way Senator Barack Obama does. I have heard staunch Republicans go gaga over Barack and say that he inspires them! Americans are fed up with bickering, partisan and polarising politics. Barack Obama's unifying message (I paraphrase) -- we are not black America or white America, rich America or poor America, conservative America or liberal America, Democratic America or Republican America, we are the United States of America -- has touched a tender chord in the American psyche. Truth be told, Senator Barack Obama's Mount Olympus oratory inspires this writer! Not surprisingly, Caroline Kennedy, President John F. Kennedy's daughter, endorsed Senator Barack Obama in an op-ed article in The New York Times on January 27. Entitled "A President like my Father," the piece said: "Over the years, I've been deeply moved by the people who've told me they wished they could feel inspired and hopeful about America the way people did when my father was president. This sense is even more profound today. That is why I am supporting a presidential candidate in the Democratic primaries, Barack Obama..." And Senator Obama is showing the same qualities today. He has built a movement that is changing the face of politics in this country, and he has demonstrated a special gift for inspiring young people -- known for a willingness to volunteer, but an aversion to politics -- to become engaged in the political

process... I have never had a president who inspired me the way people tell me that my father inspired them. But for the first time, I believe I have found the man who could be that president -- not just for me, but for a new generation of Americans." On January 28, Senator Barack Obama picked up the endorsement of another influential Kennedy. Disenchanted with the tone of the Clinton campaign, spurning entreaties from the Clinton camp to at least stay neutral, the sage of the Democratic Party, Senator Edward (Ted) M. Kennedy of Massachusetts endorsed Senator Barack Obama for president from the same stage in American University, Washington, DC where President Kennedy had delivered the commencement speech in June 1963. After Caroline Kennedy introduced him, Senator Kennedy symbolically passed the Kennedy torch to Obama, as heir to a new generation of Americans, calling Obama a "man with extraordinary gifts of leadership and character," a worthy heir to his assassinated brother. Senator Kennedy then went off campaigning with Obama among Latinos, whites and labour union members. Senator Barack Obama is often compared to President John F. Kennedy and his brother Senator Robert (Bobby) F. Kennedy for his inspirational, race-transcending messages. Near the end of Obama's first year in the Senate (2005), Ethel Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy's widow, asked him to speak at a ceremony for her husband's 80th birthday. At the time, Ethel Kennedy referred to Harvard law graduate Barack Obama as "our next president." "I think he feels it. He feels it just like Bobby did," Ms. Kennedy said in an interview that day, comparing her late husband's quest for social justice to Mr. Obama's. "He has the passion in his heart. He's not selling you. It's just him." More bad news for the Clintons. Princeton's Toni Morrison, the 1993 Nobel Laureate in literature, who



had labelled Bill Clinton "America's first black President," also endorsed Barack Obama! The way things are going for the Clintons, soon we may be hit with the news: "Monica endorses Obama!" Does it mean that Senator Barack Obama is a shoo-in for the Democratic nomination? Hardly. The Clintons' "dirty" tactics may yet work. Twenty-two states, including California and New York hold primaries on February 5 to choose over 1,600 delegates. Black vote is not as significant in many of these states. The

Clintons are exploiting the tension between blacks and Latinos. Latinos, who constitute one fourth of the voting population in California, prefer Clinton over Obama by a ratio of 3:1. And nationwide Obama has to win more than 24% of the white votes, as he did in South Carolina. If Hillary Clinton can stall the surge of support for Obama in the aftermath of South Carolina primary and win more delegates than Obama on February 5 "Super Tuesday," she will be the favourite

to win the Democratic nomination. Even if Barack Obama were to win the Democratic nomination, the Republicans will not give him a free pass just because he talks about unifying all Americans. Right-wing Republican television and radio talk show hosts such as Rush Limbaugh constantly peddle the nonsense that Obama is a Muslim (he is a Christian) and always refer to the Senator from Illinois as "Barack Hussein Obama," with clear allusion to the late Iraqi dictator.

Positive discrimination

Reservation is confined only to the services of the government, which at present is the least significant employer. The vast private sector, which creates majority of the employment opportunity and offers best and lucrative remuneration, does not have any such quota. In fact, the private sector jobs are mostly occupied by the privileged section of the society, except some lower tiers like security guards or garments workers.

NAZRUL ISLAM

A group of Dhaka University students has been demanding reduction in the existing quota system in the government service, or its total abolition. They even held a number of sit-in demonstrations on the campus to support their demand. However, another group is opposing any curtailment in the quota. A sort of whispering was in the air, as the process of the advertisement for the 28th BCS examination for recruitment in various cadre services was nearing. The whisper turned into an almost uproar with publication of the advertisement in the newspapers last week. Not only the Dhaka University students, but PSC chairman, Dr. Saadat Hussain, and a number of intellectuals in their recent media interviews also expressed their opinions in favour of decline in the

quota, or its abolishment. At present, 55 per cent quota has been preserved for various groups in government services. Of them, 30 per cent is earmarked for freedom fighters and their wards, 10 per cent for women, and 5 per cent for indigenous people. The agitating students alleged that the quota system is a gross injustice towards majority of the candidates for government services, and urged the government to ensure appointment in the civil service on the basis of merit. The opponents of the quota system argue that because of the quota policy many deserving candidates don't get chances in civil service, all creating intellectual mediocrity in government section. Now, we would examine whether there is any genuine need to maintain quota system or not. The quota system in the government service is, no doubt, a kind of discrimination. Here the discrimina-

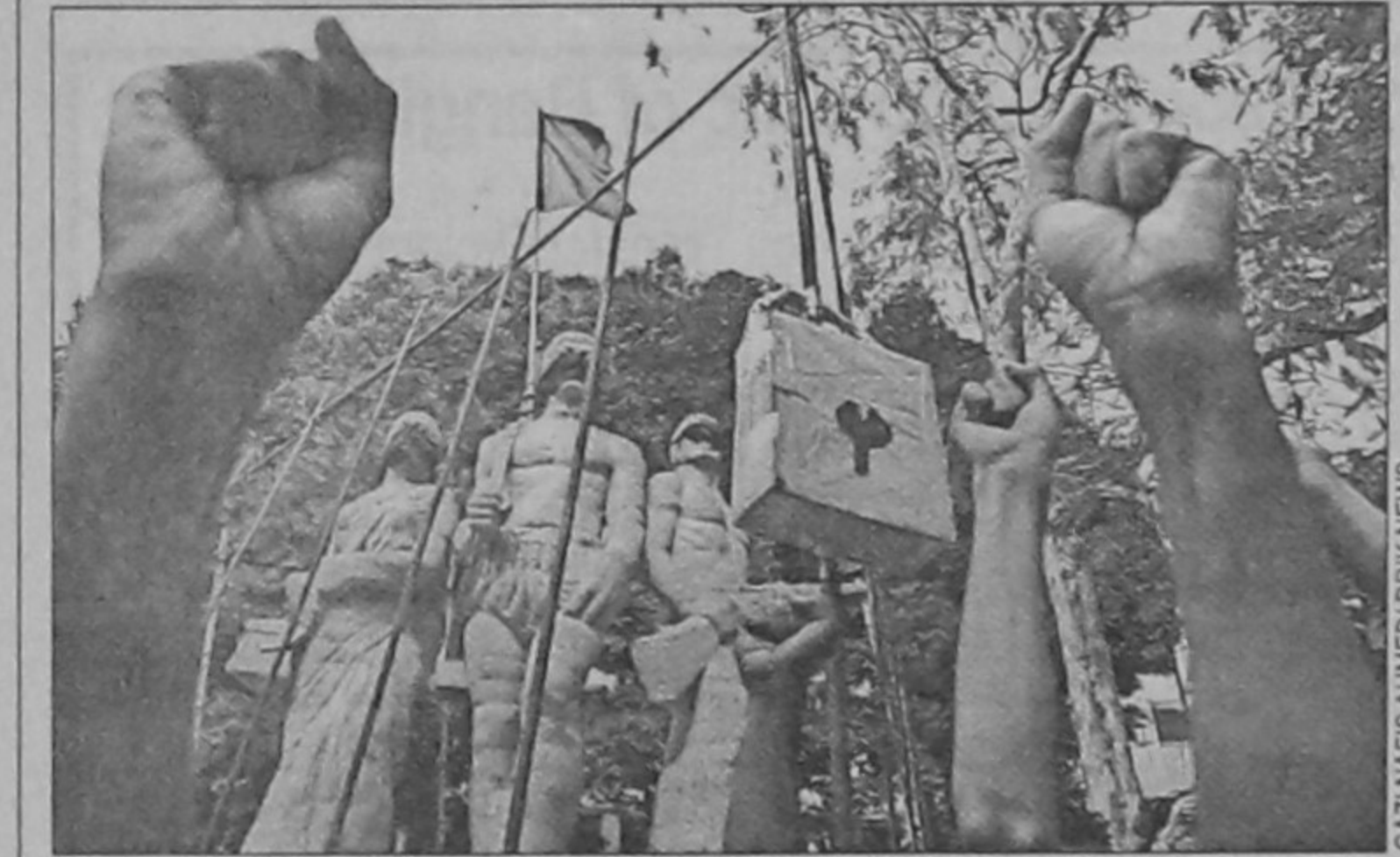
tion is against so-called meritorious ones. But such discrimination exists in almost every country across the world including US, South Africa, Malaysia, Brazil, India and Pakistan. This type of discrimination can be called a positive discrimination or affirmative action. Affirmative action refers to policies intended to promote access to education or employment of the historically or socio-politically non-dominant groups. The objective for affirmative action is to redress the effects of past and current wrongful discrimination and to encourage various public institutions to be more representative of the population. This is commonly achieved through targeted recruitment programs, by preferential treatment given to applicants from socio-politically-disadvantaged groups, and in some cases through the use of quotas. India is the brightest example of maintaining reservation or quota at central and state levels for various groups in employment, education and parliamentary or state legislative seats for long. The central government of India reserves 27 per cent of government jobs and places in higher education for Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Other Backward Castes. Along with this, each state maintains reservation for the underprivileged or disadvantaged groups up to 69 per cent (Tamil Nadu). Some other groups such as freedom fighters and professionals also enjoy quota or preferential treatment in various government facilities. Now the question lies how far is the reservation of the four groups -- freedom fighters, districts, women and indigenous people -- in our country judicious? Do the groups really deserve this positive discrimination or are they wrongly identified for such privilege? Freedom fighters: The highest 30 per cent quota has been preserved for freedom fighters or their wards. Perhaps, this allocation is at the centre of all clamour. After the independence, the freedom fighters of Bangladesh did not get any state-

level support for their living. After a long gap, assuming power in 1996, Awami League government passed a law preserving 30 per cent quota for the freedom fighters or their wards. However, they are yet to get any benefit of the law, as the last BNP-Jamaat government did not abide by the law in recruiting government employees. Even the results of 26th special BCS examination for freedom fighters and their wards, taken 7 years back, were not published. We should not be astonished to see the opposition against the reservation for the freedom fighters in a country where people who directly fought against the country and its people, assumed state-power within three decades of the liberation war. We shouldn't forget that some freedom fighters beg alms and many anti-liberation elements maintain a lavish life. So, the opposition is not unexpected. In India, the freedom fighters and their families were still given special privileges at state and central levels even after six decades of independence. Nobody raised any questions against the privileges for the heroic sons, who waged struggle for freedom of India from British rule. District quota: There is no doubt in the fact that all districts of Bangladesh are not equally developed. During the last three decades, some areas got more allocation than others. Historically some districts are economically backward. Moreover, in the prevailing trend of commercialisation of education system and wide economic disparity among the various groups in the society, it's difficult for the students of backward districts to prove their merit on the basis of merely a set of questions. In fact, the merit of a person can't be judged by a set of questions, it needs continuous observation and scrutiny, generally in the workplace. Securing first class first, by a student, does not always mean he or she is the most meritorious one. Women and Indigenous quota: Women and Indigenous quota (legally speaking) in our society: The representation of women (who constitute nearly 50 per cent of the total population) in government service is around only 15 per cent. It is the duty of the state to alleviate the situation of the backward section of the society. Similarly, the country's indigenous people are subjected to various discriminations, sometimes by the state itself. Again, it is the responsibility of the state to com-

pensate the discrimination. The demand for abolishing the quota system is being made on the plea that it prevents meritorious students from entering the government service and thereby government departments are turning into intellectually mediocre. In fact, for serving in government departments, we do not require any brilliant people. Any mediocre person, having common sense, can be the best government employee. And under the current process of recruitment, where there is a definite benchmark (50 per cent mark) for crossing every step (Such as preliminary test, written test, viva voce), there is a slim chance of entering any dullard into the service. Those who would cross the hurdle of 50 per cent benchmark are more than enough to carry out the government jobs. Research in Harvard University showed that affirmative action programs are beneficial for the under-privileged. The studies said that blacks, who enter elite institutions with lower test scores and grades than those of whites, achieve notable success after graduation. They earn advanced degrees at rates identical or sometime higher to those of their white classmates. Reservation is confined only to the services of the government, which at present is the least significant employer. The vast private sector, which creates majority of the employment opportunity and offers best and lucrative remuneration, does not have any such quota. In fact, the private sector jobs are mostly occupied by the privileged section of the society, except some lower tiers like security guards or garments workers. So, the demand for abolishing the present quota system is nothing but an unwarranted clamour to deter the state from performing its duty for the deprived section of the society. Rather, I would say, more reservations are needed for the wards of various professionals like farmers, farm labourers, factory workers, other workers, low-paid employees, etc. Reservation should also be made in every educational institution for the wards of various professional groups, as they can't afford to spend huge sum of money for their children's education. We should not forget that merit can only be judged if every child of the country is given equal opportunity to getting education.

Two cheers for dissent

The students who led the recent movement for release of teachers and classmates perhaps led the way -- but will their uncritical call for a return of majoritarian politics and the practice of electoral democracy as we have known it -- accompanied by the crudest partisan divisions -- help to further this goal?



PARVIN AKHTAR

It is great that the university teachers and students have been released, though belatedly. It could have been done much sooner and with more grace, without filing questionable cases against them. The government would have done well, in fact, to withdraw cases, once they had been filed, so there were no loose ends left. To go back to the scenes of August 20-22, the stand-off by students and teachers against an altercation between army personnel and a student led to withdrawal of the military camp in the university stadium, which probably should not have been there in the first place. The teachers did well to protest and to call for an end to the subsequent violence by the police and joint forces on student rallies, and in their homes in the Aziz Cooperative Housing. They could, therefore, surely not have cheered the burning of buses and cars and the rampage on August 22 and 23. Precisely because teachers have always spoken out against injustice, we see them as conscience keepers. It is for this that we have lionised them after their release. Dissent has been a recognised intellectual tradition from the days of Socrates, Galileo, and Darwin. Dhaka University too has main-

tained this tradition and as Prof. Anwar Hossain said after his release from jail in January: "Dhaka University has been the conscience of the country and none can suppress that with might. Whenever the university community saw an injustice or a move against democracy anywhere in the country they protested and the practice will go on." But have they protested all injustice? A quick recollection of our recent history will confirm the truth of Prof. Hossain's words. When General Ershad arrested Dhaka students in 1983, there was universal protest: Nur Hussain died with the words "Let democracy be free" and "An end to autocracy" inscribed on his back and chest. All of us mourned his loss while many of us mourned the loss of his ideals. Political parties have commemorated his martyrdom to democratic ideals every year, but have shown little respect for democratic norms and praxis. We have excused their political expediency because we held ourselves responsible for electing them. University teachers are and should remain as guardians of our ideals and our morals. We expect them to uphold values that nurture tolerance, freedom of thought and expression and above all to appreciate difference -- not only in the nation but in their own home, the university.

The teachers would have earned even more respect if, in the last 17 years, they had shown equal zeal in protesting when rival student activists, supported by their respective political parties, occupied halls and distributed rooms to their own acolytes, were found guilty of sexual harassment, built arms arsenals and used these in gun fights against rival students. But sadly, and in a tradition which appears to have been reinforced by the debacle of the August conflagrations, too many teachers have chosen to swear allegiance to rival political parties and ceded their right to think independently or to make a decision on the basis of what was right and what was wrong. They have demurred to political casteism and allowed the selection of faculty member, vice chancellors, and even senate members not on the basis of their intellectual calibre or moral integrity but by the colour of their panel to indicate their personal or partisan loyalty. Their silence and complicity has over many years allowed the degeneration of the university into a battlefield, in which demonstrations of student street power and compliance of teachers with political autocracy has formed the path for personal career building. This is not true, of course, of all university members, and there are many honourable exceptions, but it is also true that many of those who dissented from these majoritarian practices were marginalised or silenced. Our cheers would ring louder if teachers had tried to make the university a centre of intellectual excellence where they did not absent themselves for higher returns in consultancies or from private universities; if they did not delay examination results to the detriment of a student's professional career; if teachers and students alike had promoted a violence free and tolerant culture. The students who led the recent movement for release of teachers and classmates perhaps led the way -- but will their uncritical call for a return of majoritarian politics and the practice of electoral democracy as we have known it -- accompanied by the crudest partisan divisions -- help to further this goal? Parvin Akhtar is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.



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