

Barack Obama triggers tectonic shift in American politics

LETTER FROM AMERICA

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FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton

NOTWITHSTANDING the fact in the all important delegate count it was a "split decision," Senator Barack Obama trounced Senator Hillary Clinton in the state won-lost column by winning the primaries/caucuses in thirteen of the twenty-two states up for grabs on February 5 "Super Tuesday." Hillary won eight states; New Mexico is too close to call.

Senator John McCain maintained his stranglehold over the Republican nomination by winning more than half the delegates needed for the nomination. Although Senator McCain came close, none of the major candidates delivered a knockout punch.

A Democratic presidential candidate has to be nominated by a majority of delegates (2,025 out of 4,049) attending the Democratic National Convention, this August in Denver, Colorado. There are two types of delegates: pledged (3,253) and superdelegates (796). The pledged delegates are won through proportional representation in primaries and caucuses, taking into account congressional districts won by a candidate. It is possible for a candidate to win the popular vote in a state and win fewer delegates than his/her opponent. Even a "pledged" candidate is not bound to vote for a candidate. The superdelegates are important members of the Democratic party: congressmen and senators, former presidents and vice presidents, governors and national committee members.

They are not pledged. If the primary voters make a "mistake," and nominate someone like the too liberal George McGovern in 1972, the superdelegates are supposed to rectify it!

The Republican party also has two types of delegates: pledged (1,917) and unpledged (463). Elected or chosen at the state and local level, the pledged delegates have to pledge their support for a candidate at the convention. A majority of the unpledged candidates are elected and do indicate a preference for a candidate. A significant number become delegates because they are party chairs or national committee members, and are unpledged. Unlike the Democratic primaries, many Republican primaries, such as the ones Florida, New York, and California (all three won by McCain), are winner take all. The Republican nominee for president has to be nominated by 1,191 of 2,380 delegates at the Republican National Convention in Minneapolis, Minnesota in September 2008.

Senator McCain solidified his lead by winning nine of the twenty-one states, including two of the biggest, New York and California. Former conservative governor of Arkansas, Mike Huckabee, surprised everyone by winning five states: West Virginia, and four southern Bible Belt states, Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, and Tennessee. The person who touts his conservative credentials, former governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney, did not win in conservative Dixie. Although he won seven delegate-poor states (Alaska, Colorado, Massachusetts, Minnesota,

Montana, North Dakota, and Utah), he failed to stop the McCain juggernaut and has now dropped out of the race. Of the 1,191 delegates needed to win the nomination, as of now Senator McCain has more than half (720), Governor Romney 270, and Governor Huckabee 190.

In the February 5 Democratic primaries and caucuses, Barack Obama won thirteen of the twenty-two states contested -- Alabama, Alaska, Connecticut, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Idaho, Kansas, North Dakota, Minnesota, Missouri, New Mexico, and Utah. Had Senator Hillary Clinton not won California and New York, this would have been an Obama landslide. Obama won everywhere -- in the East, deep South, Midwest, West, and in Alaska -- and in several Red (Republican) states, demonstrating to the skeptics that he is a viable national candidate.

A closer look at the polls reveal the seismic shift Barack Obama is engineering in American politics. Nationwide, even in the deep South, Barack Obama won 43% of the white vote, compared to Hillary Clinton's 53%. Had white women, a natural constituency for Obama, not been siding with sister Hillary, the number would have been much higher. Refreshingly, majority of young whites (under 50), even in the South, voted for Barack. They evaluate candidates based on their qualifications, not colour. Many white Republican parents say that their children are asking them to vote for Barack! Regardless of whether Barack Obama wins the Democratic

nomination and the presidency, history will record that Barack Obama began the process of making American politics colour blind.

So, why did Obama not win more votes and delegates, although backed by 80% of blacks? Simple answer is Latinos, the nation's largest minority. Nationwide 61% of Latinos voted for Clinton, compared to 38% for Obama. In California, where the Latinos are a quarter of the Democratic voters, it was worse: 69% for Clinton and 29% for Obama. California's 8% Asian Americans also broke decisively for Clinton: 75% to 25%. Obama needs to work harder to gain the support of the Latinos, a constituency the Clintons have been cultivating for years. The good news is, if Obama were to win the nomination, these same voters will overwhelmingly vote for him.

And that is what makes this Democratic race so intriguing. Democrats love both their candidates. Hillary's supporters say that they will enthusiastically support Barack if he is nominated; Barack's supporters say the same. This explains why in the lovefest, which passed off as a debate between the two contenders at the glitzy Kodak theatre last week, the Hollywood celebrity-studded audience almost begged the two candidates to be on the same ticket.

Contrast this with the "there will be blood" Republican contest. From the beginning, all other candidates ganged up on Mitt Romney. Ostensibly, it was for his flip-flopping from conservative positions when he ran and was elected the governor of the most liberal state in the US, Massachusetts. Critics say it is more personal: Romney, a Mormon, is filthy rich, exceedingly handsome, and has had everything handed to him on a silver platter. And far right Republicans are so furious with the moderate, "liberal" John McCain that conservative radio shock jock Rush Limbaugh and commentator Ann Coulter have



The audacity of hope.

said that they will vote for Hillary Clinton if John McCain is the Republican nominee!

Of course, that is assuming Hillary will be the Democratic nominee. After February 5, that is far less certain. Hillary was supposed to lock up the nomination on that date. Instead, as of this writing, she is tied with Obama with 839 pledged delegates each, although Clinton claims she has more superdelegates. Less than two months ago, Hillary was leading Obama by 20 to 30% in most states. Obama has now closed or significantly narrowed that gap in most states, and nationally polls show a statistical dead heat. That is called momentum. And Obama has it.

Obama is well funded. In January, he raised \$32 million compared to Hillary's 13.5 mil-

lion. Hillary had to loan her campaign \$5 million to keep going. Everyone acknowledges that once voters get to know Obama, they love him. Since February 5's "national primary" covered 22 states, Obama did not get a chance to visit each state as frequently as he wanted. Now the primaries will come in trickles. Washington, Louisiana, and Nebraska will hold their primaries/caucuses on February 9; Maryland, Washington, DC and Virginia on February 12. Obama will have much more time to get acquainted with voters of these states, and if history is any guide, the voters will fall in love with him.

The danger for Hillary Clinton is that conventional wisdom suggests that the longer the fight continues, the more it favours the

challenger. Obama gets a chance to get his message across and emphasise that he represents change, which over 50% of the Democratic voters want, and remind voters that he had opposed the Iraq war (which 80% of the Democratic voters oppose), while Hillary had voted to authorise it.

The danger for Obama is that it is not easy to dislodge a front runner in the primary because delegates are distributed through proportional representation. The Clintons have a decisive advantage with the superdelegates. The Clintons are the Democratic party establishment. Over the years they have done many favors to many superdelegates. Already Bill Clinton is making phone calls to superdelegates he had done favours for, asking for a return

favour. Just to illustrate how critical superdelegates are in a close contest, Chelsea Clinton has been criticised for making phone calls to superdelegates on behalf of her mother.

A more serious danger lurks for Obama. Jewish voters preferred Clinton over Obama 72% to 22% in the New York primary. Jews appear to want to go with a known quantity like Hillary Clinton who is a staunch supporter of Israel. They do not want to take a chance with an unknown quantity like Barack Obama, whose father is a Muslim, who opposed the Iraq war, and who advocates talking to the Iranians rather than bombing them. Barack Obama must pledge allegiance to Israel to have any chance of winning the nomination, let alone the presidency.

Never-ending saga

How long would such a dire situation continue in Bangladesh? What is our home ministry going to do? Is it going to be "business as usual" or a determined resolve to go after the criminals so that never again will the social misfits be able to terrorise innocent, law-abiding citizens? I sincerely hope that it is the latter.

HABIB SIDDIQUI

HOW is the law and order situation in Bangladesh? Has it improved during the army-backed caretaker government or has it deteriorated? A personal saga is, perhaps, illustrative of the situation.

In early April of 2005 some two hundred goons broke into our Khulshi compound in Chittagong. They had the blessings of a powerful adviser to the prime minister (and BNP-MP from Chittagong) who wanted to establish his young son in real estate by land-grabbing our property. Within hours, they evicted 16 tenant families and created a reign of terror. The local Khulshi thana initially did not want to take any case, General Diary (GD), nor would we be getting any cooperation from government offices, ministries to evict the goons. We were told by

police commissioners that "their hands are tied" and that a very powerful politician, feared by many, was "calling them." My personal plea to the MP met deaf ears.

It took us almost ten weeks to get any cooperation from the government before the police moved in to evict the criminals. By that time in mid June, however, the criminal land-grabbing syndicate had totally demolished nine homes, once lived in by our tenants (some for more than 25 years), and with many fond memories for our family members from the 1950s.

The police commissioner's office was repeatedly instructed by the feared politician's APS that they should not poke their nose into that land-grabbing affair; after all, it was his boss's son's real estate venture! Funny that the young hoodlum of 23 was not born

yet when some quarter century before his birth, my father legally and rightfully owned the property (and we have been paying taxes, revenues, bills, etc. ever since!)

But with the BNP government in power in the centre and a corrupt mayor in Chittagong who was busy in his re-election campaign, and its equally corrupt thana OCs, every crime appeared possible in the dictionary of these low-life criminals and there was nothing much a victim could do to redress grievances.

Thanks ultimately to Allah who provided enough courage to two God-fearing, honest police officers -- (SP-North) Mr. Baki and (CMP commissioner) Mr. Majed -- to say enough was enough and do something right. They removed the goons from our property. Not surprisingly, for this act of unwelcome(!) courage and civic responsibility, Mr. Baki was promptly

transferred to another city and he even faced a court trial. Sounds unbelievable? No, that is how things were during the heyday of Bangladesh politics.

So, it was not too unusual that I wrote a very congratulatory article to the new care-taker government (CTG) in the Daily Star for ushering in a new age. Like millions, spread home and abroad, I wanted to believe that never again shall we be re-visited by the calamity of April 2005. I thought that with the powerful BNP politician behind bars, his notorious son and others of the land-grabbing syndicate -- who are free outside -- would not have the foolish courage to repeat their crimes. But I was wrong.

The powerful land-grabbing syndicate may use opportunistic, greedy politicians to expedite their crimes, but they are not fully handicapped by their physical absence. They have learned to manage the "system" rather craftily. First manage the thana and its OC; then everything else can be done; there is, after all, nothing that even a non-partisan government will do to stop them.

Emergency or no-emergency, it seems all the same for the victims! The can cry, they can complain, they can plea. But there is none in the government to wipe away their tears, listen to their heart-breaking complaints, and redress their grievances. They have absolutely no protection against the powerful land-grabbing syndicate, the criminal cartel that runs the streets of Bangladesh, terrorising legal owners of their legitimate right to their land and property.

My sleep in the pre-dawn hours one day last week was cut short by a phone call from my youngest sister, living in Chittagong city. As a gynecologist, she was attending a patient in a medical clinic when the sad saga started unfolding. Some two dozen goons, armed with knives, sticks and hammers, came in a truck and stormed like raging bulls, heading towards our compound-gate. They severely beat our security guard, and injured my father who was standing nearby -- trying to stop them from entering the compound, and then started breaking the wall facing the main road. Soon they totally demolished a guard house

and hurriedly put some signboards stating that the property now belonged to three known criminals of a land-grabbing syndicate in Chittagong, that had worked before with the (now imprisoned) BNP politician who was responsible for land-grabbing our property in 2005. The same criminals, apparently without their boss!

In spite of all the calls and visit made to Khulshi thana police and personal pleas, the police did not want to come to arrest these goons. After nearly an hour, when the police eventually arrived, the goons quickly disappeared. Surprisingly, none of the goons were arrested. A GD was prepared by our family members, lodging complaint against the criminals. But as I write, the OC is reluctant to come and take the case. One wonders if his reluctance has anything to do with his law enforcing office being "managed" by the syndicate prior to its illegal, forced entry into and damage to our property. My sister and brother-in-law have been waiting for hours for the police officer to take the case in Khulshi thana. Sounds strange, especially

these days, when we thought bad days are gone, and all the mafiosi criminals and hoodlums are either behind the bar or in hiding? No, facts can be stranger than fiction, especially in Bangladesh. She continues to amaze me with her lawlessness!

In a civic society, police come to rescue people, hear their complaints, investigate and apprehend culprits, and to make the society secure, free from crime and corruption, none of these are necessarily true in Bangladesh. With some utterly corrupt police officers within the force, honest, law-abiding citizens and even the honest officers are at the mercy of lawless goons and their partners-in-crime within the law-enforcing agency.

So, while governments may change, there is no end in sight for victims. For the last three years, I have personally appealed a number of times to government ministers, secretaries, Bangladesh ambassadors serving in the US to go after the land-grabbing syndicates that see land-grabbing as an investment on their part, for it is almost impossible for any ordinary citizen to fight such organ-

ised criminal syndicates, but to no avail.

They have chosen to ignore my pleas, leaving it to ourselves to fight these criminals in the court of law. Yes, we did lodge criminal cases against the front men of the politicians for all the destruction that have inflicted on our property; but who knows whether we will see justice in our lifetime. That is the sad reality of Bangladesh. I wonder with a legitimate record of deeds, title, possession, etc. dating back to the 1950s, if a family like ours cannot feel safe and secure in our own property, who can feel secure in Bangladesh? Who will be fool-hardy enough to invest from outside in Bangladesh?

How long would such a dire situation continue in Bangladesh? What is our home ministry going to do? Is it going to be "business as usual" or a determined resolve to go after the criminals so that never again will the social misfits be able to terrorise innocent, law-abiding citizens? I sincerely hope that it is the latter.

Dr. Siddiqui is a human right activist who has authored six books and more than 200 articles.

Planning the dialogue

In adopting the policy of maintaining stability of prices of the said nine items, the government must monitor constantly the international prices of these commodities. The concerned Bangladesh embassies should be directed to collect as much information as possible about the price movements of respective items. Furthermore, it may be advisable to gather requisite information about domestic consumption.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

THE common people of Bangladesh are expectantly looking forward to a national election free, fair, neutral and credible. Similar views have been expressed by the officials of EU, the US and some other democratic countries. The chief adviser is very hopeful of a free, fair and credible election by 2008. We consider the following are urgent

crucial issues of this year:

- Price spiral of essentials.
- Food shortage.
- Unrest in readymade garment sector.
- Ban on indoor politics.
- Taking initiative to bring the war criminals of 1971 to book for creating a congenial atmosphere for polls.

Though cry for early election is everywhere, the EC has not yet been ready to announce the elec-

tion schedule. The CEC says that he needs about seven months more to announce the date of election. In fact, EC is yet to start a few tasks including publication of the draft voter list, holding polls to different local government bodies, dialogues with the political parties on electoral law reforms and institutional reforms, formulate rules for legalising the ongoing procedure for preparing the voter list, polls to upazilla parishes,

and over four thousand union parishes. We are not sure as to when these jobs can be accomplished though the EC secretariat has been freed from the control of Prime Minister's Office.

No doubt CTG has accomplished a number of reformatory measures (not even tried in the past) which have been well appreciated both within and without the country. In doing these jobs there have been some errors in judgment. This is not discouraging. No administration is infallible or perfect, what is very important for the CTG is that it has made sincere effort to bring some good to the country. Its success rate could have been much higher had there been no floods, devastating cyclone, and politicised bureaucracy.

Without entering into a debate on the capacity of governance of democratic government and that of non-democratic government, we may say that we need the "wisdom" of many at the present moment to tackle the serious economic and political problems which are looming large. Moreover, our performance in foreign trade, in attracting foreign investment and in labour handling has not been satisfactory. We need people's participation in tackling problems like price spiral of essentials, eradicating corruption from society, and labour unrest.

Even though the recent decision to keep the prices of nine items deserves commendation, we may say that if the trade syndi-

cates cannot be controlled to large extent it may be too difficult for the CTG to stabilise the prices of the said commodities because international prices of these commodities are fluctuating due to various factors.

To illustrate this point let me cite the example of China in regard to sharp rise of consumption of edible oil. It is expected that its consumption may reach 22.4 million tons per annum in 2008, up 1.4 million tons in a year (from 21 million tons in 2007). Per capita consumption of edible oil has reached 17 kilograms a year (double that of a decade ago). It is reported that the price of edible oil is likely to jump in 2008 due to global shrinkage of areas under soya bean cultivation since 2006.

In adopting the policy of maintaining stability of prices of the said nine items, the government must monitor constantly the international prices of these commodities. The concerned Bangladesh embassies should be directed to collect as much information as possible about the price movements of respective items. Furthermore, it may be advisable to gather requisite information about domestic consumption.

Time appears to be running out for the CTG. It would, therefore, be proper for the government to extend all possible assistance to the EC to enable it to complete its task as well and as quickly as possible. Lagging behind in finishing EC's job is an ominous sign for the country. In addition, the items of

the agenda for the possible discussion with the political parties should be carefully prepared. Decision for lifting or relaxing the emergency should be taken without further delay. The CTG must demonstrate that its commitment to the nation for completing a free, fair, neutral and credible election by 2008 will be honored.

What is needed at this stage is more of concentration on jobs directly related to election. Efforts for completing reformatory measures already undertaken may also continue. We wish successful completion of the proposed dialogue in a free atmosphere participated in by at least by all major political parties. Let us hope that the year 2008 will be a year of wonder for Bangladesh.