

Electoral reforms

Complete the dialogue without delay

EC's decision to start the second round of talks on electoral reforms with the political parties is indeed very welcome.

We must admit that there was a creeping apprehension in the minds of the people whether or not the EC would be able to stick to its timetable.

The EC held talks with most of the political parties in the first round except the BNP. It was imprudent, we feel, on the part of the EC to have invited only one faction of the BNP which ultimately led to High Court litigations, stalling the dialogue itself.

There are several core issues like registration of the parties, the political parties retaining their student wings in the educational institutions and labour wings in the industries, and of course the issue of the parties having overseas wings. We feel that these must be duly addressed as part of setting the electoral process right. The goal has to be achieved through a comprehensive dialogue with all the major stakeholders in politics.

The issue of party registration must be ironed out with all the key political parties. But, above all, it has to be ensured that the honest and decent candidates are particularly encouraged to enter the fray.

The question that we would like to ask is why the talks were not held earlier. If the pending HC case regarding the BNP factional issue was the reason, the EC is now willing to go ahead with the reform talks regardless of the hearing and verdict on the matter, leaving the BNP talk for a later date. Had this position been taken earlier, it would have saved much precious time.

The EC is well behind its declared schedule of completing dialogue with the political parties by three months. Not only must the dialogue be held without further delay, the EC must keep in mind the importance of getting all the key political parties on board for bringing about electoral reforms. For one thing, ownership of the reforms will guarantee their quick implementation.

Let there be no doubt in anyone's mind regarding the imperative of electoral reform. Without it election will be meaningless and the character of politics will remain unchanged a situation that no one in Bangladesh would like to see prevail.

Polytechnic Institute incident

Why this wanton violence?

THE clashes between the activists of Bangladesh Chhatra League and Islami Chhatra Shibir at the Dhaka Polytechnic Institute on Sunday, which left at least 40 students injured, are a sad reminder of the violent nature of campus politics that severely disrupts normal academic activities from time to time.

On this occasion, violence erupted from a trifling incident and the supporters of the two student outfits instantly pounced on each other. That is an indication of the combat-readiness of the politicized student leaders and activists engaged in a senseless struggle for supremacy over their rivals in the educational institutions. They were equipped with lethal arms as they chased and counter-chased each other and finally took the matter to the streets, where vehicles, having nothing to do with student politics, were vandalised freely. It is this latter part of the story which is cause for even greater concern. Even students of a polytechnic institute apparently failed to realise that they committed a culpable crime, one that did no harm to their perceived enemies, in the process of settling scores. This is highly regrettable, to say the least.

When religious fanaticism enters the domain of politics things further worsen. Shibir uses religion to promote its narrow political end, which we think is an insult to religion itself.

The activists of the student bodies affiliated with the major political parties have also failed miserably to avoid violence or vandalism, which only tend to undermine their image in the public eye. Small wonder, a consensus has almost emerged that student parties should be delinked with national political parties.

The Polytechnic Institute incident shows that virulent student politics, as we have witnessed over the years, cannot possibly be contained as long as the student activists work under the protective umbrella of this or that political party. The parties, for their part, have never lived up to their promise of not using the students as pawns. However, the issue needs to be resolved in the interest of the vast majority of innocent students paying a high price for campus politics in all its ugly manifestations.

Will America elect a black president?

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN AND GUY DOWNS

PEOPLE worldwide -- and indeed, most Americans -- are under the impression that whichever party candidate has the most delegates at the end of the primary elections is assured the party nomination for president. And who can blame them?

In a typical year, one candidate will emerge from the primary campaign with a majority of the delegates, and he will have the nomination secured. But this year's race is unprecedented; a woman and black man, running neck to neck against each other to try and reach the magic number of 2025 delegates to lock the nomination.

There are 4,049 total delegates to the Democratic National Convention (DNC) -- 3,253 pledged delegates (to be won in the state primaries and caucuses) and 796 superdelegates (consisting of party bosses, sitting governors, former governors, big city mayors, US Senators and congressmen and former presidents). Superdelegates are free to vote for a candidate, and withdraw their votes anytime.

Of the 3,253 pledged delegates, over half are already split between Clinton (944) and Obama (1009), with Obama holding an unsteady lead of 65 delegates (as of 11:30 am EST, Feb. 9). With the race being so close, it appears impossible for either candidate to get 2025 delegates after all the primaries and caucuses are over.

This scenario empowers the superdelegates to decide on the nominee -- a doomsday spectacle of a brokered DNC in Denver, Colorado (August 25-28), reminiscent of the 1968 Chicago convention, with its violence in the streets

NO NONSENSE
Make no mistake; this spectacle could unfold at the DNC in August. Under this scenario, should the superdelegates support Clinton unfairly, they would risk alienating millions of young Americans whom Obama enthused with his message of hope and change. Should they shift their alliance and back Obama instead, it would be interpreted as a betrayal of long-term friendship with the Clintons.

and vitriol inside the hall. The images of a fractured, out-of-control party helped sink Hubert Humphrey in 1968 and McGovern in 1972.

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The consensus solution to this dilemma would be to nominate the candidate who appears to have the best chance to beat the Republican nominee John McCain in the general election.

Pundits and latest nationwide polls tilt towards Obama when pitted against McCain (48% vs. 41%), as opposed to Clinton against McCain (46% vs. 46%). But both Obama and Clinton come with "warts."

Clinton, on her part, carries considerable baggage from her eight years as first lady, including the stigma of the Monica Lewinsky scandal that plagued her husband's presidency -- and then there's the substantial block of voters who consider and see her as the most polarising public figure in the American political landscape.

What has McCain to say about

Clinton? In a November rally, John McCain and the Republican audience laughed when a voter asked him how he planned to "beat the bitch," McCain replied: "I fully understand why many people don't like Clinton. I don't much like her myself. She seems calculating, cold, and overly ambitious." (The Week, November 30, 2007, Page-14).

Ryan Sager in the New York Post

pect of another Clinton presidency will bring together the McCain hating conservatives because "there are fates worse than John McCain."

Obama, on his part, is a liability of a different dimension -- not only because he is black, but also because his middle name Hussein, taken from his Muslim Kenyan father, is the last name of Saddam Hussein.

Table with 3 columns: Category, % of yes votes, % of no votes. Rows include Catholic (95/4), Black (94/5), Jewish (92/7), A woman (88/11), Hispanic (87/12), Mormon (72/24), Third time married (67/30), 72 years age (57/42), A homosexual (55/43), An atheist (45/53).

argues that McCain would be hard-pressed to steal centrist votes away from Obama, while, in a McCain-Clinton duel, most moderates and independents would gravitate towards him, leaving Hillary with little more than the Democrats liberal base. The pros-

The question many people are already grappling with is: "Is America ready for a black president, who also has a Muslim middle name?"

This dilemma hasn't yet caught up with the white Americans. Once nominated for the presidency,

West beats Burma drum without purpose or strategy

At present the West's main hope of engaging the junta seems to rest on the efforts of the UN secretary general's special advisor to Burma, the Nigerian diplomat, Ismail Gambari. He made two crucial visits to Burma last year, the last in November. The EU in particular sees its efforts on Burma as supporting the UN's plans.

LARRY JAGAN

THE international community is stepping up pressure on Burma's military regime to introduce economic and political change as soon as possible. At the same time the United Nations envoy to Burma, Ismail Gambari and the European Union are pressing the Asian nations to intervene and encourage the junta to listen to the international appeals for reform.

The European Union and the United States have recently renewed calls for immediate release of the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who is under house arrest in Rangoon.

"I hope the lady (Aung San Suu Kyi) can be free as soon as possible," the EU special envoy on Burma/Myanmar, Piero Fassino told the Daily Star last week. "There can be no real talks between the junta and the opposition if a key player is not free to

talk to her party and the public," Fassino added.

But the EU is also threatening to increase sanctions against the junta, if there is no tangible progress in the next three months. "If Mr. Gambari is not allowed back into the country, or fails to achieve anything concrete when he's there, the EU will have no alternative but to consider increasing sanctions against the junta," he said.

"The West has now turned to Asia to get them out of a hole on the Burma issue," a senior South East Asian diplomat told the Daily Star on condition of anonymity. "They expect us to pressure the Burmese government on their behalf, without giving us anything in return," he added.

"Force will not achieve anything with Burma's military leaders -- they will only recede further into their shell and ignore the international appeals," he added. "The west should certainly not increase sanctions at

this stage, and in fact should consider easing them."

At present the West's main hope of engaging the junta seems to rest on the efforts of the UN secretary general's special advisor to Burma, the Nigerian diplomat, Ismail Gambari. He made two crucial visits to Burma last year, the last in November. The EU in particular sees its efforts on Burma as supporting the UN's plans. "Our strategy is to promote dialogue (in Burma) that will realise national reconciliation, dialogue that will realise democratic transition," said Fassino. "This goal will be achieved by discussions with the countries of Asia and the promotion of the UN's initiatives, through the Secretary General's special representative for Burma, Ismail Gambari.

But despite frequent requests to return in the past ten weeks, Gambari has been continually refused a visa. The junta has told

him that they are too busy and pre-occupied to see him until after the Buddhist New Year, Thingyan (the Burmese Songkran) in mid-April.

Many diplomats though in Rangoon fear that Gambari may have made his last trip to Burma, or if he is allowed in he will not be able to achieve anything. "If Mr. Gambari is permitted to visit Burma in the next months, it's almost certain he will not meet the top general, Than Shwe, making his mission meaningless," according to a western diplomat based in Rangoon who wished to remain anonymous.

The junta is clearly in no mood to cooperate with the UN at present. Apart from throwing the UN resident coordinator, Charles Petrie, out of the country two months ago, the regime is playing hardball with the organisation on the ground inside Burma.

Several important UN-sponsored field-visits, for diplomats (whose countries' fund projects), have been inextricably cancelled. A trip United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to eastern Rakhine state, where Burmese Muslim refugees have been repatriated after earlier fleeing to Bangladesh to escape persecu-

however, one thing is all but guaranteed -- that the Republicans' "dirt digging" and "mud slinging" machines will blitz the digital space and the news media with a relentless series of vicious and personal attacks against Obama, designed to arouse the latent prejudices of American voters.

Despite being 50% black and 50% white (American white mother), Obama is classified as black. He would still be classified as black if his parents' races were reversed.

Prior to 1960, different states followed different rules, including the 25% blackness (that would be Obama's grand children) rule, to classify people as black. The identifying criterion now is "one drop rule" -- one drop of black person's blood in your veins. Some Republican (religious extremists) internet bloggers and mainstream ultra-conservative columnists are already identifying him with Muslims because of his father, who was a non-practicing Muslim. So he has to overcome triple jeopardy -- black blood, Muslim blood, and his middle name.

The question remains: "Will Americans elect a woman, or a black man, as president?" According to a recent Gallup poll, Americans are much more likely to elect a woman or a black man as president than a Mormon or an old man. More interestingly, they'd rather be governed by a homosexual than an atheist.

These statistics, obviously, are prospective. People know, for example, that John McCain at 71 is not young; yet, his nomination for the presidency from GOP is all but a formality now. He has already announced that, if elected, he would serve only one term -- a self-imposed limit out of self-consciousness of old age.

Will the wave of youthful enthusiasm and passion, which has buoyed Obama's campaign to date be enough to propel him to the White House? It certainly seems possible. "Obamamania," however, reminds many seasoned Democrats of the tidal rushes of youthful energy that marked the McCarthy campaign in 1968, the McGovern campaign in 1972, the Jerry Brown campaign in 1992, and (to a lesser extent) the Howard Dean campaign in 2004.

Polls often reflect voters' attitude and sentiments, which can change in a split second at the instant of voting. Had this not happened in the New Hampshire and California primaries, Obama would have been well ahead of Clinton in delegate counts, with a momentum on his way to secure the nomination.

And therein lies the uncertainty -- the curious perversities of American elections in which young voters have, historically, shown uninhibited enthusiasms in primaries, but have neglected to vote in general elections. Their disillusionment with the candidates -- who focus more on mutual diatribes and negativities and less on policy differences -- may be the reason. Whatever it is that generates their apathy to voting, the trend is indisputable.

If Obama is the consensus nominee of the Democratic Party he will have to succeed in keeping his young supporters, disillusioned Republican crossovers, Reagan Democrats, and above all, the great majority of the independents, on board with his inspirational message of "hope and change" to win the race for the White House.

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'Doom and gloom'

Last year was one of Afghanistan's bloodiest since the end of Taliban rule in 2001. The embattled Afghan president, speaking with Newsweek's Lally Weymouth on the sidelines of the economic conference in Davos, complained of Pakistani "complicity" with the resurgent rebels but said he saw a new seriousness about fighting Islamist terrorists from Pakistan's isolated ruler, Pervez Musharraf. Karzai also called the Bush administration surprisingly understanding about his government's warm ties with Iran -- and hinted that he might run for another term in 2009.

LALLY WEYMOUTH

Weymouth: How are the Taliban affecting you in Afghanistan?

Karzai: By trying to prevent progress, by trying to prevent reconstruction, by killing our people, by (preventing) our children in southern Afghanistan from going to school, by killing the community leaders, the religious leaders, intimidating cultural leaders. By all the means. How strong are they now? They would not be strong without support. From Pakistan?

I've just had a very good trip to Pakistan, so what I would say is that Pakistan and Afghanistan and the United States and the rest of the world must join hands in sincerity in order to end this problem. They have to take (action). The last time I interviewed Musharraf, I thought he was very angry. It's really a crazy situation (in Pakistan).

Yes, very much. I found him to be more cognisant of the problems of extremism and terrorism. And that's a good sign, and I hope we

will continue in that direction. Do you think Musharraf will do something about it, send forces into the problematic areas? We have to end extremism. We have to end support to extremism in the region. Unless we do that, the picture is one of doom and gloom -- for Pakistan, and as a consequence for Afghanistan. When I interviewed Benazir Bhutto in December (the Pakistani opposition leader was assassinated 15 days later), she said to me, "I feel they are going to come knocking at my door

one night." Unfortunately, her death, the way it happened, proves her point. That's the irony. That's the sad thing about her death. She predicted something, and she was proved right in that prediction. So it must be listened to. We cannot use extremism as a tool for any purpose. It will hurt us eventually, as it has begun to hurt Pakistan.

The United States is sending 3,000 additional troops to Afghanistan. Will that help? I'm happy about that, yes, yes. The American contribution to the war against terrorism is fundamental and strong. Will it make a difference? It will make a difference when the Americans are clear and straightforward about this fight. What do you mean by that, Mr. President? "When the Americans are straightforward about the fight?" (When) they mean what they say. (When) they do what they say.

Do you think the US is sending the right type of troops? Should they be Special Operations troops? That's a professional issue. It has to be addressed by the military. How much influence does Iran have in your country right now, Mr. President? We have had a particularly good relationship with Iran the past six years. It's a relationship that I hope will continue. We have opened our doors to them. They have been helping us in Afghanistan. The United States very wisely understood that it was our neighbor and encouraged that relationship. So in other words, you don't agree with President Bush's assessment of Iran? On which question? He called it part of the "axis of evil." And there's been a lot of discussion about an Iranian nuclear program... We don't like a nuclear region, of course. Nobody wants nuclear



weapons. Who wants to have weapons of destruction around their homes? Nobody. But the United States has been very understanding and supportive that Afghanistan should have a

relationship with Iran. Are you going to run for another term in 2009? Well, I have things to accomplish. What was that line from Robert Frost? "The woods are lovely,

dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep."

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