

Polling and the media

Mass media act as a transmitter of contents furnished mainly by political parties. They help in solidifying preferences. Students, the medium and lower ranking civil servants, businessmen and skilled labourers are politically conscious. The media help them to harden their pre-disposition.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

THE CTG is committed to offering a free, fair and credible election for establishing a true democratic order. To fulfill this mission it has taken up the huge task of reorganising, strengthening and making the EC independent to enable it to complete a fresh and accurate voters' list and help in reforming political parties etc.

The people have been advised to elect honest, efficient and dedicated contestants. It is not quite clear as to why enough importance could not be given to the role of the

media in the next election. The emergency is certainly affecting the media, even though it is relatively modest.

If emergency is to be lifted/relaxed for holding the election the mass media may be allowed to work freely (of course in a responsible manner) to make the election truly democratic and meaningful.

Communication is regarded as the lubricant of political parties. The mass media are "the instrument of socialisation, they are efficient and their sweep is vast enough to cover the huge population..." (Lucien W. Pye,

Communications and Political Development, Princeton University Press, 1963). Due to the appealing devices of mass communications, and their widespread use as habit, duty or pastime people, according to Bernard R. Berelson et al, are exposed to miscellaneous information about a greater range of things than those in which they are genuinely interested.

The extent of popularity of different mass media channels in election publicity are discussed below:

- **Public meetings:** They are ranked the highest in terms of dependability and reliability

among the different forms of public communication. They draw more audience than the other communication gadgets. Apart from ethnic groups, the rest of the social groups are emphatic in their support of public meetings. Ethnic groups seem to be wary of public meetings for fear of for jeering remarks by the public. The newspapers and other gadgets give them a sense of security. In urban settings public meetings draw women in good numbers. It is interesting to note that the center of gravity of political activities has shifted from towns to villages. Furthermore, public meetings decrease in urban areas as the campaign enters the final phase.

In rural areas (because of low literacy and unemployment) the number of people attending meetings is high. In urban areas, too, the frequency and attendance at public meetings is high among the illiterate, the working class and the unemployed.

Among the educated, students and professional class appear to rely more on public meetings. Among the civil servants and businessmen mostly the medium and the low ranks attend public meetings. The high officials and top businessmen very seldom attend public meetings because of fear of being identified. In a given context, public meetings appeal to all the cross-sections of the electorate, as the ideas and news radiating from the assembly spread quickly by word of mouth.

• **Newspapers:** They come second in terms of reliability. The readership of newspapers is surely larger than the figures of their circulation suggest. A good deal of reading is confined among a

small percentage of the electorate. Because of high illiteracy the press cannot adequately supplement public meetings as a means of making party programs and political ideas known to the people.

Some prestige-bearing status is attached to newspaper reading in Bangladesh.

In rural settings people who can read newspapers wield some power over their surroundings. The newspapers readership has remained small due to illiteracy. However, on the basis of two-step flow of communication, the benefit of newspaper reading reaches the illiterate indirectly. For retaining anonymity, the top civil servants have more reliance on the newspapers than the lower ranking civil servants.

- **Radio and television:** In towns, restaurants, hotels, vending and

stationary shops of some standing have either a transistor or a radio set switched on almost all the time. At news times it is a common to see crowds in varying sizes assemble in front of these public places to hear the goings on. Thus, the illiterate, the unemployed and the lower income groups can get benefit from radios without possessing them. Radio occupies third position in respect of reliability. Its audience is predominantly urban oriented. The importance of radio is enormous as the news can be cheaply disseminated to the people on a wider scale. Television is a "spectator media." However compared to other media the television audience is much smaller.

- **Photo-journalism:** Though partly true, pictorial communication has good effect upon the

electorate it does the talking on many a count. Events are realistically depicted in the photographs, which have the potential of stimulating the eyes. These may not have lasting effects yet they move the people momentarily.

Mass media act as a transmitter of contents furnished mainly by political parties. They help in solidifying preferences. Students, the medium and lower ranking civil servants, businessmen and skilled labourers are politically conscious. The media help them to harden their pre-disposition.

The uninformed and unenlightened, like ordinary cultivators, are an impressionable lot. All types of communications are grist to the mill of the partisans who tend to find enough justification for their acts and beliefs.

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No more band-aid solution, please

Indeed, the time has come to roll up our sleeves further, and make all-out efforts for achieving sustained self-sufficiency in food grains. No band-aid solution will be enough, since the world has entered a new era of high food grain prices due mainly to the effects of climate change and to the change in land use pattern in developed nations in order to produce crops (green fuel) as a substitute for fossil fuel.

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

THE food-grain price spiral has been getting worse day by day, and seems to be heading towards an all-out crisis. The pinch, so far felt by low-income groups, is now being felt by the middle-class as well.

The Bangla daily, *Pratham Alo*, reported recently that the middle-class is now queuing up with the low-income groups for buying food grains from BDR shops in Dhaka city.

It is certainly painful to see such a picture, which has re-emerged on the streets of Dhaka after many years. The CTG has been repeatedly making it clear that the back-to-back floods and Sida's destruction of crops last year caused the present shortfall in food-grains without warning, and arrangements are being made to meet the shortfall via imports.

While this is fine, the nation provided the government enough time to bring order in grain markets, and the imports have started to arrive from various sources (India, Thailand and Myanmar), unfortunately at a snail's pace.

What is very disturbing to see, however, is that, with all the assurances, there has not been any improvement, rather it is getting worse day by day. Although, lately, the CA seems prepared to coordinate the relevant economic departments to face the looming crisis effectively.

Since the last few weeks, the print and electronic media have been inundated with solution after solution put forward by economists in order to contain prices in the short to medium terms. Reintroduction of the "ration card" system was on the cards at one stage, but the commerce advisor dismissed this proposal due to the

costs involved in running such a program. Instead, the advisor is working on a provision for income support scheme to the government employees to the tune of 30 percent of their earnings.

Also, in the meantime, the government increased the OMS allocation in order to maintain supply in the market place.

In this piece, I would like to investigate the income support program (not the WFP measure) theoretically, since such a policy has the potential of turning the present situation into a full-blown crisis if it gets out of hand. Before contemplating an income support strategy for a section of the population, one must take into account that food price inflation has been running at double-digit rate in recent months.

It is true that the present price spiral of food grains is due to a shortage in supply from domestic

sources, and not driven by demand. Hence, increased OMS and possible reintroduction of ration cards, regardless of resource constraints, are certainly the right moves. These can be shown via a simple AD/AS analysis.

On one hand, figure 1 presents the reintroduction of ration cards, which has the capacity to contain prices, if not drastically reduce it.

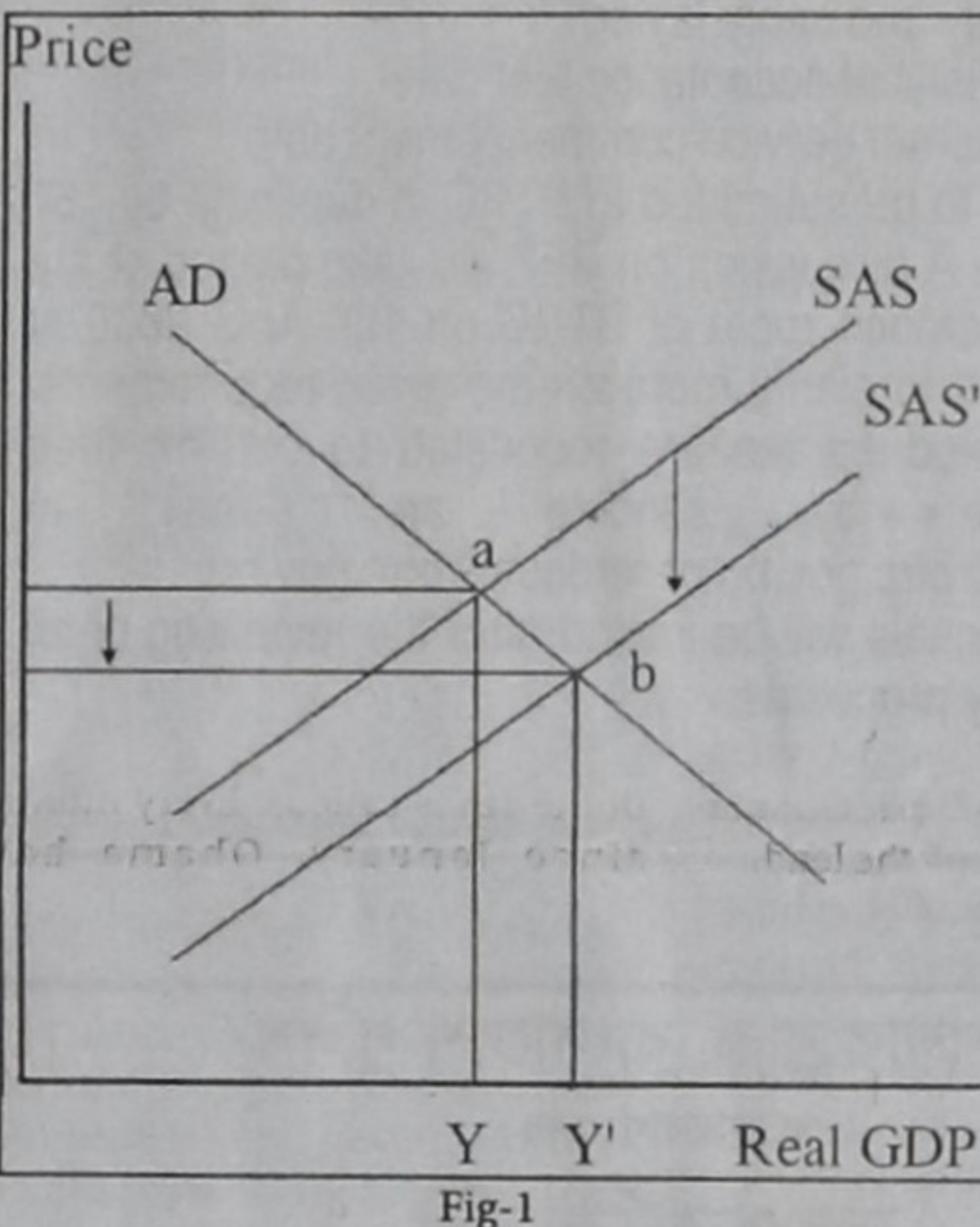


Fig-1

On the other hand, figure 2 shows that income support to a section of the population would certainly increase prices further if supply-side has no effective means (present condition) to meet the additional demand due to the income support with cash handout to the tune of 30 percent of the total income.

The price spiral would end up at

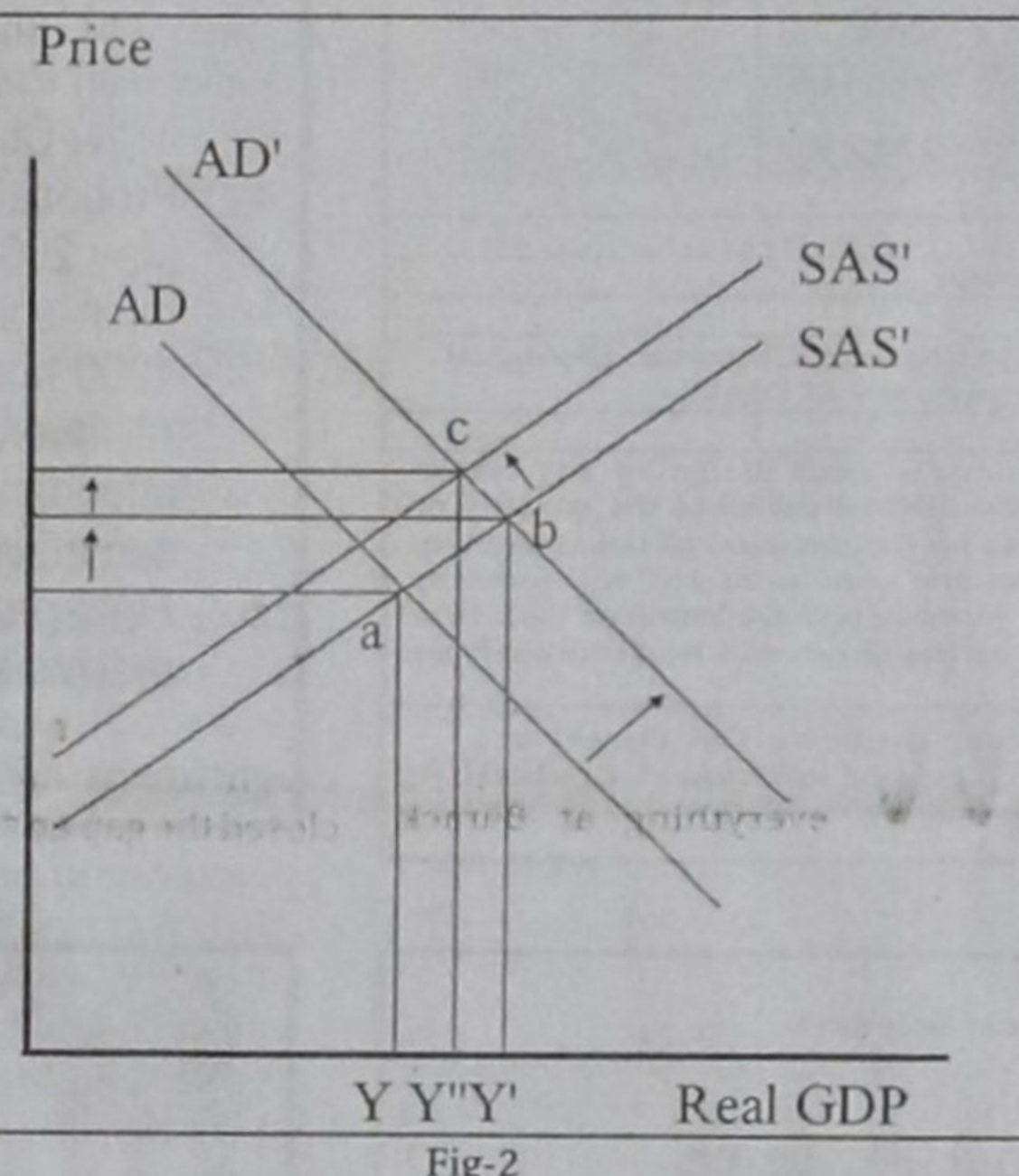
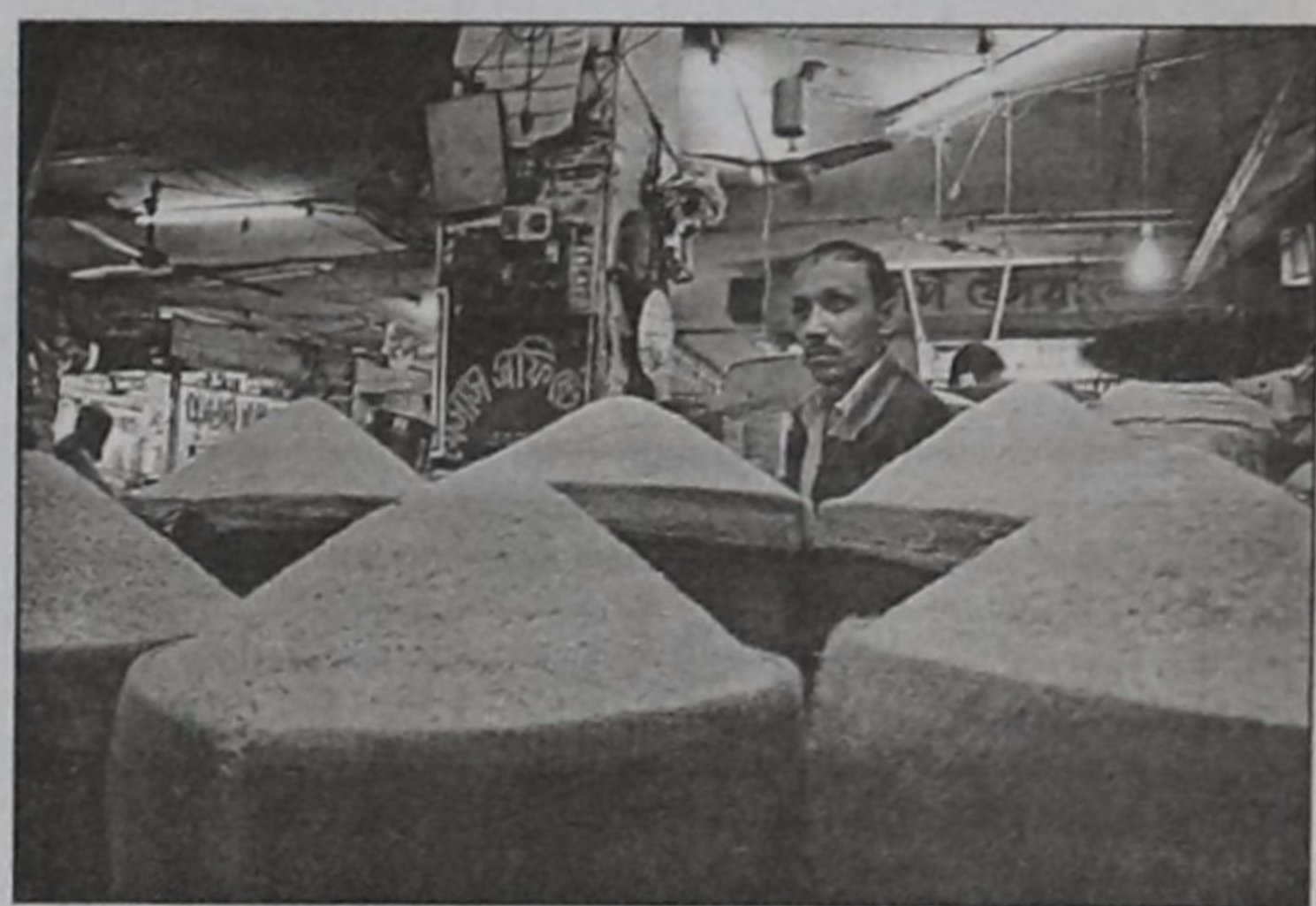


Fig-2



production further, with a view to attaining sustained self-sufficiency regardless of floods or other natural disasters in the future.

Many commentators (me included) in the past warned that if the two giants, India and China, start buying food grains on a large scale from food surplus western nations, which is the case now, countries like ours simply won't be able to meet any shortfall via imports due to increased world price.

We have arrived at that point now. I am afraid there is little comfort in having one or two bumper

harvests in potato, *boro*, or whatever crops. Indeed, the time has come to roll up our sleeves further, and make all-out efforts for achieving sustained self-sufficiency in food grains.

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The audacity of unity

Martin Luther King Jr's dream remains unfulfilled till today, as can be seen in the disparity in income, racial discrimination, undermining of civil rights, and the injustice that were demonstrated after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, where African-Americans are the majority. Against the backdrop of racial problems in the election campaign, it is really audacious to preach unity in the country, which has been divided since its birth.

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

SEAR campaign and mudslinging in US politics are nothing new. Senator Barack Obama, presidential hopeful of the Democratic Party, has been confronted with such campaign involving his religious and spiritual guru, Reverend Jeremiah A Wright, Reverend Wright, a former pastor at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, is reported to have made inflammatory remarks about the United States because of the segregation of its black community.

Until March 18, Senator Obama was able to avoid framing his candidacy in racial terms, hoping he could transcend such issues through his campaign for national reconciliation, unity and change that would cut across demographic, racial and political lines.

A couple of days ago, a video appeared where Reverend Wright was shown making inflammatory remarks against the US. That has caused uproar in the media about Senator Obama's relationship with Reverend Wright.

This is what he said in the church, where Senator Obama was present: "The government gives them (blacks) drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law, and then wants us to sing 'God Bless America.' No, No, No. God damn America, that's in the Bible for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like God and she is supreme."

Senator Obama had no other option but to clarify his stand vis-

à-vis his religious leader. This is the first time on the campaign trail that Obama has availed of the opportunity to speak on racial problems; in Philadelphia's historical constitutional centre on March 18, where he is facing primary elections on April 22. Flanked by flags of the United States, Senator Obama made an attempt to defuse tension in white voters in particular while delivering his masterly speech on the racial problem the country has been confronted with.

In his speech, Senator Obama sought to portray the subject of race as a distraction to his presidential candidacy, but also said that race was an issue that he believed this nation could not afford to ignore.

Senator Obama publicly denounced the remarks made by Reverend Wright, and said that they could widen the racial divide and denigrate the goodness of the nation. While distancing himself from the fiery sermons of the pastor, Senator Obama pointedly refused to distance himself from the pastor when he said: "As imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me. I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community."

In his extraordinary speech, Senator Obama explained the reasons for the anger and frustration among the black community, which had been reflected in the sermons of Jeremiah Wright. When Obama said that Rev. Wright "helped introduce me to my Christian faith," he was trenchantly telling the voters that he was not a Muslim, as some might have portrayed him.

The issue of race was brought up by members of Senator Hillary Clinton's campaign team, particularly by Senator Clinton's campaign financial chairperson, Geraldine Ferraro, who was vice-presidential candidate in the '80's. Ferraro is reported to have said: "Mr. Obama would not be in such a high political position if he were white."

During the course of his 40-minute speech, Senator Obama used history, saying that the founding documents were stained by the nation's original sin of slavery. He also spoke about his bi-racial upbringing by his black father from Kenya and white mother from Kansas. Drawing on his own bi-racial heritage, Obama said he understood both the anger expressed by Rev. Wright and the prejudice he sometimes witnessed in his otherwise loving white grandmother.

Both praise and criticism of Senator Obama's speech came from various radio and television talk shows, commentaries, as well as newspapers. Senator Obama, who has been advocating the unity of the country, has suffered because of his association with Reverend Wright.

However, he has been successfully courting white voters, as can be seen from the results in Vermont, Iowa, Idaho, Wisconsin, Virginia, Maryland, Georgia, and Kansas. There is no doubt that there is a racial division in the Democratic Party, which has been reflected in the voting pattern in the on-going primary elections. While Senator Obama won 80 per cent of African-American votes, Senator Clinton won 53 per cent

non-Hispanic whites.

It is not that Senator Obama is the only candidate who has faced crises during a presidential election. Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater got entangled when some of his supporters were involved in the John Birch society, whose conspiratorial anti-communist stance was considered too extreme in the '60's.

The 1996 Presidential primary candidate, Pat Buchanan, was also faced with a difficult situation when he was associated with an anti-Semitic and racist who helped in his campaign.

Since Reverend Wright has become a controversial figure by delivering politically charged sermons, which has no relation with religion, any sensible politician holding high ambition should not remain associated with him.

Although his historical speech was well received by editorial writers and civics teachers alike, it is yet to be seen how the voters react in the coming elections, when white voters in racially mixed states have favoured Senator Hillary Clinton. Therefore, it would highly likely that white voters would favor Senator Obama in the next term primaries in view of the pastor's video. One cannot help but marvel at the skills of this political pundit, who turned a crisis into a crowning achievement.

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Against the backdrop of racial problems in the election campaign, it is really audacious to preach unity in the country, which has been divided since its birth.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain is a former Bangladesh diplomat.

The Malaysian race card

In the wealthy and mostly Chinese state of Penang, the Chinese DAP won power after 36 years of rule by the Malay-dominated BN. Incoming Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng quickly vowed to end the crude affirmative-action policy, which, he said, "only breeds cronyism, corruption and inefficiency."

IOANNIS GATSIOUNIS

ANWAR Ibrahim's big victory in Malaysia's elections looked on the surface like a triumph for both democracy and multiculturalism - a major accomplishment in this profoundly divided state. The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party and the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) contributed to the opposition gains, but it was Anwar's multiethnic People's Justice Party that bagged the largest share of the popular vote and parliamentary seats.

Yet events immediately following the vote - when rabble-rousing politicians once again started playing the race card - show just how dangerous the splits remain.

Race has always played a peculiar role here, in this country of 25 million cobbled together by the British from disparate kingdoms. Ethnic Malays today make up 55% of the population. Ethnic Chinese represent an additional 25%, and Indians 8%. The Chinese minority has long been perceived as domi-

nating Malaysia's business community, causing widespread resentment among poorer Malays and sparking vicious riots in the 1960s.

Since then, successive governments have justified restrictions on civil rights by pointing to this bloody history, and to their credit they have managed to avoid major violence for 40 years. But sweeping affirmative-action programs benefiting ethnic Malays, put in place in 1971, have kept tensions bubbling just under the surface.

Anwar's People's Justice Party vowed to replace this race-based assistance program with one that would help the needy regardless of ethnicity. And since its formation in 2003 his party has been growing in strength, thanks to support from Malays, Chinese and Indians alike, all frustrated by the lackluster economic performance of the ruling National Front (BN) coalition and its leader, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi.

But by the middle of last week the opposition had succumbed to tribal instincts, with the various parties squabbling among them-

selves over jobs in state governments and threatening boycotts if they didn't get the seats they thought they deserved.

At the same time, members of the National Front's lead party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), have continued to play the race card. Indeed, politicians affiliated with this party seem to feel it is their duty to do so. UMNO has portrayed itself as the champion and protector of the ethnic Malays, and some members have promoted *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy). Worryingly, some of UMNO's younger politicians, once hailed as progressives, are now doing the same thing.

UMNO youth chief Hishamuddin Hussein, for instance, has made a habit of brandishing the *keris*, the Malay dagger, at the party's annual assembly - a gesture widely understood as a veiled threat to any race that dares challenge Malay supremacy. His deputy, and Badawi's son-in-law, Khairy Jamaluddin, recently warned that any split among the Malays - that is, any defection from UMNO - would be exploited by the Chinese.

Ironically, the same camps that play the race card are often just as quick to warn Malaysians of the consequences of acting on those feelings. And for the most part, that message has sunk in. Most Malaysians now recognize just how important the nation's peace and stability are; indeed, they're the bedrock on which Malaysia's rapid economic development has depended. Yet as the dust of the elections settles, there are few signs the rhetoric over race is going to diminish.

In the wealthy and mostly Chinese state of Penang, the Chinese DAP won power after 36 years of rule by the Malay-dominated BN. Incoming Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng quickly vowed to end the crude affirmative-action policy, which, he said, "only breeds cronyism, corruption and inefficiency."

In response, the prime minister warned the state not to marginalize Malays and said that "the state government must not try to create an atmosphere which can cause racial tensions."

By many accounts race relations are now more tense than at any time since 1969. Ninety percent of Chinese students attend Chinese-language schools, while the majority of Malays attend public schools. Islam has taken a greater prominence in the social and political domains, breeding resentment among Indians and Chinese.

Chinese and Indians, meanwhile, have become more vocal in opposing discriminatory policies, but they have given little indication that if they were granted greater equality they would rise above their own clanish tendencies. The enmity could erupt into violence. And if it does, it may, ironically, be triggered by the same affirmative-action policies that have done so much to prevent violence over the years.

The tragedy is that most Malaysians seem tired of the fractious politics of the past. Many Malaysians of all races have grown exasperated with Badawi's failure to tackle corruption, crime and inflation. And they recognize that race-based politics is impairing social and economic progress.

But unless the opposition parties can rise above the nation's ethnic cleavages by learning to put national rather than ethnic interests at the forefront, ordinary Malaysians are unlikely to.

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