

Noxious Dhaka air

Take measures to clean it up

THE pollution level of Dhaka city's air is worsening at an alarming rate with varied types of toxic pollutants being released in the air regularly from different sources. Exhaust fumes from faulty engines of motorised vehicles, especially diesel engines, remain the number one cause behind release of large amount of carbon monoxide, hydrocarbon, nitrogen oxide, sulphur dioxide and lead particles. Thus, one can clearly perceive the consequence in terms of air quality when the number of motorised vehicles keeps increasing by ten percent annually in the city alone. The constant increase of vehicles is also contributing to severe jam on the streets, which again causes burning of fuel in large amount in the stranded vehicles.

The other sources from where lethal particles find their way into the air are brick kilns, road dust and fumes from chemical industries. Though there are regulations obligating industries to minimise emission of noxious fumes, these are hardly complied with as there is conspicuous lack of enforcement. Never ending construction of brick structures in the urban areas results in fine dust flying into the air to the irritation of citizens who are forced to inhale it on a daily basis. The sight of people on the roads covering their noses to keep off the dust is only negligible in comparison with a great majority who are fully exposed to it.

Health experts are of the opinion that the extremely low quality air in Dhaka is contributing to various diseases of the respiratory tract and other organs, such as, eye and throat. Besides, asthma, high blood pressure and heart ailment are caused. Because of their vulnerable state of health, children and older citizens fall victim to air pollution more easily than people of other age groups. It is disconcerting to note that high content of lead in air adversely affects mental functioning of children.

Air pollution is not a scourge that cannot be prevented or scaled down through the application of modern devices, but to do that what is required is comprehensive knowledge about the nature of the problem and a pragmatic policy to address it. We urge the government to keep urban air pollution on the priority list in order to ensure a better and healthier life for the citizens.

After the elections in Nepal

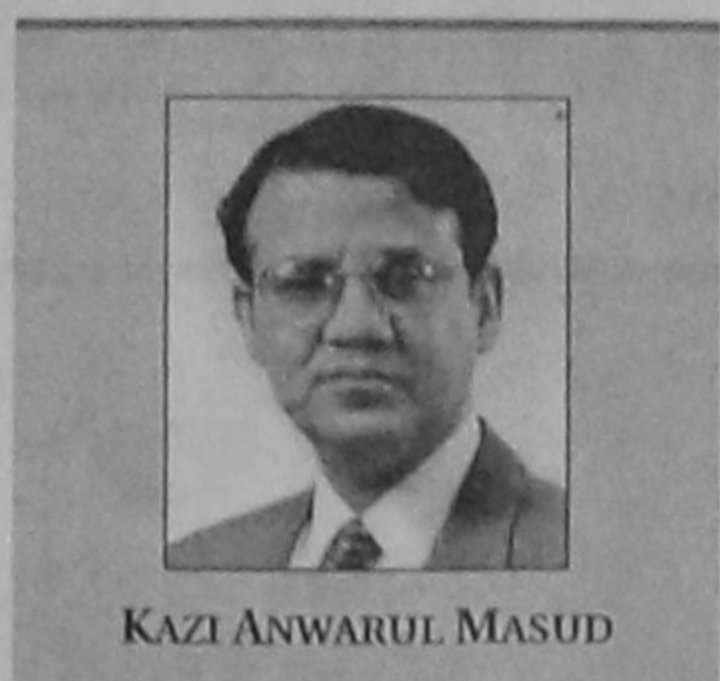
The new assembly has a critical job before it

FOR a nation yet to get acclimatised to substantive democracy, Nepal appears to have been doing reasonably well for itself. The elections last Thursday, for which votes are still being counted, drew as many as 60 per cent of the electorate to the polling stations. There have, of course, been instances of pre-election violence, but they have been minimal. The dire predictions earlier made by many about a disruption in the voting have been belied. And yet it becomes the responsibility of all parties taking part in the elections to ensure that the results are respected and upheld.

As this leader is being written, vote counting in 102 of the altogether 601 constituencies show an early lead for the Maoists led by their leader Prachanda. They dominate the outcome in 56 constituencies. Obviously, it is encouraging for them as also for their supporters. But there are all the other constituencies that remain and the general expectation is that it will be a close election. The Nepali Congress led by GP Koirala and the Communist Party of Nepal remain the other two big stakeholders in the elections. If nothing goes awry, these two parties should be doing well. The picture that might finally emerge is one of a fine balance being struck between the parties in the new assembly. And the task before the assembly is critical, if not exactly monumental. It will have the country transit from a Hindu kingdom to a republic. That of course means bringing the monarchy to an end. If there is one point that unites Nepalese by and large, it is the realisation that King Gyanendra and the dynasty he represents today need to make way for a new political order.

We wish the people of Nepal well as they move toward a more substantive form of democracy. Indeed, it is uncharted territory they will soon inhabit. After a decade-long conflict caused by the Maoist insurgency, which left 13,000 people killed, Nepal is in real need of peace and good government.

Charting a developmental path for Bangladesh



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

IF one were to interrogate Walt Rostow's proposed theory of the stages of economic growth then the time to be taken by the developing countries in reaching stage of developed state would become indeterminate. This is because it stretches from pre-Newtonian traditional stage through preconditions of take-off and take-off stages with expansion of new industries to the fourth stage of "drive to maturity" in which economies broaden their base with advanced technology and complex process and finally arrive at the stage of mass consumption with culture, politics and ethics as prerequisites of economic performance.

Rostow's prescribed journey along the path of economic growth is not short. From pre-Newtonian traditional stage to the stage of mass consumption will need per capita real income to rise to a point at which consumption needs of a large section of the population have to move beyond basic needs. While writing his

book in the fifties, Rostow could find only the US, West European economies, and Japan to have reached that stage.

"The term developed country or advanced country is used to categorise countries with developed economies in which the tertiary and quaternary sectors of industry dominate. This level of economic development usually translates into a high income per capita and a high Human Development Index. Countries with high GDP often fit the above description of a developed economy (Wikipedia)." Ordinarily countries having per capita income of at least \$ 12,000/- are considered as being high-income countries. While IMF identifies 31 countries in that category, the World Bank identifies 60, and the CIA 34, as advanced economies.

As the United Nations has more than 180 countries as members, one can imagine that the great majority of the world's population lives in underdevelopment, and millions as ultra-poor. In such a situation, the term "hidden hun-

ger," that refers not to overt hunger of poor people who are unable to afford enough but a more insidious type caused by eating food that is deficient in essential vitamins and micronutrients, has a political connotation. The term denotes extreme poverty that remains undetected or unacknowledged.

In Bangladesh it is a matter of semantics, as famine, be it silent or overt, is nothing but widespread shortage of food caused by misguided economic policies. Amartya Sen, the proponent of "entitlement theory," notes that famine usually occurs under dictatorship or during war, and rarely under functioning democracy. Demography also plays an important role in food scarcity. Professor David Pimental of Cornell University has posited that the US population for a sustainable economy should not exceed 200 million, and to avert disaster the US should reduce its population by at least one-third. Such a conclusion ignores the contribution of the working popu-

lation, which must increase in order to support the aging retirees who, due to quantum leap in medical sciences, have a greater life span than before, as well as the technological advances being made in the West contributing to human welfare.

Globally, however, soil contamination and loss of arable land coupled with increase in population will usher in an agricultural crisis that will adversely affect the political and socio-economic conditions. The North-South divide will be sharpened. The possibility of Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" may become a reality, and grinding poverty may deepen intra and international political crisis.

Geologist Dale Allen Pfeiffer has predicted that coming decades could see spiraling food prices and massive starvation on a global level never seen before. Since countries like Bangladesh have very little room to maneuver, regional cooperation to get the benefit of instant assistance like food import, when necessary, at

preferential price has to be ensured. If foreign policy is what we do and diplomacy is how we do it, then our diplomats at home and abroad should be encouraged to shed the colonial and post-colonial attitude towards our neighbours, and make friends with them and the diplomats of other countries.

In drawing up a preferential schedule for Bangladesh one has to face the difficult choice of choosing between an electoral democracy, despite doubts expressed by some quarters about holding of an election before the end of the year, and a quiet business environment necessary for the economic development of the country. Though Francis Fukuyama was somewhat hasty in declaring the victory of liberal democracy and market economy over other systems that failed to satisfy the global needs, perhaps, the greater part of the world remains to be convinced that capitalism would not mean capitalist imperialism through the exercise of power by major capitalist countries over less developed economies through the medium of multinational companies.

Indeed, it is difficult to ignore Immanuel Wallerstein's world system theory, which he defines as "world economy integrated through the market rather than a political center, in which two or more regions are interdependent with respect to necessities like food, fuel and protection, and two or more polities compete for

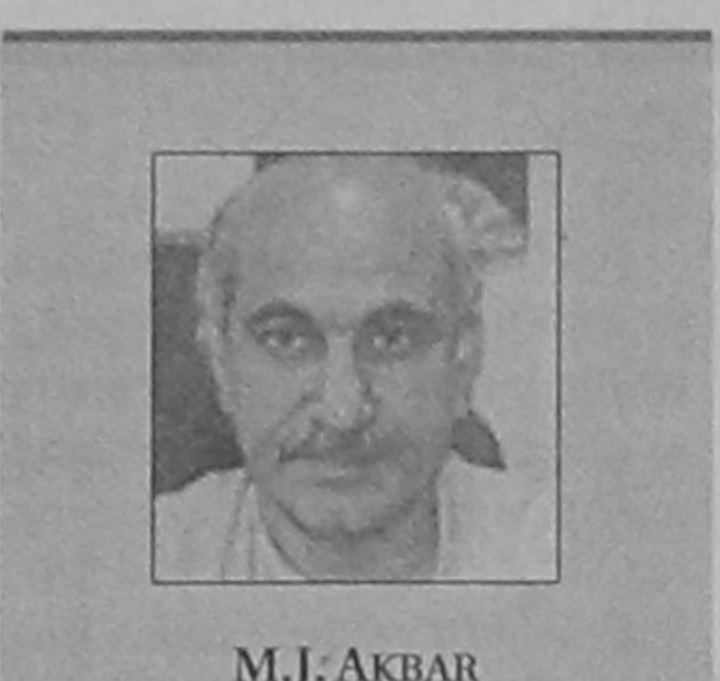
domination without the emergence of one single center forever." The current world system is a power hierarchy between core and periphery, in which the powerful core dominates the less powerful periphery.

The question that agitates the mind of many is whether the global hegemon would allow others to pursue their economic agenda if there is the slightest threat to its interest. The irrelevance shown to the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, or the Rome Treaty on International Criminal Court, or the promulgation of the doctrine of preemption effectively categorising the Muslim community as terrorists (24 percent of the US citizens would not like to have a Muslim family as their neighbour), make it extremely difficult to chart its politico-economic goals without the "consent" of the West, regardless of the immutability of sovereignty written in the UN Charter.

Since our voice, unless joined with those of others, would sound faint, it would be in our interest to restore democracy at the earliest so that what we say in the global theater reflects not only the true will of a hundred and forty million people of Bangladesh but, at the same time, also shows the world that we are a disciplined nation which the international community can do business with.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Maya and reality



M.J. AKBAR

THE good news for the Sonia Gandhi Congress is that Rahul Gandhi is finally beginning to irritate someone. The bad news is that he has irritated Mayawati, the increasingly iconic leader of India's Dalits.

Mayawati has achieved something unprecedented in the Dalit experience. She has come to power on her own terms. Her mentor, Kanshi Ram, indisputably paved the way, but in historical terms, he was only the herald of this extraordinary seismic shift in the demographics of Indian politics. Someone still had to deliver on the prophecy. Mayawati has both outpaced her mentor and risen to a higher trajectory: to push the metaphor, she has travelled both horizontally and vertically on the same momentum, which is quite unique political yoga. To claim power is a dream. To achieve it is to rewrite history. And to do so on your own terms is a glittering embellishment to an already impressive chapter.

The clash between Congress and Mayawati was perhaps inevitable, since both claim the same electoral turf. Sonia Gandhi has

been completely unable to stem the Mayawati tide, being swamped in Uttar Pradesh and driven out by parallel currents in states like Gujarat. She has now thrown Rahul Gandhi into this churn. His visit to a Dalit home on Mayawati's base was a direct challenge. This by itself is exceptional. But after over four years of power, and single-point leadership, the Congress can no longer distinguish between an adversary and an enemy. It has created a sub-culture of us-versus-them, and secret hit lists, giving a bitter edge to the normal tensions of political life. One can see the vapour rising in language, and the rancour rising in body language.

Rahul Gandhi has begun the Congress campaign for the next general election, and opted for a personal variation of what might be called the Indira Gandhi model. This was best exemplified by a decision Mrs Gandhi made during the bleak years of Janata Party rule, after the end of the Emergency in 1977 and the defeat of the Congress in that year's election. An incident took place in a remote village in Bihar, where Dalits were victims of upper-caste hostility and violence. Mrs Gandhi decided to go there, and when no

BYLINE

Mayawati is not the pretty or handsome heir of a stagnant dynasty. She is monarch of a kingdom she has won on the field of battle. She believes that her kingdom can expand into an empire. This may happen; it may not. But remember this; a democracy encourages flexible, fluid boundaries. Some things are probable, but everything is possible. This Maya is no illusion.

other means of transport was available for the last mile, she got on to an elephant. That gesture was the alchemy that transformed the fortunes of a depressed and divided Congress.

A second incident, during which she squatted down and offered arrest when the Janata began to pursue her with expected, but unacceptable, animosity, offered an equally dramatic image to photographers. This is the parallel that Rahul Gandhi seeks to draw when he turns up "unexpectedly" in tribal homes in Orissa, or a Dalit village in Uttar Pradesh; or when Mrs Sonia Gandhi gallantly offers to send her son and heir to jail for a day or two to prove his heroic credentials in the struggle against Mayawati. But there are significant differences between 1978 and 2008.

To begin with, in 1978, Indira Gandhi was the only leader, and Congress the only party that identified itself with the Dalit cause. The Janata government was a coalition of middle and upper-caste power-brokers that paid occasional lip service to the Dalits, but not much more. The Janata lost a glorious opportunity to shift the demographic and political

equations of the country when it refused to make the pre-eminent Dalit leader of the time, Babu Jagjivan Ram, prime minister after the elections and chose the anaemic Morarji Desai instead.

In 2008, Mayawati is the lodestar of the Dalits, the Indira Gandhi of her community. Nor is she a Brahmin with sympathy for the downtrodden; she is a Dalit herself, part of the poverty and the humiliation of thousands of years, with a ferocious sense of identity with her people. Jagjivan Ram sought change through conciliation; Mayawati seeks change through confrontation. Dalits feel empowered now; they felt helpless when Indira Gandhi was on her way to Bihar. 1978 was the season of bitter fruit; 2008 is the season of long-denied apples.

Mayawati's response to Rahul Gandhi's politicking is an indication of the new ferocity. Rahul Gandhi wants votes for himself; Mayawati wants a new horizon for herself and her community. When she invoked the images of soap and incense, and charged that the likes of Rahul Gandhi privately purified themselves after publicly associating with Dalits, she was arousing passions around the two great crimes against Dalits, pov-

erty and untouchability. She was also hinting at a third crime, a modern one, induced by democracy of hypocrisy. This was not a speech put together by some extra-clever boys around a computer; she etched those images into the speech herself. By throwing "foreign" into the mix, she raised the ante to the foreign origins of Sonia Gandhi and the international lifestyle of Rahul Gandhi. Mayawati's message was carried by television and print across India.

The genteel might not consider Mayawati very gentle, but the genteel are heavily outnumbered in Indian democracy. A friend watched this speech in his office, in the company of his colleagues. When an executive expressed his disapproval, a bearer said simply: "This is what has made Mayawati chief minister, and this is what will make her prime minister." I would change "will" to "could" but otherwise the statement stands on merit.

What the Congress leadership does not understand is that dynasty cannot offer itself as an alternative to a genuine mass leader. The old Congress won the sympathy of Dalits because it encouraged Dalit leaders to rise in the party; today, only the dynasty has the right to represent every community in the country. Doesn't work in a maturing democracy.

The April 5 issue of the Economist makes the perceptive point that democracy does not necessarily throw up clean results: "...of 21 countries which have elected new governments in the past four months, the result of the

vote itself was less than decisive in at least six. The number seems to be rising."

This pattern came into play in India after 1989, when Vishwanath Pratap Singh formed a minority government after an indecisive result. There has been no majority government in 18 years through five general elections. Governments are now formed by post-poll rather than pre-poll alliances. The need for a stable government, or perhaps any government at all, trumps other differences. Numbers determine the level of power a leader exercises within a coalition. In Germany, Angela Merkel became chancellor at the head of a grand coalition between long-standing adversaries because she got one seat more than her opponents. The power of one has rarely been higher. Such a syndrome in India opens the field for Mayawati, as well as others.

The Congress is desperately hoping that Mayawati fails, or collapses. Its wish has some probability on its side. Against such a probability, Mayawati is bolstered by a possibility.

Mayawati is not the pretty or handsome heir of a stagnant dynasty. She is monarch of a kingdom she has won on the field of battle. She believes that her kingdom can expand into an empire. This may happen; it may not. But remember this; a democracy encourages flexible, fluid boundaries. Some things are probable, but everything is possible.

This Maya is no illusion.

M.J. Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

Barack Obama's Willie Horton

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Their second was a winner! Willie Horton, a black, convicted felon serving a life sentence without parole for murder, and incarcerated in a Massachusetts prison, was released on a weekend furlough program on June 6, 1988. He escaped to Maryland and committed armed robbery and rape. Governor Dukakis had originally supported the program enacted by a previous Republican governor, but he abolished it on April 28, 1988

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

AFTER the Democratic Party National Convention in Atlanta in July 1988, nominee Governor Michael S. Dukakis of Massachusetts held a 17-point lead over the Republican nominee, Vice-President George H. W. Bush. History was not on Bush's side; no serving vice-president had been elected president since Martin Van Buren in 1836.

Dukakis went home and basked in his unearned glory, while Bush's campaign manager Lee Atwater and media consultant Roger Ailes went to work. Their polling showed that people knew

very little about Governor Dukakis. They decided to fill in the blanks. Their first ad, accusing Governor Dukakis of polluting the Boston harbour, did not have much traction.

Their second was a winner! Willie Horton, a black, convicted felon serving a life sentence without parole for murder, and incarcerated in a Massachusetts prison, was released on a weekend furlough program on June 6, 1988. He escaped to Maryland and committed armed robbery and rape. Governor Dukakis had originally supported the program enacted by a previous Republican governor, but he abolished it on

April 28, 1988.

Roger Ailes salivated: "The only question is whether we depict Willie Horton with a knife in his hand or without it." Atwater and Ailes ran vicious TV ads featuring the mugshot of a menacing-looking, bearded Willie Horton. Lee Atwater predicted that "by the time this election is over, Willie Horton will be a household name." He was right! The subliminal message to the whites was: Dukakis, with a foreign-sounding name (he is of Greek heritage), had no problem with blacks murdering white men and raping white women. That ad destroyed Dukakis's quest for the presidency.

Shortly before he died of brain tumour on March 29, 1991, the "happy hatcher man" and the mentor of Karl Rove and George W. Bush, Lee Atwater apologised to those who he had destroyed during political campaigns, including Governor Dukakis. Roger Ailes, on the other hand, went on to found the Fox News Channel in 1996, which is currently dedicated to destroying the candidacy of Barack Obama through Willie Horton-like tangential smear tactics.

Obama's Willie Horton is Reverend Jeremiah Wright, his former pastor. Fox Channel, especially Sean Hannity, runs Reverend Wright's incendiary rantings, "God damn America," "the US of KKKA," and his post-911 comment, reminiscent of Malcolm X's after the JFK assassination, "America's chickens have come home to roost," incessantly. I can predict that in the Republican TV commercials this fall, a ranting and raving Jeremiah Wright's face will morph into Barack Obama's.

Fox News has an ally in the supporters of Israel. Israelis believe that America's presence in Iraq is good for Israel. That is why they prefer John McCain for the US presidency, even over a proven friend like Hillary, who, under pressure from Obama, now favours a US withdrawal. As if on cue, most prominent Jewish Americans (Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell, Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman, California Senators Feinstein and Boxer, New York Senator Chuck Schumer who actually hates Hillary, Hillary's communication director Wolfson and surrogate Lanny Davis, Steven Spielberg and Barbra Streisand) are all Hillary supporters.

Senator Lieberman, 2000 Democratic vice-presidential candidate and an uber Iraq hawk, is now an independent supporting John McCain! The question is: Is it not unpatriotic to ask America to sacrifice its sons and daughters and squander its resources for the benefit of another nation?

Historically, among white Americans Jews have been the

staunchest supporters of the blacks. In June 1964, Jewish students Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner, along with African American James Chaney, were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan as they were attempting to register black voters in Mississippi as a part of "Freedom Summer."

Things have changed. Most African Americans now sympathise with the suffering of the Palestinians, as does Barack Obama. Many Jew are one issue voters: security of Israel. Although Obama professes unwavering support for Israel, his sympathy for the Palestinian suffering makes Jews question his commitment to Israel. Jews consider only those who support Israel 100 percent as real friends; 99 percent support is not enough. A Jewish website puts it more bluntly: "Once a Muslim, always a Muslim. Cannot trust anyone with Muslim blood flowing in his veins." Although Obama's father converted to Catholicism, his Kenyan ancestors may have been Muslims. Ten percent of

Americans still believe that Obama is a Muslim!

Ed Rendell has said, a la Republicans against Dukakis, that 50 percent about Obama is unknown, suggesting he may be harbouring dark secrets. Florida Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman-Schultz, representing a heavily Jewish district, has chastised Hillary Clinton for not using Reverend Wright to bring down Obama.

Ed Rendell also said that working class whites would not vote for Obama. Fox Channel's job is to make sure they don't. Working class whites love America, and they do not like blacks playing the victims. In their hearts, Obama-detractors know that he loves America. Obama has publicly urged blacks to stop blaming the whites for their troubles, and to take responsibility for their lives. Unlike Hillary's Bosnia snipe-gate, since Obama cannot be faulted for what he has said, Obama haters are using Reverend Wright as his spokesman.

They have raised questions:

Why does he not disown Wright? Why did he not leave his church? Why did he not speak up before? etc. Preachers have a captive audience. It is a one-way traffic: preachers speak, the audience listens, but cannot respond. Many a times preachers say things the congregation is uncomfortable with. Has anyone seen members of a congregation confront a preacher after a sermon? People go to pray and leave after prayers. To make Obama responsible for Wright's unpatriotic, anti-white and anti-Semitic sermons is the worst case of guilt by association.

The real purpose behind the smear campaign is to give working class whites and Jewish voters who do not want to vote for Obama anyway, a perfect excuse not to do so. This allows them to say: "I am not voting for Obama not because I am a racist, but because his previous association with Reverend Wright proves that he is unpatriotic, anti-white and anti-Semitic."

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed is a Rhodes Scholar and a Daily Star columnist.