

# The 2008 US presidential election will not be close

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BILLY I. AHMED

**I**N early December 2007, when Hillary Clinton was 20-plus points ahead of the Democratic field in national polls, she was a basic weak candidate, a beatable candidate, and polls indicated that Barack Obama would be a stronger match against Republicans. She had the highest "unfavourable" rating of anyone who had ever run for the presidency, and she was the only Democratic candidate who could unite and energise the Republican base, as she was running 10 to 15 points behind in generic Democrat vs. Republican presidential polls.

But Barack Obama is a different story. The November presidential election is not going to be close. Barack Obama is going to beat John McCain by 8 to 10 points in the national popular vote and win 300 to 350 electoral votes. Obama is going to wipe out McCain. There are many reasons why.

## Political environment

The Republican Party is led -- and branded -- by an extraordinarily unpopular president, whose policies McCain has staunchly defended and supported (95 per cent voting congruence in 2007).

In the recent CBS News and NYTimes poll, President Bush is at 28 per cent approval, 65 per cent disapproval; in the Hart/Newhouse poll, he is at 27 per cent approval, 66 per cent disapproval.

While some presidents have fallen to low levels in the past, what is remarkable about President Bush is how long-term and persistent voter disapproval of him has been, and the depth of voter sentiment.

A May 12 Washington Post/ABC poll showed only 15 per cent of voters "strongly approve" -- while 52 per cent "strongly disapprove."

"Voters think, correctly, that the country is on the wrong track. In the Hart/Newhouse poll, 15 per cent of voters said the country was headed in the 'right direction,' while an astounding 73 per cent said 'wrong direction.'" Remember, these polls include all voters, not just Democrats.

On issues, Republicans are on the short end of everything except the military and national security. Among voters, in the NYTimes CBS poll, when asked which party is better, on health care 63 per cent say Democrats while only 19 per cent say Republicans; the econ-

omy, 56 per cent say Democrats, 28 per cent say Republicans; sharing your moral values, 50 per cent say Democrats, 34 per cent say Republicans; and, dealing with Iraq, 50 per cent say Democrats, 34 per cent say Republicans.

The Democratic party has a 52 per cent favourable and 41 per cent unfavourable rating; the Republican party has a 33 per cent favourable and 58 per cent unfavourable rating. A whopping 63 per cent say the United States needs to withdraw from Iraq within 12 months; McCain wants to stay, roughly, forever -- and attack Iran.

The Washington Post/ABC poll asked: "Which party do you trust to do a better job coping with the main problems the nation faces over the next few years?" Democrats were chosen over Republicans, 53 per cent to 32 per cent.

The US economy is sinking, gas prices are skyrocketing; the real estate market has collapsed and people are losing their homes; and the Iraq Recession shows no signs of subsiding.

John McCain has been able to stay close to parity in polls matching him with Obama, but that is the product of the thumping Obama

has taken from the Clinton campaign. Once that internal scrap is behind him and he can go head-to-head against McCain, his polling is going to soar.

Even in fund-raising, a traditional Republican strength, the Republicans are at a disadvantage. At last reported count, Obama had \$51 million in cash; McCain had \$11 million.

In the combined cash of the national party committees, Republicans had \$55.5 million; Democrats \$87.1 million. The net-roots have raised unprecedented amounts of money for Democrats, especially Obama; labour unions have gone deeper into their pockets and are raising more money for Democrats than in prior elections; and, even business PACs have given more money to Democrats. Business blows with the wind, and it knows which way the wind is blowing.

Simply put, it is the worst possible time for any Republican to be running for president. And this is not simply an opinion: it is thought that has many partisans in the Republican party and among traditional Republican supporters.

Representative Tom Davis, from Virginia, in an internal memo to Republicans, recently wrote: "The political atmosphere facing Republicans this November is the worst since Watergate and is far more toxic than the fall of 2006. The Republican brand is in the trash

can. [I]f we were dog food, they would take us off the shelf.

## The candidates

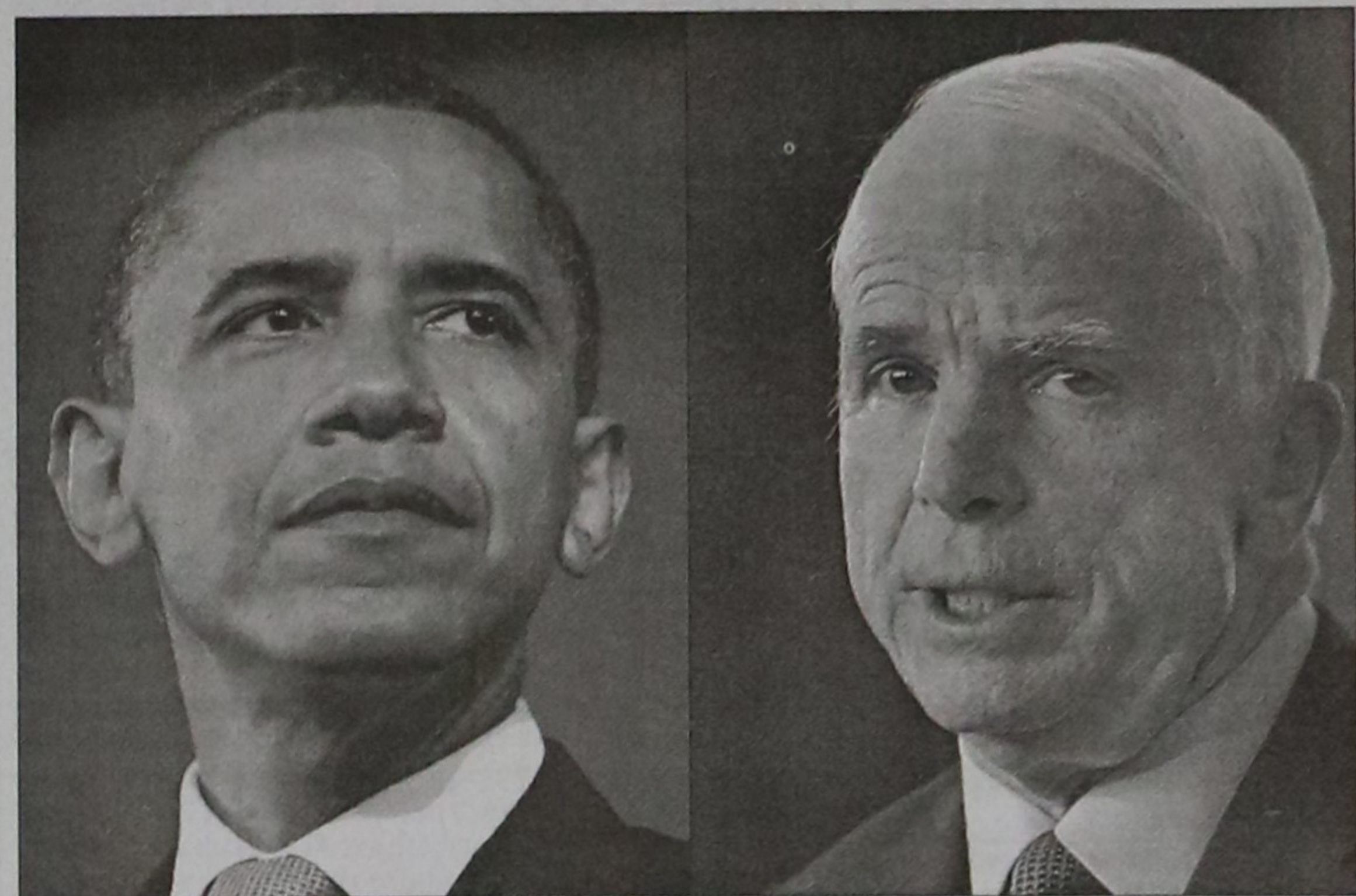
John McCain is, by all accounts, an honourable and decent man. He has earned enormous respect for the fact that he declined the opportunity to be released from a North Vietnamese prison because his father had been a Navy admiral and chose instead to stay with his comrades for 5½ years.

For a substantial period of time John McCain's political career, he was a Republican maverick on various issues, including the environment, immigration, campaign reform, taxes and the budget. These are not inconsequential disagreements with the Republican party, and he has been almost singular in being willing to disagree with the Republican establishment.

But that is the previous incarnation of McCain, not the version seen for the last four years or the version who has to run between now and November.

In addition, it has been suggested that much of McCain's problems can be correlated with post-traumatic stress disorder, which is consistent with his 5½ years of great stress in prison. This would account for his violent temper, his memory lapses, and his frequent mental disconnects.

What US is going to see in the general election from John McCain is likely a ton of mistakes. The thing the press likes about him, his candour and shoot-from-the-hip style,



The future and the past of US politics?

is going to take a heavy toll on him when the full weight of media attention is trained on him.

He never has been a good speaker with a prepared text. The media has always loved the quick, gritty, candid McCain, but that version is gone; he now is a damaged, slower-thinking McCain, but his habits will remain the same.

He will still try to be the quick wit, the maverick; it just isn't going to work. And while McCain is still capable of firing off some zingers that hit, he will be unable to sustain a narrative -- or fool the American voters -- for the next five months. This is not just about being 71; it is about being an old 71. It might be

sad to watch. There is too much at stake.

Obama is the perfect candidate for Democrats and a nightmare for McCain. Obama, who by every metric is a brilliant strategist, thinker and speaker, is going to run circles around McCain. McCain, who is not a very good speaker even on his best day, will appear slow, perplexed and confused; he will make mistakes.

Obama will be charismatic, smart, thoughtful, high-minded, alert and substantive. It will be no contest. And adding to Obama's natural advantages, McCain has just enough integrity to try to match up with Obama on issues. In

the debate on substance, Obama's overwhelming intellectual superiority and mental alertness will become obvious.

There will be the believers who have jumped aboard the Obama campaign and will continue to multiply, but there also is going to be another type of vote that is going to swing heavily to Obama: the default vote. Voters are going to default to Obama because it will become obvious that McCain simply is not up to the task of being president.

This is going to be the first not-close presidential election since 1988.

Billy I. Ahmed is tea planter, columnist, and researcher.

# 'Our lands will not come under fuel crops'

**Now, a large extent of land is required for growing animal food crops and fuel crops. Operating machines and vehicles appears to be taking precedence over protecting human life.**

ALEX THANTHRIARACHCHI

**A**DDRESSING the World Food Summit in Rome, President Mahinda Rajapaksa is reported to have said that land in Sri Lanka would not be utilised for growing fuel crops. That, we think, is a most realistic and sensible statement. By so saying, the president has brought up the issue concerning food shortage.

What is more significant is that he came out with this fact when many others were thinking of US dollars as the solution. In most of the media reports about the World Food Summit, the emphasis was on the amount of dollars required to prevent hunger.

When many leaders were attributing the causes of the present food shortage to disasters such as climate change and conflicts, President Rajapaksa chose to take a look from different angle and attributed that to man's own failings. His realistic approach is heartening and inspires hope.

This idea is very relevant to Sri Lanka. For about two decades, a considerable extent of cultivable land has been utilised to serve purposes other than food cultivation for the local people.

Paddy, the staple crop, and other cereals were set aside to grow tobacco or export crops like gherkin, which took up considerable acreage.

Now, a large extent of land is required for growing animal food crops and fuel crops. If the oil issue persists or becomes more acute the demand for land to grow fuel crops can be expected to increase correspondingly. Operating machines and vehicles appears to be taking precedence over protecting human life.

Lands have been cleared of fruit trees and edible plants to make space for cash crops. Wild plants that yielded edible roots, leaves and fruits, which provided energy to men and animals, are now in the limbo of forgotten things.

And if the trend continues not even leaves for a melluma will remain. Could there be anything more miserable than going to Rome to speak about food shortages after having destroyed the indigenous food species that grew in abundance and after utilising the cultivable lands in their respective countries to grow animal food and fuel crops?

What wisdom is there in looking for dollars to satisfy hunger? If hunger can be overcome with



Food or fuel?

US dollars, then we might as well think of growing "dollar trees." In this context lies the true significance of the president's comment.

If we looked back at recent history we would see the arrival of "miracle seeds," and the respect with which they were received.

To receive the miracle seeds, indigenous varieties and knowledge gathered over thirty centuries were discarded. The miracle has brought about starvation!

The president's pronouncement at the World Food Summit in Rome, to the effect that the country's land would not be devoted to fuel crops, is not something to be treated with indifference. It has to be taken with utmost seriousness.

It would then be possible to grasp the full import of what he said two days before leaving for Rome.

He spoke of a revolution in food production. The radical words meant the utilisation of local resources to produce an abundance of food, which would be available at fair prices.

The auspicious moment has arrived for the minister of agriculture development to make this the basic concept of his national agriculture policy, on which he has been working for the past two years.

Alex Thanthriarachchi is Secretary, Movement for the Protection of Indigenous Seeds.

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# Cricket fans in withdrawal

**Overnight, as the CSK captain, Dhoni was embraced by all of Tamil Nadu as one of its own, with one local radio station naming him Veermani, suggesting that he was the all-conquering hero. In short, IPL helped develop city loyalties, which could go a long way in broadening mental horizons all around.**

COOMI KAPOOR

**S**O gripped was India by the Indian Premier League (IPL) fever that all three new Hindi film releases during the two-month period flopped at the box-office.

Indians suffered withdrawal symptoms at the end of a two-month long cricket extravaganza, which had them glued nightly to their TV sets as eight city-based teams vied for the maiden DLF Indian Premier Twenty20 trophy.

Indian sport had never seen such a stupendous spectacle before. The shortened version of the game was the best eye-candy for the entire country. Cutting across socio-economic boundaries, Indians thronged to the stadiums in tens of thousands daily to witness the razzmatazz on and off the field.

The rest of the country saw the keen tussle between bat and ball on the small screen, which, in most cases, was settled in the dying moments of the game. Such was its pulling power that most public places emptied well before 8pm, the time when the IPL matches began daily in one or the other of eight metro centres.

Indeed, a cartoonist in a leading English daily captured the national mood well. Lying prostrate before a television set with a blank screen, the husband is seen telling his wife: "It is 8 o'clock. What do I do now?" Restaurants, clubs, markets, cinema halls reported thin attendance.

Bollywood heaved a sigh of relief on June 1 when the IPL final was played in Mumbai. Producers who

had shelved the release of their films due to the IPL were now readying to schedule them.

The private television channel which had bought the rights to telecast the IPL matches hit the jackpot.

More than one hundred million viewers saw the IPL matches on television, the biggest ever audience for any show to this day. As a result, the much-hyped television show by Shah Rukh Khan on a rival television channel failed to attract viewers.

The tournament also said a lot about the popular Indian psyche. Before it started, there were questions whether city-based teams would be able to attract loyal fans since each of the eight teams had players from other cities, and even from foreign countries.

For example, Mahendra Singh Dhoni, the captain of the national team, led the Chennai Super Kings, having been bought in the players' auction for a whopping Rs 60 million (\$1.4 million) for the first three seasons. Dhoni hails from the eastern state of Jharkhand and plays for it in the domestic circuit.

Overnight, as the CSK captain, Dhoni was embraced by all of Tamil Nadu as one of its own, with one local radio station naming him Veermani, suggesting that he was the all-conquering hero.

The South African pacer Makhaya Ntini endeared himself to all Tamils when his penetrating bowling demolished the top order of the Punjab King's XI in the semi-final match, and thus booked a berth for

CSK in the final against the Rajasthan Royals.

In short, IPL helped develop city loyalties, which could go a long way in broadening mental horizons all around. The maiden IPL competition also revealed a lot about leadership. Rajasthan Royals, the lowest cost franchise in the tournament at Rs 2.95 billion (\$69.17 million), could not have picked up the glittering trophy on the night of June 1-2 at the jam-packed D.Y. Patil Stadium in Nai, Mumbai, if they were not fortunate in being captained by the retired Australian great Shane Warne.

The RR's had entered the tournament unheralded, with no one giving them an outside chance to emerge victorious at the end of the gruelling 59-match competition.



The new king of Chennai.

But Warne did it. He had no iconic players, Indian or foreign. He operated on a shoestring budget. And yet, by the time the tournament was mid-way through, everyone had come to respect his leadership.

It was because Warne, who doubled as a coach for RR, had honed 11 anonymous players into a single fighting unit. Each player was tasked to perform a particular role.

In sharp contrast, the costliest franchises, Mumbai Indians, owned by industrialist Mukesh Ambani, Bangalore Royal Challengers, owned by liquor baron Vijay Mallaya, and Kolkata Knight Riders of Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan, fared rather poorly.

Without doubt, IPL Twenty20 is set to change the way cricket is played in the country, and possibly outside, too. Though purists might lament the demise of Test cricket, there is no denying that IPL has brought people back to the stadiums.

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## FATHER'S DAY

# My father, my icon, my daily strength

**At the age of four, he taught me the word "introspection." He said that every night when one sleeps one should think of the bad things one did and the good things one did. Then, in the next day, try not to repeat the bad things. I now understand this is the way he aroused my conscience, taught me to differentiate between good and bad.**

REZINA SULTANA

**E**VERY father has a special place in his children's heart, but to me my father was the world. He was simple, honest, soft-spoken and also caring to his family. I see him as a real family person.

My father, Md. Reza-ul-Islam, was born on May 6, 1941 in Kolkata. From the time he was a little boy, he was well-liked as a genuine good boy. He was the only son of my grandparents and obviously pampered by them but never spoilt.

Academically, he was very sound. It would be unfinished if not shared with others that after matriculation examination he just heard that the final result had been published. He went to a shop and

wanted to know the result from a shopkeeper. Seeing his result, the shopkeeper didn't utter any word but ordered for sweets for the people around. It was only gradually that he came to know that he was the only student who obtained first division in the whole district. In his HSC exams also he showed his mettle and then continued in BUET as a meritorious student. In 1969 he joined London Imperial College to do his MS. He wanted to be a teacher, but, as an obedient son, he sacrificed his own wish and fulfilled his parents' dream by serving the government as an engineer in the Public Works Department (PWD).

His professional journey was also accompanied by his matrimonial journey at the age of 21. He was

a wonderful husband, a true companion to my mother. Of course, as a father he was the best in the world. We never felt that he had not given enough time to us. Besides his office hours, social work and visits he never failed to teach his children. My father was a true teacher. At the age of four, he taught me the word "introspection." He said that every night when one sleeps one should think of the bad things one did and the good things one did. Then, in the next day, try not to repeat the bad things. I now understand this is the way he aroused my conscience, taught me to differentiate between good and bad.

My parents raised us believing that we could accomplish anything in life no matter what our race,

gender, social or religious status. Receiving a good education was stressed, but we were allowed to choose our own way, regardless of which direction it led us to. My siblings completed their academic degrees in their chosen fields but I was the one who was always kept to follow his words and fulfill his wishes. We were raised as free, though enlightened, spirits in every sense of the word.

During Liberation War, my father, who was serving an assistant engineer in Banga Bhaban, fought against the Pakistanis being in the midst of a government surrounding. He passed away in December 5, 2007. Last Victory Day, it was extremely difficult to resist our emotions as he, the person who was a genuine patriotic and true fighter, was no more with us or to observe the Victory Day celebrations.

My father, with my mother, and us (three children), lived at Dhanmondi Road 27, during the time of the war. He never thought of leaving the city and his job. I admit

that I hadn't the slightest inkling of who the Pak armies were or what was exactly happening around us then to us. We, the three siblings, were only minor children at that time. Moreover, my father fought secretly for his country. I passed through childhood and entered into adulthood before ever realizing that there was a true freedom fighter in my father.

My parents used to support the freedom fighters in many ways. One incident I can recall was that my elder brother and I were very inquisitive to see a big white sack in my parents' bedroom. We asked our mother, she replied that it was nothing but saris that someone had kept in her custody. So, we were not allowed to touch the sack. A little adventurous, disbelieving my mother, my elder brother and I tried to open the sack and found with great surprise that those were not saris but guns. Later, we understood the "passive contribution" of my parents, who did not fight in the battlefield but helped the freedom fighters and

gave shelter to them.

He took all the risks but never neglected his official responsibilities. We could have lost our father in 1971 when the Pakistanis listed the names of all intellectuals and government officials to kill. His name was sixth in the list of officials serving at Banga Bhaban. Coincidentally, he survived on the day the Pakistanis killed the intellectuals and officers as my mother didn't let him attend office on that particular day.

Saarc Fountain, designed by Nitun Kundo was another construction of my father. During the first Saarc conference, I saw my father work day and night to do the necessary arrangements and constructions to make it a success. PG Hospital, Public Library, National Museum, and so many other public buildings and monuments have been built with his sweat and toil.

Bogra Cantonment, which is one of the largest cantonments, also involves my father's hard work. After the completion of the canton-

ment in early 1980s, then President Zia-ur Rahman said in the inaugural ceremony: "Bangladesh needs engineers like Md. Reza-ul-Islam, who is not only an honest but a real hard worker."

As an officer these were definitely a part of his responsibilities, but what I would like to point out that Bangladeshi people are not aware of these little contributions of those persons who worked really hard to help the country. I, as his daughter see among these concrete monuments his dedication and presence. He was never awarded nor got any certificate from the Bangladesh government. But I know that no certificate will be enough to reward him.

My father was religious in his own way. He prayed as a requirement of our religion. He read The Holy Quran in English, Bangla, and Arabic just to understand the meaning so that he could never be misguided.

He was the first person to construct the first temporary Haji camp. He was instructed by his

superior, the then chief engineer of PWD, T.A. Chowdhury to find a place where people could come together to share their religious beliefs. He roamed near and far until he finally found his dream site beside the Turag River in Tongi. Gradually, over time, the place developed beyond expectation, but I feel overwhelmed when I see people from home and abroad are now gathering at that place once a year.

Ironically, fate took my father beside the Turag River, near the Ijtema site at Uttara. My only concern now is whether that graveyard will be officially developed soon or not. He really yearned for a place where he could eternally rest in peace.

On this father's day, let us each honour our fathers, be they still with us or passed away, for all that they have given to both their families and the nation.

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