

New Bangladesh needs new leadership

The local body polls

Dominant voice of the grassroots is heartening

THE interest of the people at the grassroots in the forthcoming local government polls is clearly discernible. What is very heartening in this dynamics is the predominant voice of the people at the local level that seems to have prevailed over that of the central leadership in so far as participation in the election is concerned. Their enthusiasm and interest, so manifest in the submission of nomination papers for the four city corporations and nine municipalities, is very encouraging indeed.

Admittedly, the local government polls are supposed to be non-partisan - yet those who participate mostly belong to one political party or the other. Therefore, in the current political ambience the influence of the local leaders and workers over their party bosses in the capital ushers in something very constructive for politics in Bangladesh. One would like to see this trend - of asserting the voice of the people, directly and through the local leaders - continue and be a determining factor in the politics of the country in the future as well. Only when the voice of the local leaders and the grassroots workers determines the course of party politics will we see democracy in Bangladesh achieve the maturity that will reshape the tenor of politics.

It is encouraging to see that everyone is caught up by the election fervour - and of course the pull factor - election in Bangladesh has to do as much with politics as with the fact that it is an occasion for festivity for our people - plays its own part.

But there is an apparent dichotomy in the whole exercise. Traditionally, local government elections in Bangladesh have been non-partisan; neither could a candidate represent a political party nor could one use party symbol to project one's case to the voters. This must remain so - and we welcome the warning of the EC that any candidate that flaunts his or her political identity would lose his or her candidature. Yet it cannot be denied that no candidate can be apolitical and indeed the political face of the candidates is very obvious.

For the political parties it would be well if they realised the unique nature of the local government polls and did not push down the electorate's throat 'their candidates' although we feel strongly that they can play a significant role in encouraging honest and good people offering themselves as candidates. That would also encourage across the board democratic participation in the forthcoming local government election.

Nursing sector

Ensure adequate number and proper training

THOUGH nursing is considered the integral part of the health care system and given top priority by the authorities in the developed countries, it nonetheless gets a second-class treatment in Bangladesh. The prevailing ills in this sector have come under discussion many a time but nothing tangible has been done so far to improve the situation. Among the nagging problems that need to be addressed immediately by the relevant authorities are: lack of adequate number of nurses, poor quality training, lack of motivation, improper attitude and low salary. With these discouraging factors abounding, one can hardly expect anything better than ordinary ward boys and girls doing the work of a trained nurse, such as, changing bandages off the chest of a burn patient.

From a front page report in this daily on the subject on Sunday we learn that an inadequate number of nurses is the foremost cause why quality services cannot be offered to the patients. And it is baffling indeed that though 1200 nurses graduate from government nursing institutes every year, no recruitment of nurses in public hospitals has been done since 2003. It is a well known fact that majority of the people in Bangladesh go to public hospitals seeking health care but often nurses are not found when a patient has to be given saline or some emergency medicine. In one ward of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, the doctors struggle to give medical service to over 234 patients with only 31 nurses when they need many more. Therefore, it remains a mystery why new nurses are not being recruited to ensure timely and quality service to the patients.

The poor standard of training as imparted in the nursing institutes is another factor that needs to be looked into by the relevant authorities. In the modern world where medical science is progressing at a fast pace, knowledge of handling electronic machines and equipment is a vital requirement of a nurse. We are all aware that in the developed countries, trained nurses efficiently take care of the patients once the doctors have diagnosed the illness and prescribed medicines. Therefore, to upgrade the country's health care system our nurses must receive training so that they can handle machines and equipment with ease and accuracy and give quality service to the patients.



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

EVEN Bill Gates, who built a huge business empire from nothing, Microsoft, retired on June 27. Why can't our older political leaders decide to retire from their political business? People get fed up when they see some of the same old faces, with serious corruption allegations against them, shouting every day before TV cameras on same issues, reiterating their allegiance to their only leader(s) and saying no election without the leader(s).

The obvious question is if the leader is dead (God forbid), then what happens? Should the party run to the graveyard for next instructions? There must be a party constitution and a system in place to take charge of things if one is absent for any reason.

This is how a party can be said to be democratic. If no democracy is practiced in the party, how could such a party establish democracy in the country when

CONSCIENCE AND SOCIETY

After election, the people would probably expect a broad-based coalition government, which could be seen as a national government as proposed by Dr. Kamal Hossain. The country now needs a politically strong government that can cater to the huge needs of the people. Once the elected members form a government, they can rectify the past mistakes and serve the people instead of just serving themselves. They should know that today the people are very conscious of their rights, and false commitments will not work any more.

it wins the election? This is where the major political parties have failed us miserably. Should Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia retire? Sheikh Hasina once reportedly declared she would retire from politics at an age of 57. It is long past. However, let's hope that she would now seriously consider retiring and allow the younger politicians to take charge of the party.

This might encourage Khaleda Zia to follow suit. One has to agree that once a person reaches a particular age, she or he needs to retire from active politics, take more care of his or her health, and give more time to the family. There is an urgent need to change the whole system of politics in the country.

Minus Two without outside pressure
Sheikh Hasina once told me long

before 1/11 (when I went to present to her my book on North South University) that: "I will not be the prime minister if my party wins the next election." I told her that this is the best decision she has taken.

Nobody suggested this to her; she said it suddenly when other political issues were being discussed, though she knew well that I do not belong to any political party. Whether it would immediately happen or not is a different matter, but this shows that the realisation for a change had started to take hold in the mind of a party chief.

By saying so, she indeed intended to declare herself "minus" at particular point in time in terms of heading the government. This could happen with the other party chief too, and Minus Two could be effective without any outside pressure.

Let there be "Minus Many"
Relatively mature democracy like

America is apparently set to go for a "change" in its politics and particularly in electing its chief executive. We also need to go for a "change" in our politics. Minus Two has now turned out to be nothing but two because of something that inexperienced handling of the present political situation.

Anyway, why Minus Two only? It should be "Minus Many." Indeed, these two leader(s) can make it happen if they decide to get rid of those who are considered a burden not only to the party(s) but also to the society too. The honest senior members could, however, be useful as advisors to the party(s).

This is a sort of the reform, which is absolutely necessary. The leader(s), under parole, should go back to the parties, confirm participation in the elections including local government elections (AL has just announced its participation) and field young and honest candi-

dates. No further violence, no muscle power, no black money, etc. to be used to have their candidates elected. Young, honest candidates would always be preferred by the people. Let there be the beginning of clean politics in Bangladesh.

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Once the elected members form a government, they can rectify the past mistakes and serve the people instead of just serving themselves. They should know that today the people are very conscious of their rights, and false commitments will not work any more.

MPs not to be ministers
In my paper, which was presented and discussed at the Harvard conference organised on June 13-14 by the Bangladesh Development Initiative, I suggested that the MPs should exclusively be engaged in making laws for the country and must not be asked to perform ministerial functions.

Here, the American system seems to have worked well. Ministers should be chosen from

outside by the head of the government and they should be well experienced in administrative work and also must have good background in politics.

Such nominated candidates must face the parliament for ratification. After ratification, they should be officially appointed by the president. Such a system will make the parliamentary elections less interesting to the corrupt people.

No more pre-1/11 politics
It is now accepted by all in Bangladesh that we cannot go back to a pre-1/11 politics.

However, how post-1/11 governance is being run is a matter that will come under strong scrutiny at home and abroad. Foreign countries will be perfectly within their rights to analyse our way of running the government with a view to taking decisions on their future relationships with Bangladesh.

This, however, should not deter us in establishing democracy that suits the people of the country. Democracy is a bottom up process and not a top down one and hence local government elections must be held before parliamentary elections.

Governance is a hugely difficult task and genuine commitment to run the country selflessly for the good of the people can ensure good governance.

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A black American in the White House?



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

Although Obama has been able to break the racial barrier, there can be little doubt, after all, that he is potential target for the racists who still populate too many parts of America's demographic landscape. A degree of racism, sometimes subconscious, is considerably more widespread. The most unpleasant aspect of Hillary's campaign was its success in subtly pandering to racial prejudices. However, this dangerous attempt did not go in Clinton's favour, but it has established an unfortunate dynamic that John McCain can insidiously exploit to his advantage.

EVEN as the people around the world waited with bated breath for the end of the chauvinistic Bush era and even the legacy thereof, the front running democratic hopefuls -- Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama -- remained locked in a highly contentious race which was not only agonisingly far too long but also kept the hopes for such a prospect uncertain and surreal at best.

Also, the Americans hit hard by the wars abroad and recession at home yearned for a change, the prospect of which remained obscured for them till the emergence of an electoral equation only early last month when Hillary Clinton conceded defeat after fighting to the finish for clinching the coveted party nomination. Now the real game will begin and, therefore, it's time to have a fresh look at the electoral canvas.

Although the grassroots support that propelled the Obama campaign continue to be incredibly efficacious, and his consid-

erable personal appeal still dominates the electorate's mood, a protracted intra-party stand-off has already been immensely damaging for the democratic nominee and has only strengthened the position of his Republican rival by further narrowing down the modest lead the Democrats enjoyed over John McCain.

Although neither the international community nor the Americans themselves expect this veteran of the Vietnam War to bring about desired changes either globally or domestically he has already gone ahead extra miles after his boring, lacklustre nomination. The New York Times aptly describes him as "Bush, the sequel."

However, as the battle lines are more or less drawn, pending formal declaration of nomination in the party's national convention in the August next, the presumptive Republican nominee can be seen running neck to neck with Obama, his Democratic counterpart, in

opinion polls despite the Bush administration's abysmal ratings. Depending on which constituency he is addressing, McCain shrewdly tries to distance himself from the unpopular government, but his imperialistic impulses mirror the disastrous status quo the Americans want to break. He can be anything but a vehicle for the changes they are looking for.

Although he once styled himself as a maverick, McCain has later consciously drifted to the right in order to reassure the Republicans of his conservative credentials, the hallmark of Bush's neo-con dominated administration. This has, inter alia, made it easier to portray him as a symbol continuity -- which presumably will be the preferred angle of attack from the Democrats.

The raucous "feel good" rhetoric that the Democratic contender effortlessly intones is a reminder that the general level of politics in the US also necessitates empty catch phrases. Yet,

Obama is a thoughtful, intelligent young man with largely liberal instincts. He thinks that the US can be transformed into a less unpalatable superpower.

The contrast with Bush or McCain is stark enough for him to be acknowledged as a far more pleasant alternative for the presidency. He has no hangover about his African roots, neither does he nourish any racial preference. On the contrary, Obama staunchly upholds American values.

According to reporters such as Gwynne Dyer: "It is now a near certainty that Obama will be the next US president, although the media will try to maintain the illusion of a race for the White House. In clinching the party's informal nomination Obama was able to inspire a movement of the sort that had accounted for a groundswell of popular support for Robert Kennedy before he fell to an assassin's bullet forty years ago."

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Welcome to the White House?

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The US presidential election is a multi-dimensional exercise subsuming numerous determining factors and considerations. Obviously, the choice here is far from perfection. Yet, Obama is undoubtedly the best that can be hoped for in the circumstances,

although anyone who perceives him as a harbinger of epochal change is bound to be disappointed.

By now, Obama has leapt over one formidable hurdle with panache -- a historical achievement that elicited a hint of pride even from cold heart of Condoleezza Rice. Of course, the more crucial barrier is still to be overcome. Observers reckon: were the global population entitled to vote for the so-called leader of the free world, Obama would win by a landslide.

The world as well as the US is for change. That change is contingent upon the judgment of the Americans. If their decision five months hence is based on content of the candidates' characters and not the colour of their skins neither they nor Barack Obama will be disappointed.

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Congress's suicidal move



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

A charade is in progress to create a "factual" basis for helping the SP to make a U-turn on the deal through various "briefings." The UPA is trying to stitch together a shaky, unconvincing majority by recruiting "defector parties" like the Rashtriya Lok Dal and Janata Dal (Secular), besides the SP's 39 MPs.

on the Left parties. Their 59 MPs help the UPA comfortably cross the Lok Sabha's halfway mark of 272.

Yet, because the UPA lacks the courage to face an early election, it's negotiating a shady, opportunistic and deplorable political deal with the Samajwadi Party merely to keep itself afloat.

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Even if this new sleazy arrange-

ment survives, it's unlikely to ensure that the nuclear deal will be concluded soon. The deal is likely to run into obstacles in the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers' Group and the US Congress.

The UPA could end up losing both credibility and the deal -- just when inflation is running above 11 percent, and there's a growing threat from the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Dr. Singh never had, and still lacks, a democratic mandate for the deal, which will cause a radical shift in India's strategic and foreign policy. Last November, the Left gave him "an honourable exit" by allowing it to talk to the IAEA secretariat -- but on condition that the talks' outcome "will

be presented to" the UPA-Left deal committee "before it finalises its findings."

However, the government now wants to go to the Board regardless of the findings.

Dr. Singh's obstinacy has dismayed Congressmen. He's a political lightweight, who has never won a popular election. He's pushing the deal under US pressure because he believes that it'll leave a great legacy -- a strategic alliance with Washington -- comparable to the neo-liberal economic shift he executed in 1991.

Congress leaders are reluctantly falling in line with Dr. Singh because Ms. Sonia Gandhi seems to be supporting him. Unless she

corrects course, Ms. Gandhi will commit a grave error.

A UPA-SP alliance won't be merely tactical. It means strategically moving away from a reliable and principled force (the Left), which is a bulwark against Hindu communalism, to a party, which is compromised with it, and steeped in opportunism.

SP leaders have cut deals with shady business groups such as Sahara, and are involved in odious land transactions and tax seams.

The SP took an anti-communal stance in the 1990s. But in recent years it has hobnobbed with the Sangh Parivar party because of its fear of the Bahujan Samaj Party.

When in power in Uttar Pradesh, until a year ago, the SP ensured that a notification needed to bring Mr. LK Advani to trial in the Babri case would not be issued. It appointed Sangh supporters to high official positions, and lavished official hospitality on the BJP's national council members in 2006.

The SP will extract a high price for supporting the UPA, including

withdrawal of police investigations, dropping of ministers, and shelving of the women's reservation Bill. This could prove to be the kiss of death for the UPA.

Yet, the UPA is embarking on this course when it's not clear that the nuclear deal can be put through its next steps.

If and when the IAEA Board endorses the safeguards agreement, the NSG must grant India an unconditional exemption from its tough rules governing nuclear commerce. Then, the US Congress must ratify the 123 bilateral agreements.

The window of opportunity for completing these steps is fast slamming shut, if it hasn't closed.

Many US policy-makers and shapers like Ashley Tellis, an architect of the deal, Obama adviser Anthony Lake, and Congressman Gary Ackerman believe that it may be already too late.

Daryl Kimball of the Arms Control Association (US) says the deal is somewhere "between intensive care and the mortuary."

Asked recently whether the deal was dead, chairman of Senate Foreign Relations Committee Joseph Biden said: "I think it is... I think if it's not done by the time we go to the August recess, it will be awfully hard" to wrap up the deal this year.

The deal will encounter its greatest hurdle at the NSG. Many NSG members will question the unique exception being made for India to the global nuclear regime.

Indian negotiators hope they can obtain "a clear, clean and unconditional" exemption from the NSG, and that too by September. But the NSG's next meeting isn't scheduled before September 22. Several members, including Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden and Australia, are uncomfortable with the deal. China and Germany remain uncertain.

The NSG debate could be a prolonged one. Some members will probably lay down conditions. Many believe that major concessions have already been made because India can keep its

nuclear weapons.

It's therefore reasonable to ask that India pledge not to conduct another nuclear test or cease fissile material production -- as the major nuclear states have already done. Any condition will kill the deal.

Dr. Singh's supporters argue that the deal is a "litmus test" for India's "international credibility." But the world knows the compulsions of India's democratic politics don't favour the deal.

The Bush administration itself seems reconciled to a delay. On June 23, State Department spokesman Tom Casey said: "We'd like to believe that this deal... can and should be supported by whoever comes into office in January of 2009. But obviously, the next US government will have to... make their own decisions..."

Dr. Singh, then, is staking his reputation on a false premise. Pushing the deal will have terrible consequences. If the Congress has any sense, it should desist.

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