

Public access to information about candidates

The obligatory principle being impinged

It is reported that out of 46 candidates for mayoral election to four city corporations as many as 12 have not furnished details about themselves such as education (in case of city corporation election), source of income, immovable property, tax return, loans and liabilities, criminal records, if any, which was obligatory for them. According to law, if seven stipulated information are not furnished through affidavit the candidature is liable to be cancelled, but to our knowledge, none of such incomplete nomination papers have been rejected so far. In some of the information provided there is apparent fabrication, inconsistency and discrepancy and against few items the word non-applicable has been used. There is a veiled, or not so discreet, attempt at suppression of facts.

The question is why such nomination papers with incomplete affidavits were accepted at the RO's level? Either the returning officers have failed in their duty or the EC is turning a blind eye. For returning officers, it must be a matter of an hour or two to verify the truth about the candidates' statements. It seems to us that the machinery is not working as it should have. It is now, therefore, incumbent upon the EC to check on the accuracy or otherwise of the particulars furnished and exercise its writ to cancel defaulting candidatures.

There is a public perception that the old discredited alleged criminals and corrupt people are creeping in to stage a comeback through the elections. The CA has himself expressed a concern and directed district officials to stand guard against such possibility. In this context, the need for a close scrutiny of the nomination papers, also made mandatory in terms of the latest legal requirement, could hardly be overstated. Rather than having the ACC do a post-facto investigation into the affidavits and the EC taking action in light of the finding to invalidate an incumbent's election, as has been suggested, it is much more practical and prudent to screen out those from the race who are found to have concealed information in the affidavit.

All concerned must strive to hold free, fair and credible elections as an auspicious precursor to an impeccable general election.

Mandela - a living legend

Leaders have so much to learn from him

MANDELA'S turned 90 on 18th of July, and the world at large celebrated with enthusiasm the accomplishments of a man whose life has been a gift to the world - and whom many unhesitatingly refer to as a living legend.

A man is known not by how long he lives but what he does with his life. And a life that is spent in ameliorating the sufferings of his fellow human beings is a life well spent. His life, in spite of the vicissitudes that he had to suffer, has not only been well spent, there is perhaps no one in living memory that can claim to have influenced several generations of men and women in one's lifetime. His greatest accomplishment has been to touch not only the hearts of his followers but also his opponents who had incarcerated him for 27 long years.

Everyone knows Mandela as the man who overthrew racism, but he also epitomised the very essence of human existence that thrives on the idea that rightful aspirations of the people cannot be suppressed by force. And his greatest teaching that the world can learn from is his gift of forgiveness. But for a man like Mandela, a country like South Africa -- a country that had seen a brutal minority perpetrate the worst form of indignity on the black majority, and supported, regrettably, by some powerful countries claiming to be protagonists of democracy, freedom and majority rule -- would have been torn apart were it not for his call to the people of South Africa to forgive and forget.

He fully understood that conflict between peoples and nations was not an accident but the harmful consequence of a way of life based on certain philosophy with convoluted rationale. And to achieve peace that idea, that philosophy had to be tackled with reason -- to expose its fallacy. And that was what he did during his life long anti-apartheid struggle.

Not only did he seek to reconcile the blacks and whites of South Africa, a very good example he set for leaders of some countries who cannot decide when to let go of power. He could have gone on, without any remonstrance from his people, as South Africa's president, but he had the sagacity to recognise when to relinquish the post and move on.

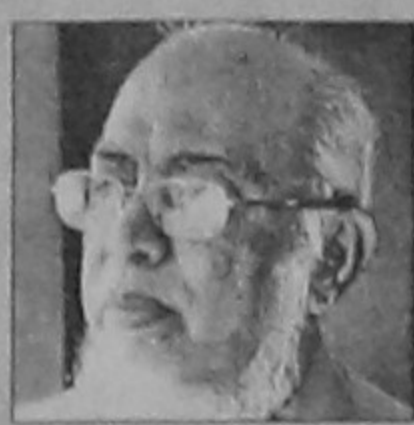
Even today Mandela remains the most vocal critic of injustice, inequality and bias. And he is never wanting in speaking out against aggression as he did against the US invasion of Iraq or more recently against a fellow African, Robert Mugabe.

We wish Mandela a happy journey. May he continue to provide the world the moral leadership.

The merchants of democracy and human rights

PERSPECTIVES

Ever since, wherever this sole superpower intervened, her principal concern had been that of those patent attributes of modern civilisation. She seldom tired of carrying her merchandise, i.e. democracy, freedom and human rights, to dump in far-off lands even if there were few takers of her brand abroad. She relentlessly pushed ahead with her mantras, notwithstanding the risk that their hollowness would soon be found out.



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

AFTER having taken over the "white man's burden" from once-imperial Britain, it was America's monopoly to trade democracy, the rule of law and, of course, human rights with the "lesser breeds" by occupying their lands, capturing their resources and establishing hegemony over those countries.

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It's not surprising that any country, from Vietnam to Afghanistan to Iraq, which had

been under US occupation, reported some of the worst travesties of freedom and abuses of human rights. As far back as in 1971, a young Navy lieutenant, and a leader of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, in a testimony before the Senator Foreign Relations Committee put up a harrowing picture of war crimes committed in Vietnam.

He also testified that those were not isolated incidents, but were committed on a day-to-day basis in the full knowledge of the commanding officers of the perpetrator of the crimes.

The obscure Navy lieutenant of 1971, now Senator John Kerry -- also a Democrat candidate for US presidency in 2004 -- told the committee on behalf of over 150 honourably discharged and some very highly decorated veterans that, at times, they had personally raped, cut off ears, chopped off heads, taped portable telephones to genitals and turned up the power, cut off limbs, blown up

bodies, randomly shot at civilians, razed villages in a fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan, shot cattle and dogs for fun, poisoned food stocks, and generally ravaged the countryside of South Vietnam in addition to the usual devastation caused by war.

That was in Vietnam more than three decades ago. Then came Afghanistan where, in a war on terror soon after September 11, 2001, reckless arrest and illegal detention of anyone suspected of having Taliban or al-Qaida links became routine practice of the US occupation forces.

An unknown number of Pakistanis captured on suspected Taliban/al-Qaida links continued to be held as detainees in Sharbaghan alone. However, the total number of Pakistani detainees in all facilities reportedly added up to almost 500.

They were neither convicted nor charged, and were held only on the suspicion that they would be able to provide information

regarding Osama or Mullah Umar. They were never given a legal hearing.

The US forces operating in Afghanistan also arbitrarily detained civilians in separate detention facilities at Bagram, Kowdhar and Jalalabad military bases. The frequent arrest of the civilians and their prolonged detention without informing the next of kin is normal practice of the occupation authorities.

Apparently the victims of faulty intelligence, all prisoners languishing in the detention facilities in Afghanistan have absolutely no contact with any outside agencies or human rights groups.

Worse still, some prisoners from these facilities are shifted to Guantanamo -- the US's gulag -- by air from Pakistan's Kohat. At Guantanamo, the torture stories and denial of legal facilities are yet more horrifying. The data collected through private sources and journalists reporting from the vicinity of Camp X-Ray in Cuba are

a sordid tale of prisoner abuse by their "democratic" captors. And it was all in the name of democracy, rule of law and human rights!

Now, there is Iraq to undergo the same ordeals again in the name of freedom for people who suffered under the autocratic regime of Saddam Hussein. In Iraq, the US held 8,000 prisoners in 14 different jails -- three of which, Abu Ghraib, Camp Cropper and Camp Bucca, are prominent for sheer brutality and bestiality -- which all held inmates for extended periods.

It was in one of those infamous prisons, Abu Ghraib, that photographs clearly depicting inhuman behaviour towards Iraqi prisoners were shot and then leaked by a compassionate US sergeant to the American media, which caused international uproar against the US -- the trader of human rights -- and created unprecedented outrage in the Arab world.

Donald Rumsfeld, the defence secretary at the time, apparently caught unawares, mumbled that abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners was an aberration by a few soldiers, and were not a reflection of American values. But, almost at the same time, BBC televised photographs taken from an Egyptian newspaper, Al Wafd, showing US soldiers in Iraq shooting civilians from a helicopter.

Following the contradiction

between Rumsfeld's claim and the reality on the ground, the defence secretary had to go through a six-hour grilling session in his testimony before the Senate Armed Forces Committee. Over the prisoners' scandal in Iraq, while some Democrats on the committee called for his sacking, the Republicans duly backed him -- as had the president himself.

Rumsfeld took the only viable course open to him: to tender an apology accepting "full responsibility for what he said," but remained circumspect on the question of resignation. It was, of course, followed up with routine measures such as investigation and court-martialing, ostensibly to mollify American pride at being "found out." But prisoner abuse in Iraq is too colossal to be hidden under rugs, and its miasma too strong to be suppressed.

The hollowness of the freedom and human rights the Americans hawk around the world is indeed synonymous with their military presence in an occupied country.

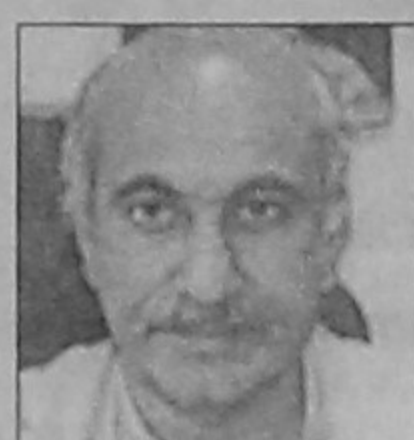
Can there be an end to this occupation? Even if it ends, the leash will still be held by the same occupiers on some pretence or other. That's what American freedom or liberation is -- as envisaged by Bush's far right neo-conservative administration.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

Inflation hits Delhi politics

BYLINE

There is inflation in the political bazaar. Dr. Manmohan Singh can now be held responsible for both economic and political inflation, a rare achievement. In such a volatile market, no sale is ever complete until delivery. Mulayam Singh promised 39 MPs. On Friday in Delhi only 26 MPs attended the party meeting. It is possible that some MPs may have been afflicted with Mayawati-induced stomach upsets, and a few with heartache; and they may indeed turn up to vote behind the leader on the evening of July 22. Sometimes 72 hours can be even longer than a week in politics.



M. J. AKBAR

IT was as easy, to esteem Chaudhry Charan Singh as to underestimate him. I knew him reasonably well during the critical days when he brought down the Janata government in 1979 and won the undying contempt of urban India, which had invested so much passion in the first non-Congress government in Delhi. At one level, he had charming simplicity. There was nothing he enjoyed more, after work, than playing ludo with his wife.

But he also had a sharp self-interest in the rural, Jat-dominated constituency of west Uttar Pradesh. Since he was the pre-eminent leader of the Jats, the line between individual and collective was often blurred.

In his mind, what was good for rural India was good for him, which is fair enough; but the reverse held equally true. What was good for him became ipso facto good for rural India. He had the rustic virtue of trust; but in the end he became a victim of the rustic vice of naiveté.

He broke the Morarji Desai government and became prime minister on the basis of support offered by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. But the Congress stabbed him in the back soon after he stabbed Morarji Desai in the front. Mrs. Gandhi withdrew support, and Chaudhry

Charan Singh became the first, and only, prime minister who could not summon a session of parliament.

Three decades later, in one of those U-turns for which history is famous, his son Ajit Singh's single-digit strength in parliament could help keep Mrs. Gandhi's daughter-in-law, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, in power. A sweetener has been spread before Ajit Singh. Lucknow airport has been named after his father. There are many reasons for remembering Charan Singh. This is possibly the worst. His name is now inextricably linked to a political bribe.

Given the track record, Ajit Singh should not be surprised if the airport is renamed again if things do not go as expected.

If a lollipop was sufficient to appease Ajit Singh, he would have announced his support to Dr. Manmohan Singh's nuclear deal without any delay. His hesitation, and willingness to socialise with distinctly anti-nuclear deal politicians indicate that he has a little more on his shopping list.

Since his political outfit is confined to west Uttar Pradesh, he can never become chief minister unless he carves out a separate state. He wants a new one to be called Harit Pradesh.

Shibu Soren from Jharkhand, with five MPs, is demanding a place in the cabinet with the lucrative coal portfolio, currently in the hands of a Congress fundraiser. Soren was dropped from Manmohan Singh's Cabinet for a fairly dramatic reason. He was accused of being involved in a secretary's murder. He has been exonerated and wants his job back, with some back pay if possible.

The Telangana Rashtra Samiti wanted a separate Telangana, and became anti-nuclear when there was no response from the Union government. We have already witnessed the blatant intervention of corporate interests in the survival of the government.

The unedifying sight of convicted murderers turning up to save or scupper the nuclear deal will doubtless fuel editorials worldwide on the mature state of Indian democracy.

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is possible that some MPs may have been afflicted with Mayawati-induced stomach upsets, and a few with heartache; and they may indeed turn up to vote behind the leader on the evening of July 22. Sometimes 72 hours can be even longer than a week in politics.

Given such intense bargaining, the price of victory for the government might be far higher than the temporary despair of defeat. There is already an SMS doing the rounds, which does not make pleasant reading for those in power: "Wanted: convicts, murderers, mafia, jailbirds, criminals 2 vote 4 TrustVote. Parties need u if r any of the above. U will get CM's post, ministership, airport named after u father etc. Good citizens need not apply."

In times of meltdown, we thirst for a glimpse into the future, and track it along the seam lines of what politicians can do. There is a much surer way of finding out. Check out what politicians cannot do, and you will discover what they will do.

Eliminate the impossible, and the possible begins to define itself. Sentiment has little to do with power play. Likes and dislikes mean very little at crunch time. Politics is about the protection

and pursuit of interests. Of course, self-serving politicians will always clothe self-interest in the garb of national interest, but that cloth has worn thin.

The Left could never accept a strategic alliance with the United States, which is at the heart of the proposed relationship. It is a concept in which India becomes the eastern fortress of the "New Middle East," an expanded arc that stretches from the Nile to the Ganges, and includes all the volatile regions of the Muslim world in which America has a deep vested interest because of energy. America does not hide this interest.

India, including its waters, will become a region from which American forces can operate if they feel the need to do so. Obviously, this need will arise only rarely, but when it does India will be an undeclared base; supporting forward operations.

War is not only about fighting; it is also about logistics. The sop that is being thrown out by Dr. Singh is that an American strategic alliance will create a balance of power between India and China.

Who is right is less relevant than the fact that these views are incompatible. The alliance, acceptable till the line was breached, is now untenable. Dr. Singh and Mrs. Sonia Gandhi want to leave an indelible American mark on the Congress Party, with consequences that will change the organisation's fundamental ethos completely. That is their privilege.

A substantial section of the Congress does not agree, but is voiceless in a party where debate has been extinguished.

Mulayam Singh's decision to support the Congress has nothing to do with the nuclear deal. His compulsions are regional and

personal. Mayawati has driven him out of power in the only state where he can be in power. Defeat has unnerved him. The Congress, bed-ridden but not quite dead, makes a perfect ally, because it is too frail to make an independent bid for power.

When it comes to a division of Uttar Pradesh's 80 seats, Mulayam Singh will bargain with bare knuckles. The Congress will be lucky if Mulayam offers the party ten seats and relents to 12. Local luminaries like Salman Khursheed could discover that they have been sliced out since Mulayam will not concede a constituency like Farrukhabad.

Once the Congress moves out of 80% of UP's seats it will never be able to return, for its remaining cadre will abandon the party. This suits Mulayam Singh even better, just as it suits Lalu Yadav in Bihar to restrict Congress to four or five seats. The Congress cannot revive if it sells long to buy short.

The short-term benefits for the Congress are dubious; the long term suggests disaster. The Congress will effectively eliminate itself from the spine of the nation, the Indo-Gangetic belt.

If, five years or more later, the electorate tires of regional parties and seeks a national alternative, the only national party in Uttar Pradesh left standing will be the BJP.

Dr. Manmohan Singh began with a majority of nearly a hundred. In four years, by becoming a one-point Bush-entranced prime minister, he has reduced that majority to a variable that could easily slip into a minority. We will soon see who wins the numbers game. What we do know already is that the government has lost its credibility.

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Barack, please pick Hillary

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Hillary Clinton not only finished second in the Democratic primary this year, the contest was a virtual tie. After finding her voice during the middle of the campaign, Hillary won more primaries during the second half of the contest than Obama did. With Hillary on the ticket, Obama will clinch the support of the women and many working class white voters. As Obama limped to nomination victory, one could argue that Hillary had earned the right to be the vice-president because of her strong and close finish.

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

CONVENTIONAL wisdom has it that Barack Obama should not pick Hillary Clinton as his running mate, unless he is trailing so badly in the polls that without Hillary he cannot win.

This may be conventional thinking, but there is not much wisdom in it. It is clear that Obama picked Hillary only because he could not win the women and working class white votes without her, who will be in the catbird seat? You pick your VP because you want to, not because you have to. If Hillary is the

reason Barack wins the general election, then his tenure will become a co-presidency.

The current thinking is that Barack will pick an experienced (read older) white male. The names most mentioned are Senator Joe Biden of Delaware, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (for his knowledge of foreign affairs), former Georgia Senator Sam Nunn (for his armed services credentials) and Senator Evan Bayh of Indiana (a former Hillary supporter who will not upstage Obama).

If Joe Biden is picked, the

Republicans will remind voters that during his 1988 presidential campaign, one of Biden's speeches ("why am I the first person from my family to go to college?") was plagiarised from one of British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock's speeches!

If Sam Nunn is picked, John McCain's age disadvantage will be somewhat neutralised. Nunn will be 70 in September. Surely, there must be better criteria for choosing a VP candidate than picking someone who is too boring to threaten the president, such as Evan Bayh!

Critics say that if Hillary is

picked as VP, there will be three presidents in the White House -- Hillary and Bill being the other two. They may have a point as far as Bill Clinton is concerned.

Hillary campaign insiders privately admit that Bill hurt his wife's campaign, which had decided to write off the South Carolina primary. But Bill insisted that she compete. It was in South Carolina that Bill played the race card and compared Obama to Jesse Jackson to a chorus of angry protests from Obama supporters. Bill's gaffes also hurt Hillary in Pennsylvania and North Carolina.

It was clear that Bill was a loose cannon who could not be controlled. After all, Bill Clinton, one of the most brilliant politicians of the twentieth century, was a two-term president -- the first Democrat elected to multiple terms in office since Franklin D. Roosevelt. As such, he commanded respect; he did not like to be told what to do.

In an interview before Super Tuesday, February 5, Barack Obama praised Ronald Reagan as a

transformational president. Bill Clinton was irked because Obama never praised him by name.

One could argue that it was difficult for Obama to praise Bill Clinton without also indirectly praising his rival, Hillary Clinton, because Hillary claimed to have been intimately involved in Bill Clinton's White House, especially in areas such as healthcare, the peace processes in Northern Ireland and Bosnia.

Although he promised Obama his full support, Bill Clinton is yet to make a public appearance with Barack Obama. Bill honestly believes that Hillary is a better candidate and should have won the nomination. He feels that Obama is praising his peace and prosperity presidency and giving him respect now because Obama needs his help to get elected president.

Some women are also being mentioned as Obama's running mate: Obama supporters Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri and

Kathleen Sebelius of Kansas. It will be strange indeed if a female VP candidate is picked whose name is not Hillary Clinton.

After defeating the late prime minister Ted Heath for party chairman in the first round in 1975, Margaret Thatcher picked the person who finished second to her in the second round, Willie Whitelaw, as the deputy leader of the Conservative Party and, four years later, the deputy prime minister.

After a bitter primary fight in 1960, John F. Kennedy offered the VP slot to Lyndon Johnson, who surprisingly accepted. Although George H. W. Bush had called Ronald Reagan's economic policies "voodoo economics" during the 1980 campaign, Reagan picked Bush, who had finished second in the primaries, as his VP. The framers of the constitution were of the opinion that the candidate finishing second in the primary should be the VP.

Hillary Clinton not only finished second in the Democratic primary

this year, the contest was a virtual tie. After finding her voice during the middle of the campaign, Hillary won more primaries during the second half of the contest than Obama did.

With Hillary on the ticket, Obama will clinch the support of the women and many working class white voters. As Obama limped to nomination victory, one could argue that Hillary had earned the right to be the vice-president because of her strong and close finish.

Obama has an opportunity to make history twice over. If he were to choose Hillary as his VP, America will cross two hurdles simultaneously -- the nation will have its first African-American president and its first woman vice-president.

Sure, there will be questions about vetting Hillary and, by extension, Bill Clinton, whose worldwide monetary transactions for the Clinton library could reveal embarrassing facts, a la revelations of Geraldine Ferraro's husband's

shady dealings when she was picked for VP by Walter Mondale in 1984. But Bill will be twice removed from Obama and will do less harm.

Some worry whether Obama will be able to stand up to the two Clintons. If Obama lacks such fortitude to take on the Clintons, he has no business running for president.

Although national polls show Barack Obama leading John McCain by 3 to 7 points, statewide polls are more revealing. Except for Florida, Obama leads McCain in all swing states such as Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin. What is more shocking for the Republicans, Obama is ahead of McCain in traditional Republican strongholds such as Virginia, North Carolina, Idaho and Missouri.

It appears that Barack Obama does not need Hillary Clinton to win the US presidency. That is why he should pick her to be his vice-president.

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