

Is the battle against corruption lost?

The ACC chief, whom I still revere, will be hard-pressed to explain to those whom he lectured, travelling from city to city, to instil antipathy against corruption in the mind-set of the young and adult alike. His bureau's actions or inactions have put a burden on the conscience of many of his admirers. Is the battle against corruption lost?

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

BY the time this piece appears in print, Begum Khaleida Zia and her son Tarique Rahman could be out of jail through, of course, "due process of law," as repeatedly asserted by their followers.

Begum Zia presided over the most despicable administration this country has ever endured. Her family members, especially her two brothers and two sons, became the symbol of corruption and abuse of the state authority bestowed on their sister and mother, respectively.

When she was only eleven days away from allegedly rigging the scheduled January 22 general election, the so-called 1/11 occurred. Her opponents along with the general people, except for the die-hard supporters of the

alliance government and their beneficiaries, heaved a natural sigh of relief.

Although the main function of this administration was to assist the reconstituted EC to hold the general election with a genuine voter list, the government embarked on a self-appointed agenda under a reconstituted ACC to punish the corrupts and promulgated ordinance under emergency rule to meet that end.

However, from the beginning, the actions of the ACC and the government in dealing with the politicians of the two major political parties gave rise to various hypotheses as regards the motives of the government.

As the anti-corruption drive gained speed, the main wrath of this government appeared to fall on Sheikh Hasina. After her arrest, she was sued one after another on

charges of extortion and corruption, while the immediate past PM whose regime has been marked by the biggest plundering of the national wealth and abuse of authority, remained virtually unscathed.

Begum Zia's brother, who was allegedly only second to his own nephew in corruption, was not even on the big list of suspected corrupts. Her second brother was arrested a few weeks ago and was released on bail in a short time. However, the stories of wanton corruption appeared in a number of highly credible print media right after his arrest, with vivid descriptions of what and how he did towards making many of our national institutions financial failures. However, charge against him is as vague as many who have already been convicted on the basis of accumulating wealth

disproportionate to income.

Naturally, the highest number of cases was filed against Tarique Rahman, but so far he is facing no trial. Five cases of extortion against him have been stayed by the HC and there was no news of appeal by the state against the stay order. Quite to the contrary, when the extortion case against Sheikh Hasina was stayed by the HC, the then addition AG (current AG) appeared in front of the TV cameras in a melancholy mood and appealed to the Appellate Division, resulting in its overturning in no time.

Recently, Tarique has made a record-setting history by securing bail, not in one or two, but in five cases in a single day, including Zia orphanage trust case in which his mother has allegedly diverted money (2.1 crores) from PM's relief fund to so-called Zia orphanage trust run by him, which he has allegedly misappropriated in its entirety.

The principal counsel of the ACC could not attend the bail hearing as he was ill and the HC did not have time to waste by adjourning the proceedings, since

this was not the case of an ordinary person! That is not all. He has added one more laurel to his credit by securing bail directly from the Appellate Division in the bone-chilling case of sharing Tk 21 crore bribery booty with his erstwhile crony following the murder of Humayun Kabir Sabbir.

In this case, too, reportedly neither did the AG attend nor oppose the bail. This is what the authority claims to be "due process of law." A very similar "due process of law" took place when H. M. Ershad was acquitted in corruption cases one after the other, after Tarique and Babar went to his house and made a deal for JP to join the four-party alliance.

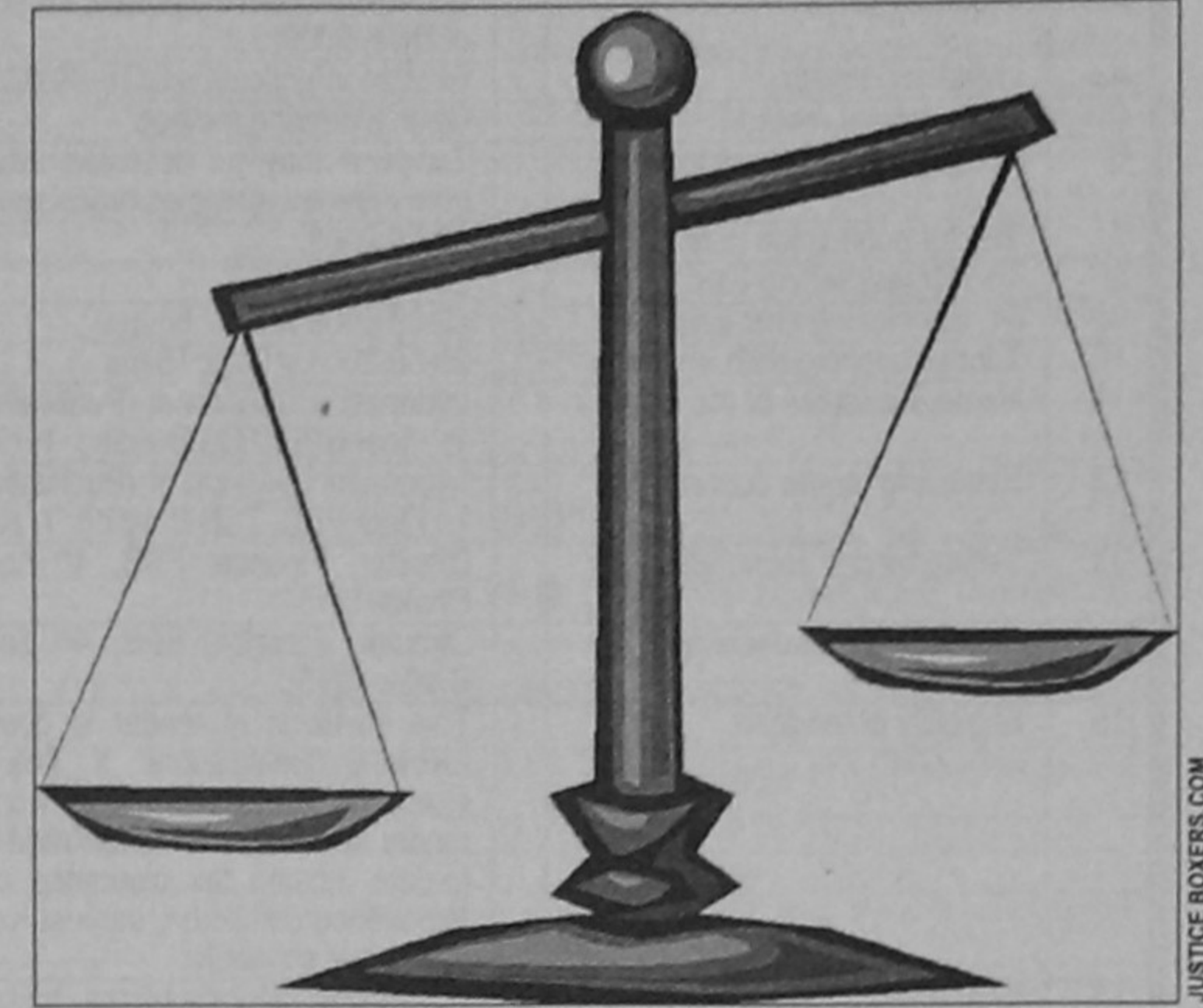
To make matters worse, this "due process of law" was initiated in the aftermath of the killing of an innocent citizen as a result of mayhem caused by BNP thugs in the street. Since there was no arrest, even when emergency rule is in force, this is a clear precedent for the appeasement of violence and terrorism that carries a grim message to the nation about the future course of politics. In a corollary of the "due process of law,"

BNP secretary general's son has also been granted bail.

BNP has already claimed bail as synonymous to acquittal, white-washing all sins, and has challenged the acting AL secretary general to prove that Tarique Rahman is guilty of any misdeeds, albeit it is the responsibility of ACC and the government to prove the charges of the dozen or so cases pending against him.

If members of the Zia family could be out of jail, then no one could disagree with AL acting secretary general when he said: "If champions of corruption are released, the government has no moral or legal right to keep detained the leaders and workers of other parties arrested on so-called corruption charges."

Those who so far have been convicted were mostly on the vague charge of "accumulating wealth disproportionate to income" or some other relatively minor charge. At this stage, it seems impossible for the government to counter the argument that all these arrests, convictions, and bails were guided by the government's discriminatory policy



Tilting towards the corrupt?

of who they want to eliminate from the political scene.

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and adult alike. His bureau's actions or inactions have put a burden on the conscience of many of his admirers. Is the battle against corruption lost?

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Hyperinflation: 1.1 million percent!

In his characteristic hauteur Robert Mugabe disparaged the power of ballot by saying: "We are not going to give up our country for a mere X on a ballot. How can a ballpoint pen fight with a gun?" His ranting pales into insignificance in comparison to the devastation he has wrought on the Zimbabwean economy.

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

THE other day I came across the information that our inflation rate has crossed into double digit. Considering the vicious price hike one can easily surmise that inflationary pressure on our economy is rising. For a nation of over 150 million people the statistics is vital. While we have millions in population Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe has it in economic plight, with hyperinflation crossing the million mark. It is now 1.1 million percent!

Why should it happen to Zimbabwe, a country nearly thrice the size of Bangladesh, with an area of 390,580 sq. km., and with a much smaller population of 12 million people? The country is rich in mineral resources, with coal, chromium, asbestos, gold, nickel and copper.

Zimbabwe, once Southern Rhodesia and a British colony, came to international spotlight with the unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) by its white minority ruler Ian Smith in 1965. Mr. Smith defiantly carried on for over 14 years, beating international sanctions till a negotiated settlement returned power to the black majority in 1979.

Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) leader Robert Mugabe was installed as the first prime minister of the new nation Zimbabwe. With a vibrant and diversified economy Zimbabwe started as a bright promise in Africa. But the leader blighted the prospect. Right from the beginning he showed an unrelenting trait of bullying the opposition. The first to submit was Joshua Nkomo of Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). He became the president in 1987, and since then he has trashed many a poll.

The latest being the one from which he scared his opponent

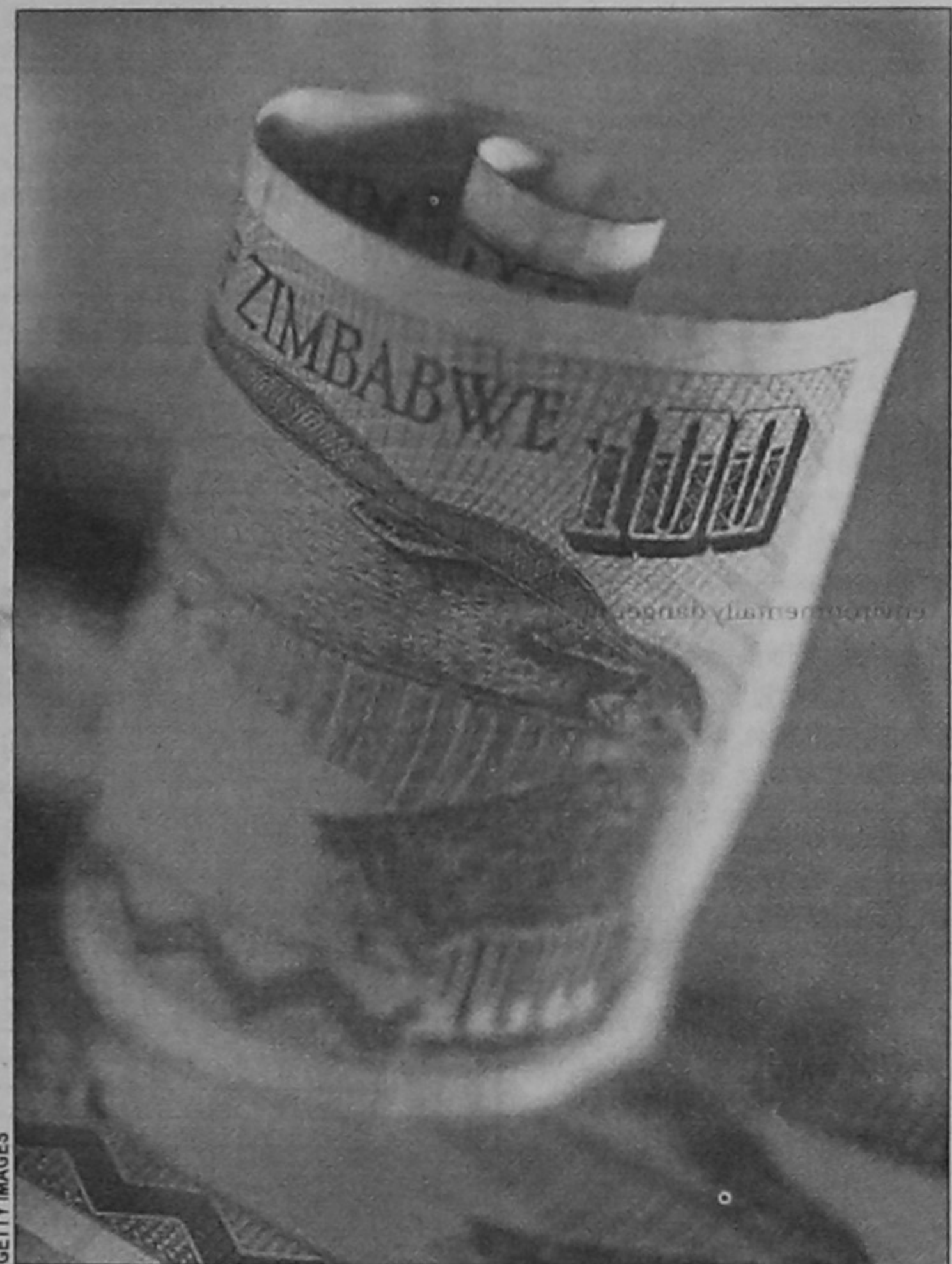
Morgan Tsvangirai of MDC into quitting the polls. In his characteristic hauteur Robert Mugabe disparaged the power of ballot by saying: "We are not going to give up our country for a mere X on a ballot. How can a ballpoint pen fight with a gun?" His ranting pales into insignificance in comparison to the devastation he has wrought on the Zimbabwean economy.

During the last five years Zimbabwe has experienced a catastrophic collapse of its economy, presided over by the authoritarian and inept rule of its president. The rate of inflation was 32% in 1998, which kept going up and up and at the end of June it stood at staggering 1.1 million percent. The short list of ills that set the rot includes reckless spending, thuggish land seizures, disruption of farm output and flight of foreign capital.

As a result of the misrule the economy started contracting, stagnation set in, and economic growth and national income fell. The Zimbabwean government resorted to printing money to finance mounting national debt. The currency started losing its value, causing prices to rise. The cost of production was more than the prices the goods fetched. Shortage of supply was the natural outcome.

Government price controls further compounded the crisis. Suppliers lost the incentive to supply at government rate. Shortage became even worse. The Zimbabwean government's answer to the crisis was to print more and more money. The inflation became uncontrollable and soon it reached 1.1 million.

The economy contracted to the level of 1953. Maize production fell by three-quarters. A country which was an exporter of food was surviving on food aid. Half the country faces food shortage. One quarter of



"Millionaire" inflation.

the population has fled Zimbabwe. A national hero that Mugabe is responds by predictably finding foreign hands behind the crisis.

Another hyperinflation in a different time and in a different country produced a national leader who plunged the world into a conflict that took millions of lives. Germany surprisingly surrendered when the war was deadlocked in the Maginot Line. It brought the end of World War I. Many Germans saw a Zionist hand behind it. A feeling of national betrayal kept on simmering till it found voice in incandescent haranguing by Adolph Hitler.

Much to the woe of Germany, the armistice signed placed a heavy load of reparation payment on it. The post-war German government was reluctant to pass on the burden to the German people. Germany faltered with reparation payment and France retaliated by seizing the industrial area of Ruhr.

The German economy fell into

crisis, and was forced to pay more for its imported goods. The government, hit by shortage of funds, started printing money. There was a time when Germans had to buy a loaf of bread with a sack-load of money. The inflation stood at 3.25 million percent during the worst time of the crisis. German angst was looking for a leader to fulminate against national betrayal and the foreign bullies. Adolph Hitler became the Fuehrer!

Hyperinflation is the offspring of misrule. Profligate and tyrannical rulers subordinate economy to political will. It is the vehicle they ride to perpetuate their personal rule. They live desperately. And desperation knows no discretion. The end should always serve them. If that means driving the country to the brink, let it be. But the economy has many tongues. They speak of the woes of misrule.

Syed Maqsood Jamil is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

To dream a little dream of us

Obama's Democratic version of the Dream focuses less on celebrating individual success and more on protecting the vulnerable. But Obama also believes something that McCain does not: that the Dream itself is endangered. Obama's running mate, Joe Biden, said the dream "feels as if it's slowly slipping away."

ELLIS COSE

IT was not Ronald Reagan's "Morning again in America," the times are too dicey for that. But the Republican National Convention, no less than the Democratic one that just ended, was a showcase for dreams -- and arguments about how to make them real.

The Republicans did their best to match the Democrats' soaring rhetoric. Though, on that front, they were challenged. It was hard to imagine Cindy McCain evoking the fervour of Michelle Obama, or Tim Pawlenty and Arnold Schwarzenegger generating the drama and heat of back-to-back Clintons.

And as compelling as John McCain's own life story is, he will be hard-pressed to top the oratory of Barack Obama -- whose acceptance speech was all the more poignant for coming on the 45th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legendary discourse on a dream whose fulfillment some see in Obama himself.

But this contest is not about who is the best orator; it is more about who is the best dream merchant. Make no mistake: both candidates, and both parties, have dreams to sell. Or, more accurately, they have different versions of the same dream -- the American Dream.

In the end, the election is likely to go to the candidate who best argues his dream is the more authentic -- and his approach the most American.

Both candidates claim they are children of the Dream. Both are eloquent in offering up their versions of what it did for them, and of what it can do for other Americans.

McCain's Republican version emphasises toughness, individuality and loyalty -- to country, to friends -- that trumps virtually anything else. The Republican

convention, themed "Country First," will wrap that vision in an American flag.

It will roll out the narrative of an authentic war hero fighting a battle to lead an America that, while enduring some hard times, is basically sound. It will also be a celebration of the doggedness and ingenuity of the American people -- people who, in McCain's opinion, are smart enough to know that a young man with a silver tongue but meagre experience cannot lead them into a brilliant morning.

Obama's Democratic version of the Dream focuses less on celebrating individual success and more on protecting the vulnerable. But Obama also believes something that McCain does not: that the Dream itself is endangered.

Obama's running mate, Joe Biden, said the dream "feels as if it's slowly slipping away."

Many Obama supporters share his concern and think that dramatic measures are required. As Bernard Anderson (an assistant secretary of Labour in the Clinton administration and an Obama delegate) put it, "The fundamental process of upward mobility has broken down."

Within seconds of Obama's speech in Denver, the McCain camp blasted out what it deemed to be a corrective of the misleading claims Obama had made. Among them was Obama's statement that McCain didn't believe American families were hurting -- that in McCain's view, the country had made "great progress economically."

In the longer version of that interview, McCain dutifully noted that the nation's great economic progress was of "no comfort to families now that are facing these tremendous economic challenges." Only after that caveat did he add: "the fundamentals of America's economy are strong.

We're the greatest exporter, the greatest importer, the greatest innovator, the greatest producer, still the greatest economic engine in the world."

He also acknowledged that times were tough and that families in small Pennsylvania towns were aware of that. To McCain, he was not out of touch, as Obama said, but very much in sync with the feelings of the public. The larger point was that the Dream was strong and that his policies would make it even stronger.

Like all campaigns, this one will be not just about competing dreams and proposals. It will be about character, maturity and leadership, and how those things are measured, about ground operations in battleground states, and who has the strongest.

It will feature all matter of attacks and counterattacks, and smears by surrogates careful to keep a certain distance from the candidate they favour. And it will induce endless debate about that which arguably should not matter at all -- race, age, depth of religious

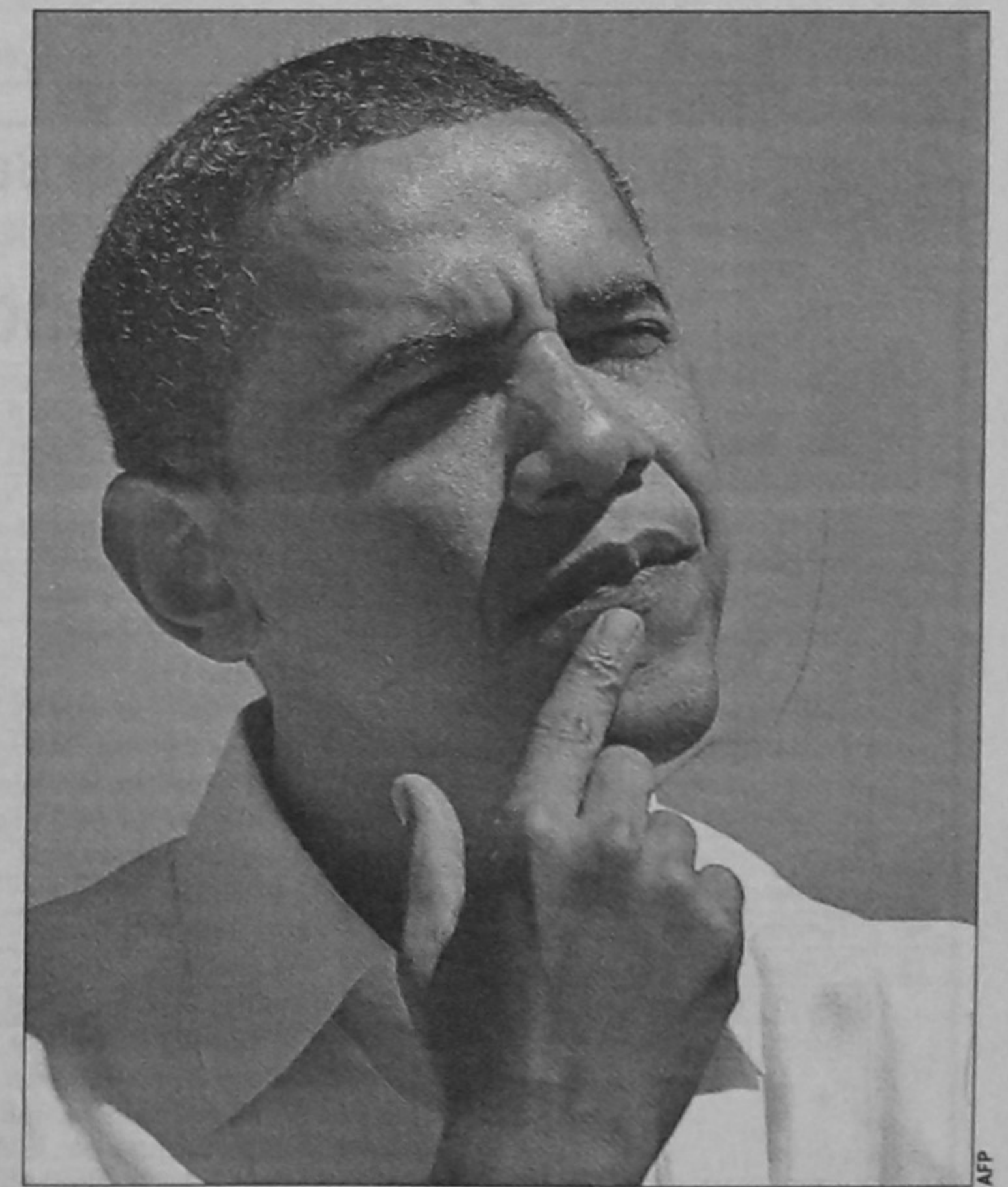
beliefs and feelings about subjects ranging from bowling to gays.

But in an interesting way -- and for all the noise in the background -- this may be the purest election since 1980, when Reagan reduced the essence of it to a simple question: "Are you better off than you were four years ago?"

McCain and Obama have fundamentally different takes on how to keep the Dream alive for the millions who are hurting and fearful of the future. In Denver, Obama made his best effort to date to explain why he is right. Last week McCain had his chance.

In the next two months, political operatives will blow a lot of smoke in voters' eyes in an attempt to distract us from what is truly important. The way out of such confusion now, just as in 1980, is to do what Reagan did: make the contest about which candidate can best help Americans realise their defining dream. Then everyone votes accordingly.

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Dreaming bigger?

'The Chan pimple' or 'How to be Pope'

A friend called me yesterday to tell me he had writer's block. He was writing something he was "almost certain would be a major bestseller," but had come to a complete halt. "How far have you got?" I asked.

"I'm just working on the title at the moment," he said.

"Yeah, but how much of the story have you written?"

"I'm just working on the title at the moment," he repeated.

"You mean you haven't written anything? Well, what's the title?"

"That's just it. I can't think of one. But I know it's going to be a major bestseller. I have a feeling in

my gut."

I told him that unless he stopped wasting my time, I would use my boot to give him a feeling in another part of his anatomy, one which happens to rhyme with "gut."

A thriller writer I know told me to generate titles using the Robert Ludlum three-word trick. The first word is "the", the second is a random name, and the third is a random noun. Ludlum had big hits with *The Bourne Identity*, *The Ostermann Weekend*, *The Holcroft Covenant* and so on.

Incidentally, Mr. Ludlum's most recent book is *The Bancroft*

Strategy, which is interesting since he's been dead for seven years and his writing style has improved dramatically since his death.

Yet I found that the three-word trick works fine for Western names, but fails miserably with Asian ones. Would you buy a thriller called *The Chan Pimple? The Kumar Weiner? The Shriramacharitamana Deodorant?* No, me neither.

The other option is to simply be ultra-creative, but competition is tough. *The Big Book of Lesbian Horse Stories* came out in 2003. Last year I saw a book called

Monograph of the Horny Sponges which must be incredibly dull or utterly fascinating; no middle ground there.

Bookseller magazine organises contests for the oddest titles of real books. Among recent contenders: *Living With Crazy Buttocks*, *How Green Were the Nazis?* and *The Stray Shopping Carts of Eastern North America: A Guide to Field Identification*.

I'm pleased to say that there was an Asian entry: *A General Analysis of the Counting Methods of Chopped Yarrow Stalks in the Book of Changes*.

Rural Postmen and Their Cancellation Numbers, *Bombproof Your Horse* and *American Bottom Archeology*.

But I reckon academia produces the most bizarre titles. Some appear to have been written for extremely small audiences, such as *Male Genitalia of Butterflies of the Balkan Peninsula*.

Some one hopes have been written for extremely small audiences, such as *Knitting with Dog Hair: Better a Sweater from a Dog You Know and Love than A Sheep You'll Never Meet*.

And I know of one book which appears to have been written for

only one reader every couple of decades: *How to Be Pope: What to Do and Where to Go Once You're in the Vatican*.

I saw a book the other day called *How to Write a How to Write Book*. In other words, it is a book, which tells you how to write a book, which tells you how to write a book. What a despicably cynical idea. I wish I'd thought of it first.

In the meantime, if anyone knows how to contact the Pope, please tell him I have a book with his name on it.

For more cheeky writing, visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com.