

Back to square one?

After 20 long months, we are stuck in the middle of the tunnel, searching for some light. Instead of 3 months, we gave 20 months to this government. Instead of protesting, we supported this government. Today, we seek an answer from this government.

ARAFAT ISLAM

ON January 11, 2007, the president declared emergency and constituted a new caretaker government headed by Chief Adviser Dr. Fakrudin Ahmad. People from all corners, despite their political identities, welcomed the move and, from Day 1, supported this government.

After many years, the nation was united in supporting the government and, without much hesitation, the people granted a reasonable amount of time to this government. In his first speech to nation, the chief advisor assured

us of an election as soon as possible.

The government lived up to our expectation when it undertook drives against corruption. Many high profile corrupt suspects were arrested within a short time, and the common people lauded the government. We all did whatever we could from our positions to come to the aid of the government in eradicating corrupt practices from society. Civil society, business community, and common people from "Teknaf to Tetulia" appreciated the anti-corruption drive of the government.

The caretaker government also initiated steps to carry out political

reforms and electoral reforms. On April 11, 2007, the CTG entered into uncharted territory by not holding an election within the 90 days stipulated by the constitution. Still, not a single person protested because all of us accepted this government and were willing to give them extra time to carry out three important tasks:

- Anti-corruption drive: The people decided it was high time to fight corruption, and we welcomed the reforms in the Anti-Corruption Commission. The ACC carried out massive operations across the country. More than 100 "VIPs" were arrested. There was a tremor in the society,

and we all felt it was needed. However, as days passed by, the drive became questionable and senior lawyers warned us about the future of many of these cases.

The government apparently did not listen to or consider any critiques made by senior lawyers and former judges. Slowly but surely, many corrupt suspects started to take advantage of the loopholes in the laws. Many of them are already out of jail and the rest are trying to follow them. We did not give the government so much time only for such a poor performance!

- Political reforms: The government had immense opportunities to create an atmosphere where political parties, along with the Election Commission, would carry out much needed reforms. But, by creating factions in the parties and other unnecessary interference, the

government made a mess again. While the CTG put much effort to carry out the "minus-two" scheme through the so-called "reformists," no party carried out any effort to bring change in itself. Not a single political party amended its constitution and, most importantly, none of them changed their mindset. As of today, no constructive reforms took place, and the word "reform" has turned into a discredited word.

- Electoral reforms: Nobody can deny the importance of a national identity card, and the EC deserves appreciation for this historical accomplishment. The EC, under the new commissioners, promised to bring changes in the electoral process of the country. The role of the EC on the issue of inviting a certain faction of the BNP was a very costly mistake, and it gave a wrong signal to the people. The

EC gave us hope and assured us of transparency and accountability in candidates as well as political parties participating in elections. However, we were shocked to see the outcome of the so-called test case -- the City Corporation elections. Some disputable candidates, reportedly giving false affidavits, won the elections, and the EC was utterly helpless. Same old strategies, same old practices!

Despite so much public support, this government has failed to deliver, and, as a result, today, it is losing popularity. Our lives were stricken with soaring prices of goods and services and drastic fall in employment and investment, but still we supported this government. We had thought we would see some light at the end of the tunnel.

However, after 20 long months, we are stuck in the middle of the tunnel, searching for some light. Instead of 3



Deja vu.

months, we gave 20 months to this government. Instead of protesting, we supported this government. Today, we seek an answer from this government.

What reforms could they bring about, and what is the fate of the anti-corruption drive? Why did we waste 20 months?

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America and the world into a new era

The next US president will inherit a country with a profound image problem. Anti-American sentiment around the world is already far worse today than it was in 2000. And the disconnect between McCain and, on some issues, Obama and the publics around the world is only likely to worsen that problem.

BRUCE STOKES

THE United States elects a president in two months. The whole world is watching because whoever is victorious will be the leader of not just of US but the world. Africans, Asians, Europeans and Latin Americans -- unhappy with the Bush administration's eight years -- all have a stake in the election's outcome. But they'll discover that whether Democrat Barack Obama or Republican John McCain is the next US president, his foreign policies may not often be in concert with global public opinion.

Obama is the favourite of people outside US. But only Americans get to vote. And Republican John McCain stands a good chance of winning the election. Those abroad wishing to see an Obama presidency would do well to remember that the American people share many of McCain's hawkish foreign policy views.

Sure, the next US president will

enjoy a honeymoon of goodwill around the world because he is not George W. Bush. But whether Obama or McCain sits in the White House next year, that honeymoon could be short-lived.

People outside the US have exceedingly high expectations of the next American leader. In 14 of 23 countries surveyed recently by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, majorities or pluralities of the population expect the next US president to change American foreign policy for the better. Overwhelmingly, they suggest that Obama is more likely than McCain to do the right thing in world affairs.

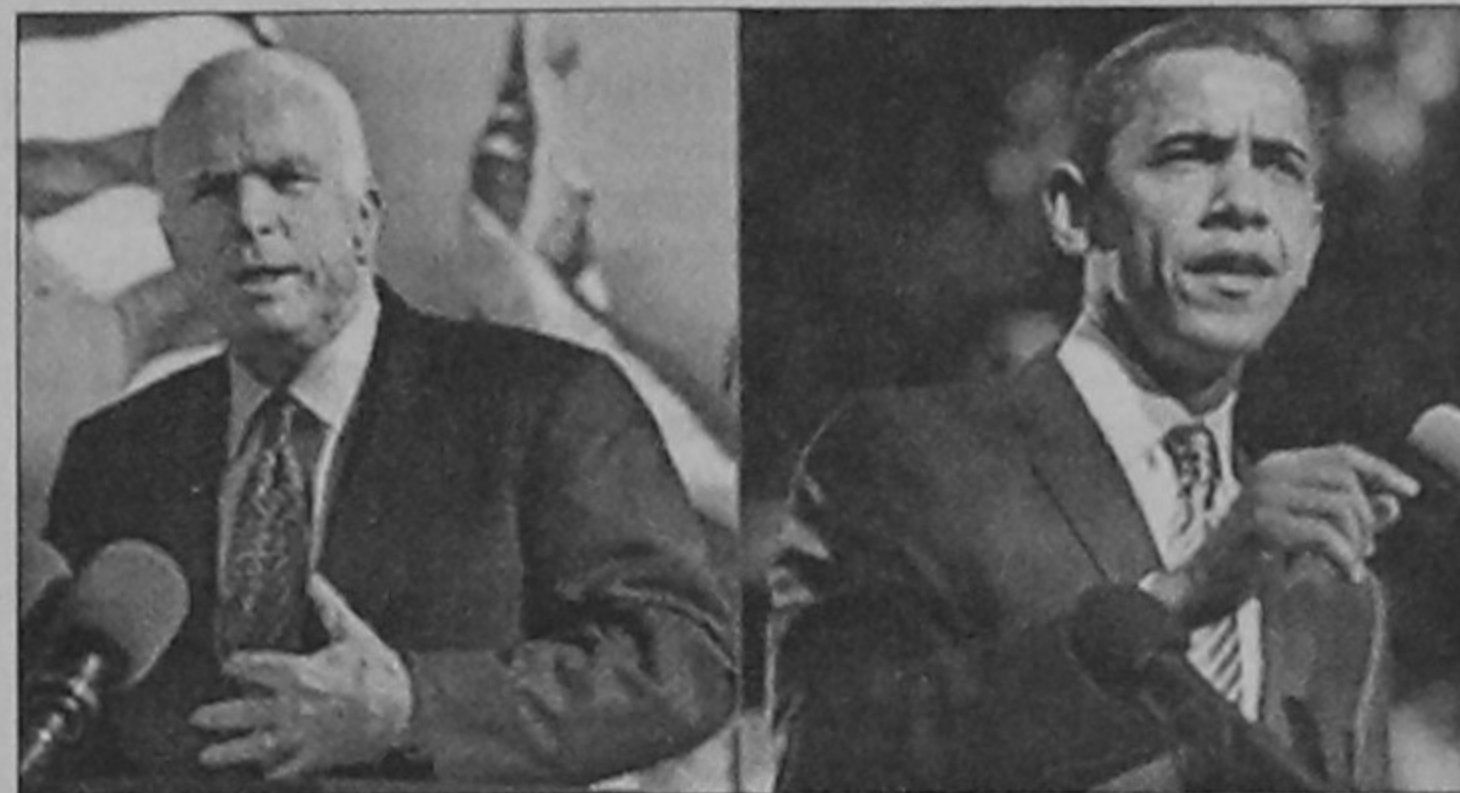
But McCain only trailed Obama by a few percentage points in US public opinion surveys going in to the fall campaign. And because the United States elects a president state by state, not by popular vote, McCain stands a good chance of carrying enough individual American states to win the election.

Obama's choice of Senator Joe Biden, the chairman of the Foreign

Relations Committee in the US Senate, to be his vice president, demonstrated a desire to reassure voters, and the world, that an internationally experienced person would be one heartbeat away from the presidency.

McCain's choice, Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate, after having met her only twice, sent a different message. It suggested that the Republican candidate makes important decisions on impulse rather than through a deliberate decision-making process, a trait that may not bode well for future US foreign policymaking.

The recent confrontation between Russia and Georgia is a case in point. McCain was quick to condemn Russian actions in far harsher tones than Obama, who initially urged restraint. Both, however, have supported Georgian membership in Nato and have threatened to deny Russia membership in the World Trade Organization.



Neither US candidate may be able to bridge the gap between American and world opinion.

McCain has gone even further, urging that Russia be kicked out of the G8. He also supports the Bush administration's plan to build missile-defense sites in Eastern Europe. McCain could be expected to be more confrontational than Obama in dealing with Moscow, an approach that's out of step with Berlin, London and Paris.

McCain has also been one of the loudest cheerleaders for the Iraq war, which Obama opposed from the start. McCain claims victory in Iraq is his first priority. And two in five Americans agree that US efforts in Iraq will succeed. Half of the British, two-thirds of the French and nearly three-quarters of the Germans agree with

Obama's belief that the US effort in Iraq was doomed from the start.

Obama and McCain are equally bullish on the war in Afghanistan, where both want to bolster Nato's presence. This stance has the support of the American people, half of whom believe that the Afghan war needs to be won at all costs.

By comparison, global publics have no stomach for such an effort, suggesting both Obama and McCain would face opposition to escalating the war. In 21 of 23 countries Pew surveyed, a majority or plurality of those questioned said that US and Nato troops should be removed from Afghanistan as soon as possible.

On Iran, McCain argues there is

only one thing worse than a "military solution" with Tehran and that's Iran having nuclear weapons, implying he would go to war if necessary to end the Iranian nuclear-weapons program. Obama argues for diplomatic engagement to defuse the confrontation. In this case, the American people support Obama not McCain. But two-thirds of Americans have an unfavorable view of Iran, suggesting they could support getting tough with Tehran if diplomacy fails.

Environmental issues promise to be another international headache for Obama or McCain. By a significant margin, publics in 13 of the 23 countries Pew surveyed name the United States as the world's top polluter. To change this perception, the next US president must chart a new course, on climate change.

Both McCain and Obama, unlike Bush, acknowledge the gravity of global warming. But on this they are out of step with the American people. Only 42% of Americans think global warming is a very serious problem. By comparison, majorities in 14 of 23 Pew survey nations are extremely worried about climate change, including 92% of Brazilians, 73% of the Japanese and 66% of the Indians.

The economy will pose additional problems abroad for the next US president, especially McCain. He contends that economic prospects are good. In contrast, publics in 17 of 23 countries rate their economy as bad. Moreover, among those people who think that the US economy influences their economy, large portions -- seven in ten in Britain, Germany and France -- say such American influence is negative.

McCain and Obama also differ on trade. The Republican candidate is an unabashed free trader. The Democrat wants trade agreements to give greater protection to worker and environmental standards which may have the practical effect of crimping trade. And again, McCain seems out of step with trends in public opinion. The Americans' support for trade has fallen 25 percentage points in the last six years, the most of any nation. But enthusiasm for trade has also eroded in Europe and parts of Asia and Latin America.

Like Bush, McCain's instinct is to act unilaterally in dealing with international issues. To that end he has advocated creation of a League of Democracies, effectively a coalition of the willing, which some of his conservative supporters want to use to kill the United Nations. And McCain did recently vote to

cut the US share of payments for UN peacekeeping operations. Obama, on the other hand, speaks openly of the need for multilateral approaches to problem solving.

Yet in his opposition to multilateralism, McCain has the support of the American people. When asked what country or organisation should have responsibility for dealing with the world's leading problem, whatever that issue might be, a plurality of Americans said the United States should go it alone. A plurality of the British, French, Germans and Chinese disagree, saying that the United Nations should take the lead.

The next US president will inherit a country with a profound image problem. Anti-American sentiment around the world is already far worse today than it was in 2000. And the disconnect between McCain and, on some issues, Obama and the publics around the world is only likely to worsen that problem. Yet this erosion of America's standing in the world does not concern many Americans. And it will not influence their vote in November.

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The climate war

We have little chance to win the climate war, unless concerted efforts are made. Margaret Beckett said in the UN Security Council (April 2007): "Climate change can bring us together, if we have the wisdom to prevent it from driving us apart."

MOHAMMED ABDUL BATEN AND RONJU AHAMMAD

THOSE who keep in touch with Hollywood science-fiction movies know about the film "Star Wars," and worry about the earth being attacked by aliens.

By analysing different wars over the last two decades, many political analysts came to a consensus that they were for establishing control over valuable natural resources such as oil, fresh water etc. to secure future consumption of mighty nations in the prevailing or upcoming climate contingencies. Therefore, we can define these wars as "Climate Wars."

Like other wars, climate war is not confined to only competing countries or regions. It affects all human beings, regardless of race,

caste, ethnicity, sex and level of income, and confronts humanity with the threat of extinction. Though the world is trying to analyse climate change from different aspects, its security dimension is most often camouflaged by political or economic discussions.

Many climate scientists claim that the present climate risk is creating new kinds of security threats to our essential life-supporting elements as well as compounding the existing social and political tension within a country and between countries, as resources and safe places become scarcer, and disasters destroy livelihoods, increasing the number of migrants and refugees.

Global warming, the main causal factor for climate change, will present cross-linked multiple security aspects in the upcoming

decades, such as decreasing food production, unavailability of fresh water, increased coastal hazards, mass migration, diseases, and conflicts for energy, a report titled "The Age of Consequences: The foreign policy and national security implications because of climate change," argues.

Though the extent of climate change remains uncertain, it not only hinders human development and environmental conservation, but also poses a major threat to human security with increased frequency of extreme weather events like floods, cyclones and droughts that are degrading socio-economic conditions across the world, particularly in poor and developing countries.

Because of increased temperature and drought, two consequences of climate change, agri-

culture production has declined in many parts of the globe, especially in the tropics where many developing countries are located.

The most recent food crisis and price hikes of rice, wheat and maize, has adversely affected the world's poorest parts. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimates that low agricultural productivity and worldwide food price have affected more than 800 million undernourished people in sub-Saharan Africa and some parts of Asia.

As an agrarian economy, food crisis has also increased in Bangladesh. Most of our agriculture production is highly dependent on monsoon rain that accounts for nearly 90% of annual precipitation. Any kind of change in monsoon rain is likely to exacerbate the food crisis.

Freshwater resources constitute about 2.5% of world water resources, but almost two-thirds of those are in inaccessible forms such as glaciers and permanent snow packs (the Antarctic alone has 60% of total world water

resources).

Climate change also influences freshwater availability through altering precipitation, evaporation and snow melting. An estimate shows that currently almost one-third of the world's population consumes less than 1000m3 water per year.

Fresh water crisis has already created conflicts in the African region. Rainfall in the Darfur region of the Sudan has declined by almost 40% over the last century, creating violent clashes for water between nomadic herders and agrarian farmers.

In South Asia also, glaciers may retreat from the Himalayans because of global warming, thus affecting freshwater availability in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan.

Moreover, sea level rise may increase salinity in fresh-water bodies and adjacent agricultural fields, thus resulting in unproductivity. Though Bangladesh gets enough precipitation in the monsoon, often causing flood, we have limited water for

farming in the dry season. Control of Ganges water in the dry season has caused political tension between Bangladesh and India.

Climate induced coastal hazards lead to migration of the vulnerable people to better parts of the country. We already have 4 million environmental refugees from river erosion.

Scientists predict that, because of increased tropical cyclones and salinisation of the farming lands in coastal areas, environmental refugees will exceed 20 million in future. As a result, their demand for land, water, employment and other social services may trigger conflict with the local residents.

Moreover, migration creates conflicts between neighbouring countries. The Indian government has already announced that it will build a barbed wire fence along its border with Bangladesh to prevent the influx of environmental migrants during sea level rise. This may unsettle the political co-existence with Bangladesh.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), extreme

weather events cause more than 1,60,000 deaths annually. Climate change is also likely to enhance the spreading of vector borne diseases like malaria, diarrhoea and AIDS.

It is true that climate change will amplify security problems in developing countries. Poor governance, weak economy and absence of social cohesion may also overstretch their socio-ecological vulnerability.

The work of Nobel laureate Al Gore makes it clear that today's global warming is not merely an environmental problem, rather it has become a global issue. Unfortunately, we see very little internationally coordinated effort to reduce climate change impacts. The UN can establish more collaboration between scientists, politicians and businesspersons for an effective climate change policy to safeguard the earth's security.

Bangladesh, as a disaster-prone country, faces security implications from climate change. In this regard, the climate change issue should be included in the development plan of the country. Bangladesh can also

draw attention of the world community in climate change conferences to take financial initiatives and share technology for adaptation.

Ironically, despite the depressing effects, climate change offers humanity an opportunity for a quantum leap in sustainable development and peace making. For instance, Bangladesh can collaborate with the India for reducing trans-boundary environmental hazards. Both can establish a jointly managed conservation zone (i.e., Peace Park) for the Ganges delta, which will also raise the level of trust between them and contribute to overall stability in the region.

We have little chance to win the climate war, unless concerted efforts are made. Margaret Beckett said in the UN Security Council (April 2007): "Climate change can bring us together, if we have the wisdom to prevent it from driving us apart."

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The real reason why Asian cities have low crime rates

Advertisement for 'Vittachi' featuring a woman's face and the text 'ONLY IN ASIA by Nury Vittachi'.

OVER breakfast with a couple of Germans and an American at a hotel in Macau, I pondered one of the most puzzling East-West mysteries. Crime is linked to poverty, so why do cities in the richer West have more crime than those in the poorer East?

Confucianism? Asian values? Respect for authorities? Maybe Asian criminals are just too dumb to pull off a decent heist, I thought. This column has several times reported on hapless thieves who break into houses only to drop off their wallets, keys, toolboxes and in one memo-

table case, a getaway car. I was still thinking about this puzzle that night when I got back home. Like most Asians, I live with way too many generations of my family in a space that is way too small.

I went to bed at 11 p.m. At midnight, just as I was dozing off, my workaholic wife came home noisily and woke me up.

At 2 a.m., Grandma woke up and turned on all the lights, ready for her usual hearty breakfast of English tea and custard creams. (Our doctor diagnosed Grandma as suffering from "disorientation and general confusion about

everything" which worried me as the term perfectly describes my normal state of mind.) I fixed Grandma a snack and sent her back to bed.

At 3 a.m., Grandma turned on all the lights again, informing me that we should phone the reception desk and tell them to reserve a table for us. I told Grandma that our kitchen does not have a reception desk ("You can't get the staff these days") and sent her back to bed.

At 4 a.m., not one, but two of my children woke up. One needed an urgent visit to the toilet and the other needing

comforting after a bad dream.

"Did you dream about a scary monster?" I asked.

"Yes," she wept. "Mike Myers in The Cat in the Hat."

I told her that if Mr. Myers turned up at our flat, I would drop to all fours and bark to scare him away.

At 5 a.m., Grandma turned on all the lights for a third time "because we are approaching the harbour and will soon have to disembark." I told Grandma that the apartment was not weighing anchor here, but would continue its triumphant journey across the seven seas

until morning. At 7 a.m., I finally achieved a state of deep sleep. Which was when the alarm went off. Time to get up for work.

I'm not asking for sympathy. This action-packed home life is common enough in most over-stuffed multi-generational homes of Asians. But it is probably very different to that of say, Texan families, who I understand typically consist of two rednecks and a goldfish, each of whom have a separate (gun-filled) room, wing, building or ranch.

Now I wouldn't want you to

Keep our columnist up later by writing to him at www.vittachi.com.