

Two leaders' participation in election

It should not be impeded

THE election tempo has been set in motion with the EC announcing the election dates for the parliament and the upazilas, and, other than certain conditions put forward by a few parties on certain electoral issues, none of them had so far taken an anti-election stand. We, however, note that the Awami League and BNP have now taken a stand not to participate in the forthcoming parliamentary election if their party chiefs are prevented from participating in the same.

The issue of participation in the election, we feel, is very clear. As stated by one of the election commissioners recently, anyone not convicted under the emergency provisions is free to put themselves up as candidates in the next election, further clarifying that there is nothing that disqualifies the leaders of the two major parties since they have not been convicted under any charge as yet.

The latest position on the parliamentary election taken by the two parties appears to be predicated entirely on their speculation that their party chiefs may not be able to contest the polls. This has, naturally, created misgivings about holding of the election. Certain advisors to the CTG had met the two leaders recently, at home and abroad, thus we fail to understand why, in spite of that, the parties do not feel assured of the government's intentions.

We are not certain as to the basis of their misgivings, but if the position of the two political parties stems from an apprehension that there might be impediments contrived to keep Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina from participating in the electoral process, we cannot but be concerned. We would like to believe that there are no such plans whatsoever from any quarters, and our suggestion to any quarter that might be contemplating such an option is that they should desist from it.

As of today, the cases against the two leaders are proceeding in accordance with the law of the land. We hope that law would follow its own course now and even after election, and that it is in character with the rule of law demonstrated in future. That being so, even an elected representative will have to submit to the process of law and accept the verdict of the court whatever that might be.

Let us also restate that it is for the political parties to choose who their leaders should be, and who should be their party representatives in the parliament, and any restraint placed on them that might appear contrived, will be suicidal for democracy, not mention, bad for the country.

For effective traffic management

Translate words into action

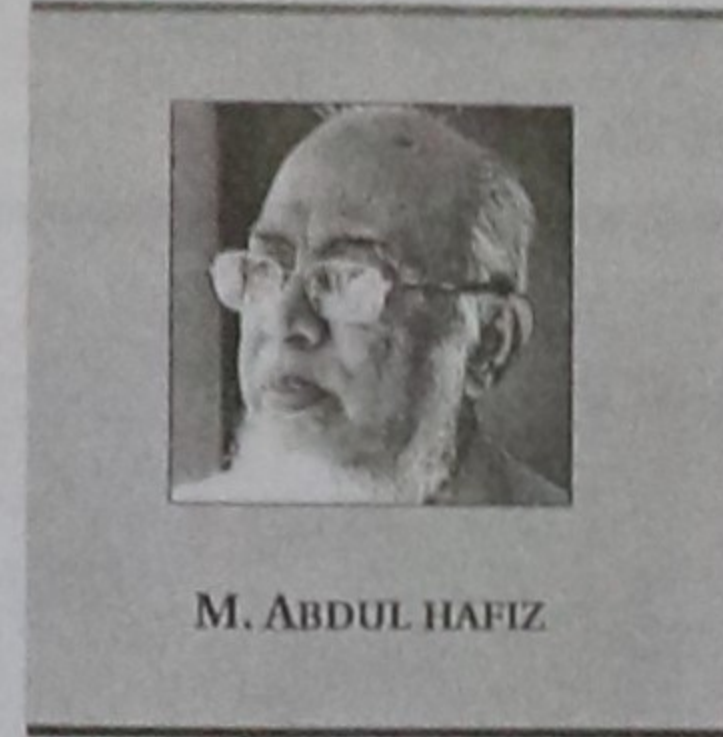
AGAINST the backdrop of horrendous traffic congestions, what the suffering citizens want to see now is strict implementation of existing rules and regulations to bring discipline on the city roads. There is obvious lack of effective traffic management, which is causing congestions lasting hours together in the capital, every day from dawn to late evening, thereby making life and living next to impossible. The rush of vehicles that turns the roads into veritable traps for commuters also results in other fallouts, such as loss of valuable fuel and that of man-hours. Surprisingly, it has been going on for years together but no relevant agency came forward to stop the slide.

In a roundtable titled "Making Dhaka Liveable: Focusing on Transport Problem," held at The Daily Star premises on Saturday, experts offered some concrete suggestions aimed at solving the problem through ensuring sound traffic management. They laid emphasis on mass rapid traffic (MRT) and bus rapid transport (BRT) to tackle the crisis and increase mobility of people. Creating better walkways is a good option that could be used by the citizens instead of using a vehicle to travel short distance. A strict parking policy will have to be implemented alongside creation of new parking spaces.

The need for a unified traffic management policy, both short-term and long-term, with the increasing involvement of public transports was one among the many recommendations we believe should be given serious consideration. There is no denying that increasing the number of public transports like large buses would help take many dilapidated minibuses and old private transports off the roads. A rough estimate says that a double-decker bus can replace about fifty rickshaws or three minibuses. But, as for availability of roads, the seminar revealed that only 250km out of 2,200km in Dhaka is suitable for large-scale bus operation. This clearly indicates that the roads of the capital need to be made ready for smooth operation of large public transports. The other points that deserve merit are decentralisation of the administration to reduce the population pressure on the capital; and relocation of industrial units and garment factories outside the city.

With the expert prediction that Dhaka will be the sixth most populous city in the world by 2010 and second by 2015, it would be quite difficult to keep it liveable unless the suggestions are taken seriously and implemented with due earnestness. A great deal has been said already about the flaws in our traffic management and we believe now is the time to translate words into action.

Square pegs in round holes?



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

ONLY the flunkies will deny the fact that the unusual caretaker dispensation of the day has failed to deliver. It's not for nothing that it has started drawing flak from the public who gave this government blanket support on its advent eighteen months ago amid great relief and rejoicing. There is no denying the fact that it made some waves with its anti-terror and anti-corruption drives. Now, with the motives of those popular steps put to question, the redeeming works visibly coming to a naught, and the country's political forces gaining primacy irrespective of their past records and background, the credibility of the caretakers couldn't but plummet drastically.

But then, the government

cannot be entirely faulted for its failure because it had to carry the heavy baggage of the past. In the wake of 1/11, under extraordinary circumstances, it inadvertently pursued an agenda not meant for it and got unwittingly bogged down in a morass. Only lately has the government realised that it must get out it before it becomes totally inextricable. Moreover, the debris of the mess it tried to enthusiastically remove wasn't of its own making

shape could be best done by an elected government. However, a series of experiments to try some alternative courses yielded nothing but an intensified muddle. Against this gloomy backdrop there was some silver lining when events took a positive turn, stirring up a moribund political scene afresh with the vox populi lending support to it. With regard to denying the country's two top leaders a role, or giving them at the best a curtailed role, the government seemed to backtrack in favour of a status quo. As a result, one of them was sent on parole for treatment abroad and another given omnibus bail. By all appearance the country proceeded smoothly towards a democratic

PERSPECTIVES

transition with the government spokespersons constantly assuring the nation of a "level playing ground" prior to election in December.

But, contrary to the spirit of positivism, there are, in tandem, also discordant developments suggesting some twist in the government's game plan with regard to its future intentions. Demolishing the concept of "level playing ground" -- for example Sheikh Hasina has been denied bail in at least one indictment while Madam Zia was given bail in all cases pending against her. It keeps the door open for taking Hasina into custody on her return, but Madam Zia is free of such possibility unless

Barapukuria case matures in the meantime.

Before the election -- considered the mother of all elections, and awaited with bated breath both at home and abroad -- an opaque change of course does not bode well for the people already suffering under continuing sky rocketing prices of essentials, chronic power shortage, and proposed increase in utility charges hanging over the people like "Damocles' sword." Obviously, the people would favour a fresh beginning quickly under an elected government -- that presupposes the holding of a credible election -- for the redress of the agonising issues. The chief adviser's recent address to the nation declaring the firm date of the election sparked hope for a new dawn of fresh promises and possibilities.

When the election is only two months away, those hopes are disappearing in thin air, with the government and political forces crossing swords over myriads unresolved issues that include the registration of political parties with the EC, delineation of the constituencies, the lifting of emergency, and so on. In the ensuing differences of views, it is

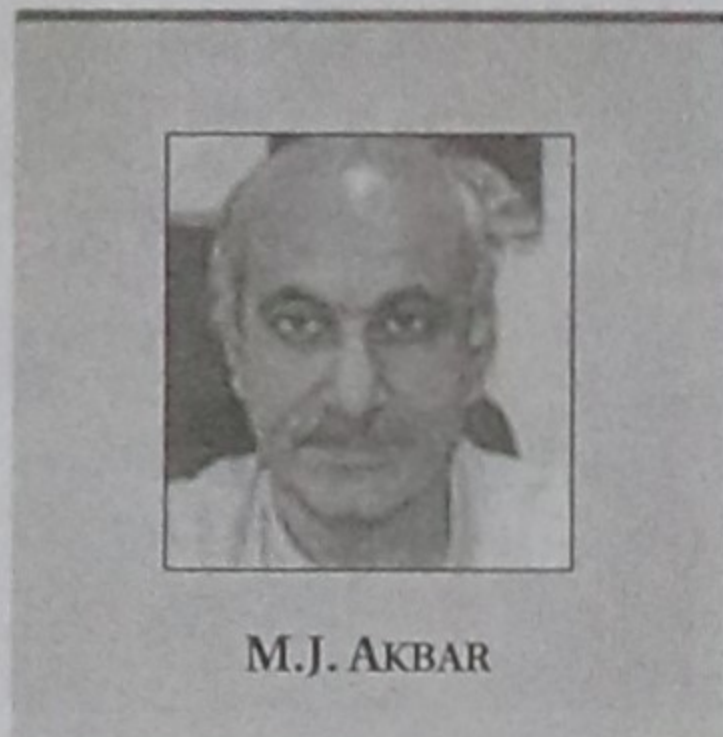
forgotten that both the government and the political parties have a common stake in their consensus on the issues.

No less ominous is the alacrity of the carpet-baggers from the US State Department, IMF or World Bank, as well as all donor countries, who are always uncomfortable with a genuinely democratic dispensation and are at ease doing business with conformist regimes, whatever may be their democratic credentials. No wonder that there is no taker of the merchandise of these merchants of democracy and human rights, even if they shove it down the throats of others across the world.

It's time that we bury our hatchets to draw a strategy for best serving our interests in this milieu. If the election becomes uncertain due to our internal squabbling it will be a tragedy of national proportion. It will also be quixotic on the part of the caretakers to continue to be the cuckoos in the nest on one pretext or other. It's time for them to call it a day and let the nation breathe freely. The choice is theirs -- whether they will make history or be dumbed by it.

Bring (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BLS.

Who wants to be the pinprick inside a bubble?



M.J. AKBAR

IT often needs a startling image to convey the dimensions of a crisis. Bloggers have time to discover such startling analogies. Someone on the net has had the time and patience to conjure up this image about \$700 billion, the most dramatic figure among the many mountains of cash that governments have doled out to capitalism's poster boys in order to save capitalism.

If you stacked up \$700bn in 100-dollar bills (100, not 10 or 1), it would climb 54 miles into the sky. If you counted one billion at the rate of one digit a second, you would need 30 years. 700 billion? Don't begin.

Would you want to add the British crisis-management fund to this? On October 7, Britain announced an \$87 billion rescue package for its banks, and offered a guarantee of \$200 billion more. How high would you have to go if you added Japan and other nations to the list? And this is only the start of a story whose end is outside the comprehension of all the pontiffs who, with the support of obedient priests in politics and media, have turned unrestrained economic reform into the sole morality of our times.

This is the bailout for a few companies. A western nation, Iceland, is trembling on the brink of a meltdown and no one knows

BYLINE

Will a President Obama change anything when he inherits a situation teetering on chaos in the last week of January 2009? No. That would mean stretching his luck a bit too far, and he will have exhausted much of his quota of luck reaching the White House. There is a more important reason why he will not do anything radical. No one yet knows what there is to do.

quite what to do. Iceland itself does not know whether it needs \$5 billion or a multiple of that. A desperate Gordon Brown is trying to protect British investments by threatening Iceland with sanctions, as if it was a renegade Iran.

What do the great capitalists plan to do with this waterfall of cash? Some of them think that the party can continue as before. Executives of the world's largest insurance company, AIG, which has already picked up \$85bn and is thirsting for more, celebrated in the only way they know. They gathered at a top California beach resort for an eight-day jamboree and ran up a tab for \$440,000, including pedicures, massage, golf and cocktails. (Former American ambassador to India Frank Wisner is vice-president for foreign relations at AIG, but he was not part of such shenanigans.)

It has yet to strike anyone seriously -- at least to my knowledge -- that throwing away money is not the best way to protect a system that has been shattered at fundamental points by a basic tenet of the capitalist faith, greed. The last decade has seen the escalation of greed into a primary virtue.

The rise of executive salaries and bonuses is only one aspect. In our country, governments have watched benevolently as some

crooks masquerading as wizards have raped funds given to them in trust by shareholders. The government, impelled by World Bankers, would have tied the Indian economy fiscally into the West much more deeply. Prakash Karat is right when he claims that the Left prevented the UPA government from becoming a handmaiden of the American economy. With organisations like Morgan Stanley now an integral part of capital markets, India cannot escape the consequences of haemorrhage in New York, but it can yet avoid free fall.

Capitalism is in trouble because reality became a version of caricature. Growth became a cloak for venality. Everyone placed on the watch went to sleep. American commentators now admit that warning flags went up 18 months ago, and action should have been taken a year ago at the very latest. But who wants to be the pinprick inside a bubble?

No free ride goes on forever. George Bush thought his would continue for the duration of his term; better man than him might never have seen the tsunami, but he has been blind to anything but his whims for many years now. In a democracy, if systems and institutions do not hold you accountable, the people eventually do.

There was something a little funny about the apologetic

Republican at a John McCain town hall meeting railing at the prospect of a "Socialist" being elected president. You did not need exceptional insight to read his mind: in that closed and narrow mental chamber, every Black was a Socialist, and that was only the least of his sins.

A survey conducted by Stanford University, The Associated Press and Yahoo, completed in September, showed that some 10% of white America was irredeemably racist, and that another 6% was unconsciously prejudiced in the sense that he or she would make a racial decision without believing that this was the decisive factor.

It is obvious that the Republicans have concluded that the only factor that can save them now is colour. John McCain's slur, when he called Barack Obama "That one!" was crafted to arouse subliminal and overt hatreds. The Republican effort is to arouse demons in the 6% that is not aware it has demons. In other words, Barack Obama has to lead by about 12% in order to win by perhaps 2%. It is safe to assume that if Hillary Clinton had been candidate she would have been ahead by 15% already.

History cannot be made without luck. Obama needed much luck to become candidate. He is of



The bubble has burst.

mixed descent rather than pure African-American; his mother was white, and he is devoted to his white grandparents who gave him love and a home. A high percentage of young voters are no longer of pure ethnic descent; the nation has become a genetic melting point as well. But that could carry him to the nomination, not to the White House.

Obama needs divine intervention to become president. He prays effectively. He got it. If this crisis had broken a few weeks later, it would have been too late for him. The seismic shift came at the precise moment when it was needed, when he was lagging in the polls and the election was drifting away from him despite eight years of Bush. As long as the colour of failure was only black or Latino-brown, the White House was effectively safe for Republican America. But the crisis has sent a shudder of dread into the heart of white middle-class America.

Hands will be trembling when they reach the ballot, but they will no longer tremble only at the thought of putting a dark man with a strange name into the White House. They will also tremble in anger at the prospect of a lifetime's savings destroyed and confidence in the immediate future. It is that tremble that could shift their finger away from the Bush-McCain button on November 4.

Will a President Obama change anything when he inherits a situation teetering on chaos in the last week of January 2009? No. That would mean stretching his luck a bit too far, and he will have exhausted much of his quota of luck reaching the White House. There is a more important reason why he will not do anything radical. No one yet knows what there is to do.

The radical answer for the Right is to discover capitalism without capitalists, and no one has any ideas about how to weave a route towards such idealism.

M.J. Akbar is Director of Publications, Covert.

Debates are hurting, negative ads helping McCain

LETTER FROM AMERICA

John McCain believed that he had so much more experience and foreign policy expertise, and had demonstrated so much more leadership than Barack Obama, that Obama did not belong on the same stage with him. In their first debate, McCain was so dismissive of Obama that he did not even look at him, and laced his comments with belittling sarcasms: "Senator Obama does not understand..."

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

SENATOR John McCain must be thanking his stars that Barack Obama did not take him up on his offer of ten town hall debates. For reasons that have little to do with politics, any time McCain and Obama are on the same stage, Obama wins.

Televised presidential debates have played key roles in elections since their inception in 1960. Like Obama, John Kennedy delivered his Democratic Party acceptance speech outdoors, at the Los Angeles Coliseum. The acoustics were bad; reverberations distorted Kennedy's voice.

Republican nominee, Richard Nixon, who was watching, concluded, "I can beat this guy in a debate!"

Wrong conclusion! In their 1960 televised debate, Kennedy realised that presidential debates were not real debates; they were opportunities to showcase a candidate's strengths to the nation. As a handsome and articulate Kennedy addressed the nation with his "New Frontier" vision for America, a perspiring Nixon solely addressed Kennedy as though he were in a college debate.

Nixon lost the debate and the election. In the subsequent elec-

tions Nixon contested, in 1968 and 1972, he avoided debates like a plague.

The televised debates were resurrected in 1976 when President Ford took on candidate Jimmy Carter. Ford's famous gaffe that Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe were not under Soviet domination contributed to his defeat.

President Carter misconstrued his debate "victory" over Ford. Carter remained a weak debater. Polls showed Carter slightly ahead of Ronald Reagan on the eve of the 1980 presidential debate. A suave and debonair actor, Reagan ate Carter alive in the debate, using

such put downs as "There you go again!" and asking Americans a rhetorical question: "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?"

Americans had doubts about Reagan's extreme views. His performance in the debate reassured them. Reagan passed the "does he look presidential?" test, and a close election turned into a landslide for him.

In the 1988 presidential debate, the Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis was asked whether he would still oppose capital punishment if someone raped and murdered his wife. Dukakis said "yes," and gave an intellectual and unemotional answer. Dukakis lost.

Bill Clinton clobbered senior Bush in their debates in 1992, in one of which Bush was seen looking at his watch as though he did not want to be there. Al Gore's condescension towards junior Bush in 2000, especially his sigh (as though saying, "Why am I debating this idiot?"), turned off many voters.

John McCain believed that he had so much more experience

and foreign policy expertise, and had demonstrated so much more leadership than Barack Obama, that Obama did not belong on the same stage with him. In their first debate, McCain was so dismissive of Obama that he did not even look at him, and laced his comments with belittling sarcasms: "Senator Obama does not understand..."

McCain was making a Nixonian mistake. Viewers were not going to give McCain extra credit for his past accomplishments. They were sizing up the two candidates as they stood side by side behind two lecterns.

McCain, 72, looked like a condescending, snarling and angry 85-year old man. Obama was cool, composed, articulate, handsome, and flashed a mega-watt smile that could light up a dark room. Even Republicans conceded that Obama not only won on substance, he looked more presidential than McCain. After the first debate, Obama took a 7-point lead in the polls.

Things got worse for McCain in the second debate, which was conducted in his favourite town

hall format. The candidates sat on a stool. Asked a question, they walked the stage and approached the audience. All of McCain's physical deformities, due to age and torture in Vietnam, were on display as he walked.

Walking with loping strides, Obama was as sure-footed as a gazelle. As McCain lurched, hobbled and groped, Obama galloped. Obama looked far better than McCain while sitting down.

In every election in the last fifty years, except Reagan v. Carter, the younger man won. To address the nation's complex problems, Americans want their president to be young and vigorous. 47-year old Obama raced to an 11-point lead after the second debate. It was then that McCain changed tactics -- back to racism.

For the past week, McCain has been running ads calling Obama "friend of a terrorist," a "liar," and "too risky for America." William Ayers, a member of the 1960s Weather Underground radical group, now completely rehabilitated and a Professor of English at the University of Illinois, is Obama's neighbour. Obama was

8 when Ayers' group carried out bombings.

The two served on a charity board financed by the Republican financier Walter Annenberg in 1995. Sean Hannity of Fox News had been asking McCain to brand Obama as a terrorist for his association with Ayers. McCain has complied. The strategy is to paint Obama as some kind of threatening, black, "foreign" terrorist; "not one of us." McCain promised supporters that he would interject Rev. Wright, Obama's former controversial preacher, into the ads and in the final presidential debate on October 15.

McCain/Palin have been stoking fires of hatred in their campaign rallies. In one rally, to McCain's question "Who is the real Obama?" a man shouted, "Terrorist!" Responding to Palin's warnings about the dangers of electing Obama, a man shouted, "Off with his head!" another added, "Kill him!" Neither candidate chastised the shouters.

From Lincoln through John Kennedy to Martin Luther King, Jr., America has been devastated by political assassinations. If

McCain and Palin do not rein-in their supporters, and one of them assassinates Obama, there will be race war in America!

Negative ads work. Obama's lead has shrunk to 7%. In the meantime, on October 10, the Alaska legislature found that Governor Sarah Palin violated Alaska's ethics law and abused the powers of her office by pressuring subordinates to get her former brother-in-law fired.

As expected, the McCain campaign blamed "Obama supporters" for the verdict. Interesting, because there were 10 Republicans and only 4 Democrats on the panel, and the verdict was unanimous! Nevertheless, McCain/Palin is busy branding Obama as "not trustworthy," when a Republican-dominated panel has found that Palin violated the state's ethics law, in the complete confidence that a white woman's crimes will be forgiven, whereas innuendoes smearing a black man will stick.

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed is a Rhodes Scholar and a Daily Star columnist.