

## Reform in political parties

The signs are encouraging but still inadequate

HERE are some visible signs of reform in the political parties which, however faint, do suggest that the parties have begun to feel that they have to change the old order that had little room for collective thinking, let alone decision making. It is indeed a welcome development, though any conclusion might be premature at this point of time, when the parties are undergoing a process of reorganising and regrouping.

The focus is on the big two, by far the biggest stakeholders. The Awami League has no doubt chosen the line of going boldly forward with reforms by adopting a series of measures that are expected to change the way the party works, if not overhaul it. The most notable among them is the plan to pick up candidates from panels elected by grassroots level committees. It will devolve the authority of nominating the candidates from the top leadership to the field level.

For its part, the BNP, which has not gone that far but has certainly felt that they, too, need to adjust themselves to the changed circumstances. The party's quest for "right" candidates to be found out by a team of researchers echoes a sentiment popularised by civil society and the media that only the honest and competent people should be nominated by the major parties. It might not sound like a breakthrough, but it is definitely a departure from the practice of attaching value to only money and muscle, something highly repugnant to democracy and good governance.

The Jamaat, the least likely outfit to show any amount of flexibility, is also contemplating amendment to its constitution to ensure that it does not contradict the basic tenets of the country's constitution. This might well provide food for thought to other religion-based parties.

The developments are a kind of acknowledgement of the civil society's avowed position that there cannot be any substitute for honest and educated candidates in the election. It is commendable that the parties are at long last listening to the counseling, which once was sadly interpreted as the civil society's overstepping the limits.

If they realise, belatedly though, that people want to see only honest and competent candidates seeking election, it will serve not only the parties but also the cause of good governance. The plain truth needs no more elaboration.

But it must be mentioned that their reluctance to reform in some major areas leaves us disappointed. Their refusal to delink their student, labour and professional fronts renders the reform process half-baked, especially the issue of party wings in foreign countries. To the best of our knowledge, political parties from neither Pakistan, nor India, nor Sri Lanka have party wings abroad.

## US drone forays in Pakistan

Such action can only worsen an already bad situation

US missile strikes have once more left people dead in Pakistan. The number of people dead from such forays by drones since mid-August now stands at twelve. Of a good deal more significance than the number of deaths is the matter of how such American attacks inside Pakistan, in search of Taliban and al-Qaeda elements, may be leading to a worsening of the situation. Questions have already been raised, and quite properly too, of such attacks being an infringement of Pakistan's sovereignty. More to the point, such behaviour on the part of the United States surely does not bode well for the future. That is because it might become a pattern where other nations might face conditions similar to those that Pakistan is confronted with. After what has happened in Afghanistan and Iraq and what has been going on in Pakistan's tribal areas, there are grounds for concern.

There has, of course, been no acknowledgement from the Americans of the strikes, though Pakistanis have always been vocal against them. New President Zardari has made it known that his government will not allow Pakistan's territorial sovereignty to be violated. That said, there is the danger that such strikes not only undermine Pakistan's position but also bring its ruling classes to disrepute before their own people. But perhaps the worst ramification of these drone strikes is that they only harden the resolve of the people of the tribal areas of Waziristan against the Americans and the West and push them towards increasing sympathy, if not support, for the Taliban and al-Qaeda. That is a dangerous thing to happen, for it gives these groups a little more space to work in. To be sure, there are the suspicions that people within Pakistan's military establishment may be reluctant to move against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, that therefore Pakistan's own actions against them may be too little and too weak to have any impact. But that is a precious little excuse for the kind of action the US military has been taking against the militants in the tribal areas, which is why the need for caution is now an imperative.

The danger for Pakistan, and for the region, is a proliferation of religious radicalism. That danger must not be accentuated by American drone forays into Pakistani territory.

## Traumatic traffic tango



SHAHNOOR WAHID

### SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Look around and see how our big bosses create some of the worst congestions by holding up the traffic flow for going to some office. They do not want to remain stranded with the plebeians and share the common fate. Their time is money. Our time is garbage. Remember, the same big bosses used to give gali to the previous big bosses for holding up the traffic. But, as the adage goes, "Whoever goes to Lanka, becomes a Ravana."

JUST as we get used to the rule of the tyrants, or consuming adulterated food items, or drinking polluted water, we get used to getting bogged down on the roads in traffic congestions for hours together. And we endure it with such grace! No hollering, no banging, no cursing.

While trapped inside our claustrophobic cars, we talk to friends on cell phone, we listen to music on cell phone, we quarrel with foes on cell phone. And, finally, when we reach Motijheel from Banani in two hours we still are as fresh as a cucumber, smiling at everyone we meet. We also remain quite philosophical sitting inside an ambulance with a heart attack patient inside. If the jam is to take his life then it was written in his fate -- to die inside an ambulance in a traffic jam without treatment. Amen.

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stranded with the plebeians and share the common fate. Their time is money. Our time is garbage. Remember, the same big bosses used to give gali to the previous big bosses for holding up the traffic. But, as the adage goes, "Whoever goes to Lanka, becomes a Ravana."

On a busy day, if a small road remains blocked for fifteen minutes then the congestion would spill over and engulf the entire city. It would take half a day to clear up the mess and by that time we would have lost man-hours worth millions of taka. We would also burn gallons and gallons of expensive octane and gas just sitting like a stupid out there on the road. But, who cares?

The traffic management officials know this very well, but they cannot come up with any alternate solution so that five big bosses do not hold up traffic for thousands of citizens during business hours. Can we have

separate lanes for the bosses to go to different offices, which could be kept free of vehicles since morning after arranging separate thoroughfares for the public? Well, just a thought.

But these traffic management officials do not want to use whatever amount of grey matter is left in their cerebral cortex after hauling up trucks in shady corners to think about the sufferings of the "non-paying" citizens.

They feel a sense of glee overpowering their bodies and minds when thousands of citizens stranded at various street corners silently curse them for the ordeal. When confronted, these officials blame the fate for the congestions but don't blame the system left corrupt by their inept administration.

How can Dhaka see the end to traffic congestion? A million dollar question. Is there one simple answer or a multitude of answers? Another million dollar

question? There are many more such million dollar questions to haunt us in our dreams. Shall we ever be able to manage or control the burgeoning traffic on Dhaka roads with thirty/fourty year old vehicles of odd descriptions still running around with crooked chassis? When shall we take them off the roads? Is there space for twelve thousand plus new vehicles hitting the roads in the capital every year (with 1,800 vehicles getting registered every month)? Can we bring order and cohesion on the roads with the entire bulk of the civil, police and paramilitary establishments located in Dhaka?

Decentralisation is an answer offered by the experts. They suggest relocation of industrial units, especially garment factories, in specified areas custom built for the purpose. The most important suggestion given by them is the increasing use of public transport. One large public bus is

worth the carrying capacity of twenty private cars.

It is always economical to travel to and from work by private transports. Yes, they have to be modern and definitely bhodrolok-friendly. Not the kind that runs you down to pick up a passenger and then throws him out before the vehicle stops properly.

The most citizen's health-friendly advice given by the experts is developing better walkways. It would allow citizens to walk to office, school and work without having to depend on a vehicle. For this, you would not have to burn expensive fuel. All you will burn is your own unhealthy fat and make some health profit as well.

So, brothers and sisters, please ask your boys and girls to walk to school if it is located within one mile. Take them yourselves so that you have your morning walk at the same time. Ask the municipal/city corporation authorities to keep the walkways vendor-free and chandabai-free.

Hey, we had heard of a project named "Strategic Transport Planning (STP)" but what has happened to it? Is it active or has it died a natural death? By God, we are never short of projects, planning, committees, probe bodies and so on! We also keep hearing of mind-boggling sums of money like two hundred crore/five hundred crore/one thousand crore have been spent on traffic management. So, what is the result?

Where has the money gone, bhaisab? In buying flats in Baridhara?

Is there any suggestion for widening the roads by breaking down the structures built right by the side of the roads and shutting down shops on every road, which cause private transports like cars, rickshaws and rickshaw vans to park on the roads in front. There must not be shops by the side of every road since there are shopping malls in each area.

Before a new road is completed, the land or house owners on the two sides rent out front portions to the shop owners. This has to stop. The small shop owners on other important roads could be motivated to form a cooperative and buy land elsewhere to build a shopping mall to do their business.

If you can break down the shops on the Elephant Road you can widen the road by twenty feet on each side. Same goes for the Farmgate road from Shahbagh to Bijoy Sharani.

According to a UN estimate, Dhaka will be the second most congested city by the year 2015. Well, I wonder why it is not so already? How can any other city have the privilege of being the second when we have bumper-to-bumper traffic on the roads from dawn to late at night? Does the second most city have cars riding on one another then?

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## Reciprocate Zardari's overture

### THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN



PRAFUL BIDWAI

writes from New Delhi

If India could talk to Gen Musharraf, there's an even stronger reason why it should reciprocate Mr. Zardari's overture. On the other hand, India has a huge amount to gain if talks on the Zardari proposals defuse, and eventually end, its rivalry with Pakistan. Indeed, South Asia's very future hinges on such a breakthrough.

statement...not so much because it represents the strategic reality or an accurate political assessment, but because it shows an intent to terminate Pakistan's six decades-long strategic hostility with India.

Mr. Zardari has called Kashmir the militant separatists "terrorists." (The "terrorist" description has since been retracted by Sherry Rehman, but the rest of the statement stands.)

He also says he has no objection to India's nuclear deal with the US -- with the routine rider that Pakistan must enjoy parity: "Why should we begrudge the largest democracy in the world getting friendly with one of the oldest democracies...?"

"Largest democracy" isn't a description of India many Pakistanis are comfortable with.

More, Mr. Zardari hinges Pakistan's "economic survival" upon economic ties with India: there's no other strategy "for nations like us."

Relations with India would be the key to Pakistan's prosperity. Its cement factories would cater to

India's infrastructure needs, its textile mills would feed India's demand, and Pakistani ports would help India relieve congestion at its own ports.

Few Pakistani analysts have gone this far in acknowledging India's emergence as a major economic power, vis-à-vis that Pakistan would play a naturally asymmetrical role.

What motivated Mr. Zardari to say all this? He couldn't be enthused solely by his meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh or by his anxiety to obtain a \$100 billion infusion into Pakistan's economy, for which he needs to appear friendly to India.

Mr. Zardari's "Mr. Ten Percent" reputation apart, he and Benazir Bhutto cut shady US-brokered deals with former President Pervez Musharraf to get amnesty from criminal charges.

Worse, his recent election as president with the power to make crucial appointments and dismiss elected governments/legislatures weakens parliamentary democracy.

Can Mr. Zardari be trusted? He has comprehensively reneged on the Murree Declaration. It's hard to argue that his vision of a non-adversarial relationship with India is shared by the military.

Yet, beyond a point, these questions are irrelevant. What matter is that Pakistan's elected president stuck his neck out by making this overture at a make-or-break juncture in Pakistan's history.

However obliquely, this reflects two views that have gained currency in Pakistan, as I noted through a recent visit and discussions with analysts.

First, there's pervasive support for the peace process with India. Pakistan cannot afford tensions along its Eastern border when its Western border is burning under the combined impact of a pro-Taliban insurgency and the US-led war in Afghanistan.

Second, perceptive Pakistanis believe their country has a great stake in intensified relations with growing economic power India. Official trade between them has doubled over two years and there's boundless scope for growth.

One vehicle for growth is the recent agreement to resume overland trade across the Punjab and Sindh borders, which will reintegrate these regions.

Pakistan today faces its greatest existential crisis since 1947 -- far graver than the separation of Bangladesh. Every institution of governance is in decay. Political instability has been aggravated by its shaky ruling coalition.

The economy is in dire straits, with inflation at 25%, the rupee below a historic Rs.78 to the dollar, slumping growth, and not enough foreign exchange reserves to pay for two months' imports.

Meanwhile, insurgencies are flourishing in the North-West Frontier Province, the tribal areas and in Baluchistan, and separatism is growing in Sindh.

The horrible prospect of Pakistan becoming "a nuclearised Yugoslavia in the making" can no longer be dismissed as a fantasy.

The US bears a huge responsibility for the crisis -- not least because it has conducted the war in Afghanistan primarily as a hunt for al-Qaeda, not to stabilise and reconstruct that devastated country. Its lethal strikes across the border have bred unprecedented resentment to a point where "positive" or "mixed" feelings towards al-Qaeda (22%) outweigh "negative" feelings (19%), say polls.

The US myopically backed Gen. Musharraf till the very end, and imposed bad political deals upon Pakistan, thus undermining its

organic democratisation.

India must reciprocate Mr. Zardari's overture by giving a determined push to the peace process. India has nothing to lose by pursuing a serious dialogue on Mr. Zardari's ideas and building a climate for reconciliation, and reaching out to a wider audience in both countries.

If India could talk to Gen Musharraf, there's an even stronger reason why it should reciprocate Mr. Zardari's overture.

On the other hand, India has a huge amount to gain if talks on the Zardari proposals defuse, and eventually end, its rivalry with Pakistan. Indeed, South Asia's very future hinges on such a breakthrough.

India can best help Pakistan if it builds a relationship with it independent of the US, and weans Pakistan away from dependence on Washington. Equally, India should reassure Islamabad by thinning out troops in the Kashmir Valley.

India should offer Pakistan generous security cooperation and joint projects in Afghanistan and provide essential supplies, including petroleum products.

Besides joining the newly formed "Friends of Pakistan" group, India should unilaterally allow duty-free imports of all goods from Pakistan. The Indian economy can easily bear this. Nothing could better help rebuild mutual relations.

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## Obama and the Bradley factor

### NO NONSENSE

Named after Tom Bradley -- the long-time black mayor of Los Angeles, who lost the 1982 California governor's race despite being comfortably ahead in voter polls -- refers to a tendency of white voters to tell pollsters that they are undecided or likely to vote for a black candidate, and yet -- on election day -- vote for his/her white opponent. This behaviour is explained as being due to the fear of expressing their true preferences.

It's not unusual for political campaigns to get ugly -- often in their final weeks and days. But McCain's atrocious campaigns tactics are unprecedented. David Brooks wrote: "They have gone far beyond the usual fare of quotes taken out of context and distortions of an opponent's record -- into the dark territory of race-baiting and xenophobia." But are these below the belt blows working?

All the polls are suggesting that Palin's negative ratings are a serious drag on McCain's presidential prospect because of her lack of grasp of any issues -- domestic or international. Some conservative columnists even urged McCain to drop her from the ticket. Chris Mathews of MSNBC called her a campaigner for "low information voters." In fact, McCain's strongest support comes from non-college educated and high school drop-out white voters.

The on-going financial market cataclysm and the increasingly desperate economic outlook has caused four key states -- Virginia, North Carolina, Ohio, and Florida -- in which McCain once seemed well-positioned to win, to now turn Obama's way. If he bags these states, Obama will likely surpass

350 electoral votes -- well over the critical 270 needed to win the presidency -- barring the Bradley effect.

The Bradley effect is an observable fact that refers to a frequently observed discrepancy between voter opinion polls and election outcomes when a white candidate and a non-white candidate run against each other.

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Among numerous past races, the Bradley effect was witnessed in the 1983 race for Mayor of Chicago, the 1988 Democratic presidential primary race in Wisconsin, 1989 Mayor of New York City, and 1989 Virginia gubernatorial election.

The Bradley factor may have tapered off over the years, but Obama must still lead McCain by a

sizeable margin, 8-10% in each state he is positioned to win. This is to offset the historical Bradley effect identified in the 1989 Virginia gubernatorial election, in which Douglas Wilder's pre-election lead was 9%, but he won the race by less than half of 1%.

Running 10% behind Obama (42% vs. 52%) in Gallup's nationwide daily tracking poll, McCain is behaving erratically, and has shifted his campaign from issue oriented strategies to Bradley factor increasing tactics -- smearing Obama's character and charisma. The attempt behind all this -- loudly reading out his middle name "Hussain" in campaign rallies, linking him falsely to domestic terrorists, and tracking his foreign contributors to see if they were Muslims -- is to raise enough doubts to have the Bradley effect tilt the election outcome.

Republicans, in the past, often used race baiting to make their rivals seem anti-white. This year's campaign slogan is: Obama isn't patriotic enough. "McCain and Palin are doing something different: they're using race to make Obama seem anti-American," says Peter Beinert (October 9, Time).

Political strategist Robert Shrum, writes: "I've advised candidates who, under pressure from impending defeat or in the grip of an implacable animosity toward their opponent, just couldn't help revealing their true feelings" (October 7, The Week).

Conservative columnist David Frum (American Enterprise Institute) observed: "McCain may have hoped to do to Obama what George Bush did to him in the famous South Carolina primary of 2000 -- get under his skin in a way that goads him into a self-destructive outburst" (Oct. 9, The Week).

Obama cannot have an outburst -- for sure. America may or may not elect a black president -- but it's not ready to hear a young, Harvard-educated black man trade insults with a white war hero.

But then, Obama doesn't have to trade sneers with McCain, does he? He should keep doing what has been working for him -- follow the path of another white war hero, Napoleon Bonaparte: Never interfere with an enemy who is in the process of self-destruction.

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ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

SENATOR John McCain's ongoing presidential campaign represents nothing less than a frontal assault on American political decency -- a campaign that is directed at character assassination has now turned into a campaign of his own self-destruction. At a time when distressed people within the country and the world outside are running for shelter from the financial market meltdown and want to hear what solutions McCain has to offer, he seems obsessed with Obama.

McCain is going to regret the "preposterous" allegations his campaign is slinging at Barack Obama, said Mary Mitchell in the Chicago Sun-Times. The "steady

stream of hateful speech" from his running mate, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, is a "turn-off" -- especially, her vile accusation that Obama has been "palling around with terrorists."

She twists and besmirches Obama's brief and distant-past association (2001) with William Ayers -- founder of the 1970's Weather Underground (an antiwar group) who claimed responsibility for a dozen bombings between 1970 and 1974 (when Obama was 8 years old) but was never convicted of any crime, and later named Chicago's Citizen of the Year in 1997 -- now a distinguished Professor of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Palin tries to establish that Obama is sympathetic to the vio-

lent overthrow of the US government -- a movement Ayres is accused of organising some 38 years ago. "The Democrat" (Obama), she says, "sees America, it seems, as being so imperfect that he's palling around with terrorists who would target their own country." On October 6, she said to a campaign rally: "I am just so fearful that this is not a man who sees America the way that you and I see America."

"If you really want to talk about someone who has been cozy with radicals," said David Talbot in Salon, you should take a close look at the secessionist "America-haters" Sarah Palin and her husband have been "palling" around with" back home in Alaska. In the October 7 New York Times

(NYT), conservative columnist David Brooks wrote: "Her demagoguery has elicited some frightening, intolerable responses."

Brooks is referring to last week's Washington Post report that claimed of a rally in which a Florida man yelled "kill him" as Palin delivered the above statement connecting Obama to terrorist -- and others in the same rally shouted epithets at a black member of a TV crew.

Obviously, Palin is doing what McCain has set her to do -- be an attack dog. In a recent campaign stump, when McCain asked the crowd "who is the real Obama?" some people in his rally yelled "terrorist." In another campaign rally, some people even shouted, "Bomb Obama."