

Role of DCs crucial for good election

Nation expects them to be up to the task

WE cannot emphasise enough the importance of the role to be played by the Deputy Commissioners (who will also be acting as returning officers) for the integrity of the upcoming national election on December 18. Indeed, it is not overstatement to say that in the coming seven weeks, it is their performance, above all else, that will either make or break the election.

If the DCs rise to the occasion and perform their appointed role with efficiency and effectiveness and are not constrained by partisan consideration or influence from any quarter, then there is no reason why the election should not go smoothly and the wishes of the voters will be reflected at the polls.

To this end, the DCs must take their roles with the utmost seriousness. They must be vigilant and energetic and must ensure that the various election laws and regulations are carried out to the hilt. Anything short of this would do a disservice to the public and open the door for the elections to fall into controversy and disrepute.

It goes without saying that the DCs must ensure that those bank defaulters and convicts who are barred from contestation do not find their way onto the ballot. In addition to this, however, there is a High Court directive ordering that the candidates release certain relevant information to the voter. The DCs must make sure that these kinds of regulations are complied with and that all candidates fulfill their responsibilities to the voters.

In the past, returning officers were known to have turned a blind eye and allowed candidates to flagrantly flout the election laws. This must not happen this time.

Most important of all is the responsibility to ensure that there is no intimidation of voters or violence, either before, during, or after the polls, and that every voter is able to cast his or her vote in safety and without fear. Elections in the past have often been marred by either overt or covert intimidation of voters, and the DCs must ensure a secure and level playing field, such that the voters right to cast their ballots as their consciences dictate is not infringed upon.

The responsibility before the DCs is a grave and onerous one, and we trust that they are up to the job. If they act with integrity and are above reproach in their administration of the election, then they will have performed an indispensable service to the country.

Day of deliverance



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IN the next few days the closing arguments of both camps will have ended and the campaign trail will be closing up to the finishing line on the home stretch. Some analysts have already awarded the result of the joust in favour of Obama, and if one were to assume that the actual voting pattern will reflect the verdict of the various polls that had been conducted so far, than the American people will very likely have a Democrat in the White House, at least for the next four years.

But nothing can be taken for certain, and no sensible person should take a Democratic victory as a foregone conclusion. However, one thing is absolutely certain -- the world, thankfully, will see the end of the most arrogant and unenlightened presidency whose intellectual deficit and moral bankruptcy have been reflected in US policies, on both political and strategic matters.

November 4 will certainly see the end of a regime that had been motivated entirely by, and relied unhesitatingly on, the use of brute military strength as the primary means of settling issues. One would hope that the American people, too, will see this as a welcome change, and November 4 a day of deliverance from a regime that had increasingly taken the country to the brink of isolationism.

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

One hopes that the new administration would not stereotype the Muslims and paint them with the broad brush as "Islamofascists." One hopes, too, that the new US administration would realise the limits of its power and that there is more dividend in pursuing a multi-lateral policy than going it alone; that the new administration would take to heart what Bill Clinton had said recently, that America should lead the world by the power of its example rather than the example of its power.

One is very tempted to bypass the question by simply asking: "Does it really matter." Should any one of us in our part of the world, more so those of us belonging to the very low rungs of the third world countries, really worry as to who becomes the 44th occupant of the White House. I feel that there is a stake for everyone in this globe that value justice and peace, in who becomes the next US president; and peace cannot be guaranteed without ensuring justice.

Unfortunately, there was very little "just" that one saw in the policies of the Bush administration in the last eight years. Its resistance to world opinion and absolute reliance on unilateralism, and its unwillingness to subscribe to many important international conventions have caused it to fit the very appellation, "rogue state," that it chooses to characterise those nations that refuse to conform to its definition of world order.

As for South Asia, the Gallup polls (conducted between May and June) show a great disconnect between what the world's most well known pollster calls the world's poorest inhabitants and the politics of the United States. On the average nearly 85% of those polled in the three sub-

continental countries did not really bother as to who wins the US election, and a similar percentage has shown the same indifference regarding their preference of candidates.

Interestingly, according to Gallup, only respondents in Bangladesh expressed a statistically significant difference in their preference, favouring Obama to McCain by 19% to 8, and majority of those asked in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh did not express their opinion on whether the US election would make a difference to their country.

One wonders whether public opinion elsewhere in the world projects similar views, but certainly there is need to look at the reasons for this attitude. While no doubt there will be a change in personality, one wonders whether there will be change in any substantive form in the foreign policy under the new dispensation.

As for John McCain, he has found it extremely hard to shed the mantle of a Bush acolyte, and his opponents feel that a McCain presidency will be more of the same of what people saw in the last eight years. Although he has tried to distance himself from Bush, it is perhaps too late for McCain to be taken seriously by

the voters when he now criticises Bush's policies.

As for his foreign policy, there is hardly any difference in the tenor of his projection and what is being conducted now. He is willing to stay a hundred years in Iraq if necessary, and he has only recently brought himself round to accepting the necessity to focus on Afghanistan where defeat is staring in the face of ISAF and Nato forces. What the world is eagerly waiting to see from a new Republican president is whether he would persist with the Bush doctrine that was motivated by a warped philosophy of pre-emption, in the strategic realm, and democratisation, in the political realm.

Is there any difference in the strategic position of Obama? What will be his strategic philosophy, particularly with regards to South Asia? In some respect, Obama's position is more nuanced, but one hardly sees any substantive differences between the two. While, for example, Obama makes no secret of the fact that he would not hesitate to violate international borders of a friendly country in pursuit of terrorist leaders (as a part of global war on terror), McCain disagrees, but only to the extent that he feels that such policies



The Oval Office: The chair awaits its next occupant.

must not be voiced aloud. As regards the Middle East or for that matter stance regarding any Muslim country, Senator Obama is at a considerable disadvantage. He will be weighed down by what I call the "H" factor. He has gone out of his way to prove to the American people that he is not a Muslim and the "H" in the middle of his name has no significance at all -- if only he could dispense with it.

One can hardly blame him for that, given some of the comments from the McCain supporters, no outsider can be blamed for thinking that it is a crime to be Muslim (or an Arab) in the US. He has bent over backwards to convince the Israeli lobby that there would be no better friend of Israel than he, and that he would not hesitate to punish any Muslim state in the region if it ever posed a threat to Israel.

Granted, the primary responsibility of any leader is to see that his or her country's interest is upheld at all times. But that cannot be bereft of moral convictions and civility -- otherwise we will have to suffer from the primordial

instincts of man. One would hope that the new US administration would bring in a degree of honesty in its foreign policy, that it would ensure that subterfuge and lies are not resorted to in influencing public opinion, that it would distance itself from Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. The former is seen as an instrument that has been used to desecrate a religion by subjecting the inmates to the most undignified forms of treatment and the latter stands out flagrantly as an anti-human rights symbol.

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Consumers' rights protection law takes effect

Put institutional framework in place now

E NACTMENT of a law to protect consumer rights was a long felt need that has finally been fulfilled. Consumers are now definitely better placed to deal with the anomalies, irregularities and fraudulent practices that they have so long been exposed to.

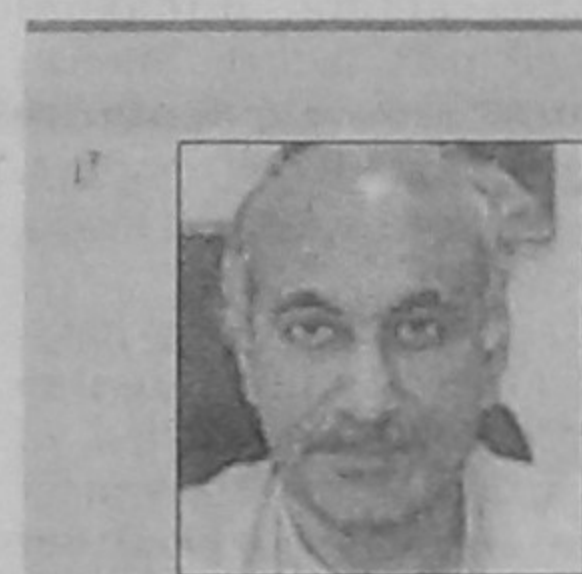
Little credit goes to successive governments which could not make any headway in framing such a law, since the initiative was first taken to protect consumer rights some 18 years ago. It is a sad truth that powerful business lobbies managed to prevail over the government on this particular issue and nothing could virtually be done to contain activities like market manipulation, adulteration, hoarding etc. So, the new law is a triumph for the consumers whose rights to seek redress against any wrongdoing were never established in the absence of any law.

The triumph, however, appears to be a qualified one as the new law prescribes methods for seeking redress that are heavily tilted towards bureaucratic, rather than judicial, solution. There is no provision for a consumers' court that would have allowed the aggrieved consumers to file cases directly. It is the directorate of consumers' rights protection which will be in charge of looking into the complaints lodged by the consumers. The process could be a little long-winding and time-consuming. And given the tendency of our bureaucracy to move slowly, dispensation of justice might not be as quick as is necessary in such cases. Here again we watch the executive branch of the government shouldering the greater part of the responsibility, when a court would have been the ideal recourse for the aggrieved consumers looking for quick justice.

The formation of the supervisory body, National Consumers' Rights Protection Council, would produce the desired results only if it can formulate effective rules to check anti-consumer practices like cheating, adulteration and price jacking. The council will have to equip the directorate well to accomplish the huge task of stopping the malpractice that hurts the consumer's interest.

The operational structure is urgently needed to be put in place, otherwise, the law will remain on paper. Simultaneously, consumers would have to be familiarised with different aspects of the law and the ways to seek redress of their grievances.

Two of a kind: Shades of Maya in Obama's rise



M.J. AKBAR

BARACK Hussein Obama could not have been older than he is. He is 47. Four years after he was born, America enacted the first set of electoral and positive discrimination reforms that lifted blacks from the deep depression into which they had been cast after their escape from slavery.

President Lyndon Johnson, a Texan who understood the virulence of half of America, led the momentum of radical change. Martin Luther King's assassination was the last great crime of white racists. It proved the tipping point. A new generation of blacks answered with arson and terrorism.

That rage was calmed by care. Obama is a child of that remarkable achievement of democracy, a

BYLINE

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child wafted towards his destiny on the silent engine of a peaceful revolution. The genius of any minority is wasted without the chemistry of circumstance.

We will never know how many Obamas existed before Obama, for their talent was poisoned prematurely by prejudice -- just as we in India will never know how many Mayawatis existed before Mayawati.

She too is a combination of individual genius and six decades of social engineering through reservations on electoral and academic maps that has empowered a people enslaved for thousands of years by the inequities of the caste system.

Obama and Mayawati, despite their vastly different temperaments and trajectories, have understood two critical aspects of

the transition from the margins to centre-stage. First, you cannot achieve this by unidimensional community mobilisation. You have to consolidate your base, of course, but that is only the first layer of a pyramid that needs the support of many communities.

Obama reached out to white liberals, of course, but that was the easy part. He had the courage and wisdom to have faith also in middle class America in the middle west, and it has responded in sufficient numbers to take him so close to victory that now only a major self-goal can stop him.

Mayawati could not have become chief minister of Uttar Pradesh without substantive support from Brahmins and Muslims. Her future progress in national politics will depend on how sustainable her alliance with

others is. Muslims will be the hinge to her future.

The second realisation is that you cannot defeat the entrenched power of establishment without money. Their methods seem completely different, but they are not as different as you might think. Obama does not convert his donations into real estate in Washington, and I doubt if he likes diamonds. But the principal source of funding for both is grassroots donation: the expanse of the dribble effect.

Mayawati, of course, has exploited power to add to her stash, but in this she is no more culpable than any other Indian politician. You cannot hold her to different standards just because she is a Dalit. She probably has complete contempt for conventional political morality in any

case; that is what kept her community in bondage.

Obama has left Republicans reeling, when they are not seething, with the amount of money he has raised in small donations -- \$150 million in October alone. Republicans are used to a money advantage. They are now whining in self-pity compounded by disbelief.

Republicans might have reconciled themselves to defeat against a traditional white Democrat. But to be upstaged by an "upstart" has churned their souls and turned them visceral. They have run through a range of slurs.

They accused Obama of being an ally of a black racist, white terrorist, red socialist and finally green Islamist. This is yesterday ranting against tomorrow.

Obama also has that unique distinction that Napoleon demanded from his generals: luck. Victory belongs to he who can spice his talent with good fortune. Hillary Clinton should have stopped him in the primaries; instead she mismanaged her way to defeat.

The fact that he had to fight every inch enabled a nation wide network that is paying dividends today. But his biggest stroke of

luck was John McCain's choice of Sarah Palin as running mate.

Bill Clinton called her "hot," a view endorsed by his soul-mate Asif Zardari. But America wants a cool hand at the top at this moment of grave economic peril. The Wall Street meltdown could not have been better timed for a Democrat triumph.

Moreover, Palin is, to put it correctly, ignorant and politically foolish. As if she had not done enough harm, she bought \$150,000 worth of clothes for the campaign from expensive stores. This is the kind of morsel that feeds a million conversations.

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The Muslims of the subcontinent saw the realisation of Jinnah's dream in 1947. In 2008, we can only ask a question: was that a dream or a nightmare?

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A tool for rapid industrial growth?

Although there is some debate on the effect of SEZs in accelerating overall growth in an economy, the truth remains that the success of a zone depends on how it is designed, developed, and managed.

MD. GHULAM MURTAZA

IN the race for economic growth in a short time, developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America are increasingly looking towards solutions that will foster investment activities insulated from the quagmire of infrastructural and environmental bottlenecks.

Special Economic Zones (SEZ) are one such solution. SEZs are now looked upon as engines for economic growth supported by quality infrastructure and complemented by an attractive fiscal package with the minimum possible regulations.

Recent analyses by the World Bank Group and others have identified key constraints to private sector competitiveness. They are (i) inadequate and poor quality infra-

structure and energy supply, (ii) difficulty in obtaining land especially serviced land, (iii) poor access to finance, and (iv) cumbersome and inefficiently implemented regulatory and administrative procedures.

At the same time, in an increasingly competitive world, countries like Bangladesh need a paradigm shift in their competitive strategy, from the historical approach of price-based competition based on low labour costs and managed trade (such as the MFA for the textile and garment sector) to inclusion of non-price factors being demanded by the markets around the world, including quality, timeliness and production based on compliance with good social standards.

Against this backdrop, formation of SEZs can pave the way for

more productive use of land, labour, capital and infrastructure, leading to greater investment, economic growth and social development in the country.

Features of SEZs

SEZs can deal with infrastructural deficiencies and bureaucratic hassles such as complex regulations and inefficient customs procedures in these countries. SEZs provide for:

- Simplified procedures for setting up units and conducting business in SEZs;
- Single window clearance for setting up a unit in a Special Economic Zone;
- Simplified procedures for operation and maintenance of the SEZs.

An SEZ is an industrial cluster where external economies of scale and other advantages help the

operating firms in reducing costs, developing competitive production systems and attracting investment, in particular, FDI. India is one of the first countries in Asia to have adopted this strategy.

Some developing countries, including Bangladesh, see it as a tool that permits them to develop and diversify exports and act as job creation vehicle, which addresses the increasing unemployment prevalent in these countries. However, with foreign investors, SEZs can also be effective in establishing a safe haven where they can start before gaining the confidence to locate elsewhere in the country.

SEZs must offer modern, adequately sized, world-class facilities that meet the expectations of foreign investors. Zones of this kind can be seen in the Middle East but are absent in Bangladesh.

Global proliferation of SEZs and job creation

SEZs have been expanding globally at a phenomenal pace. According to estimates of the South Asia Foreign Investment Advisory Services (FIAS) there were 80 free

zone projects in 30 countries in the '70s, which accounted for \$6 billion in exports and around one million direct job creation.

Today, SEZs operating in over 120 countries have over 2000 projects accounting for over a staggering \$600 billion in export earnings and \$500 billion direct jobs; China alone boasts of over 30 million jobs in SEZs. Many countries across the world, including China, Jordan and the Philippines, have attained excellent economic growth through such economic zones.

Mass production made possible through economic zones dramatically transformed the jewellery industry in India, from its cottage industry status into a mechanised modern one.

Spillover effects of SEZs
Well-planned SEZs have multiple spillover effects. Some examples are:

The 420 square kilometer Subic Bay free-port in the Philippines, administered by the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority, is home to 3,000 residents and includes a deep-water port, an international airport and air cargo hub, and a

nature preserve. The free port has attracted private investment in residential and retirement communities, marinas, a technology park, and two industrial parks. The port is being upgraded.

The 375 square kilometer Aqaba Special Economic Zone in Jordan, administered by the Aqaba SEZ Authority, is home to 80,000 residents. The zone includes the facilities of three ports and an international airport, and hosts private investors in an IE, a logistics park, and two master-planned tourism/residential communities. Two new logistics facilities and two tourism areas are under development.

The 2,020 square kilometer Shenzhen SEZ in China is home to over 4 million residents. The zone has attracted both tourism and industrial investment, and includes a port, an airport, 130 hotels, and several industrial zones.

Management of SEZs

The above examples make it evident that success of SEZs is essentially linked to the way they are located, developed and managed. In Bangladesh, harnessing such

programs with the national objectives of economic development and poverty alleviation would require translating broad policy objectives into institutional, legal and physical development frameworks required for implementation of these zones.

This requires some sort of consensus on the direction of future economic zone programs. Experts on SEZs have suggested some options, which include (a) rehabilitating and commercialising existing properties; (b) implementing new BOT projects under current regimes; (c) modernising existing regimes, and implementing new PPP and private-sponsor projects; (d) introducing a master-developed, contiguous SEZ and (e) introducing a regional, multi-project SEZ program.

However, choosing the appropriate option would entail a realistic perception of factors such as implementation costs, the absorption capacity of the economy and socio-economic factors such as public support to new projects, and reaction of local communities and civil society.

The economic zone policy regime

should specifically address methods for implementing both public-private partnerships (PPPs) by specifying the areas of their contribution, or fully private initiatives (including single factory zones). This should include procedures for project identification, identification of potential public parties to the PPP and the division of responsibilities between the Economic Zones Regulator and public asset owners.

Although there is some debate on the effect of SEZs in accelerating overall growth in an economy, the truth remains that the success of a zone depends on how it is designed, developed, and managed. Zones in the Dominican Republic, for instance, account for over 80 percent of total exports, while they employ millions of people in China.

Special Economic Zones today are evolving towards large, integrated economic communities. They are looked on as catalysts for ushering in rapid economic development to an economy in a world of competitiveness and changing external scenarios.

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