

## What it means for us

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SHAHPAR SELIM

THE US is going through what is arguably the most important election in its recent history. Barack Obama looks set to win, and most Bangladeshis I know will be delighted. But what would Obama's election, or McCain's, for that matter, actually mean for this country?

Bangladeshis should support either Obama or McCain based on what their respective mandates mean for our economic and environmental well-being. Bangladesh should support the candidate that fits its interests as a secular country with massive developmental challenges.

When it comes to South Asian foreign policy we have heard from Obama and McCain on the recent Indian nuclear deal, and, of course, Pakistan is never far away. But what do the foreign and trade policies of Obama and McCain mean for Bangladesh? Unsurprisingly, there is very little to go on. During this campaign, how many times have we heard the word "Bangladesh"?

In fact, McCain has solidly kept quiet on US international trade issues (is he hoping to make it up as he goes along?). Given how little has been articulated by the candidates, Bangladesh should be cautious and read from the candidates' voting records: given the overall economic recession, no deal will go through that does not have America's best interests at heart.

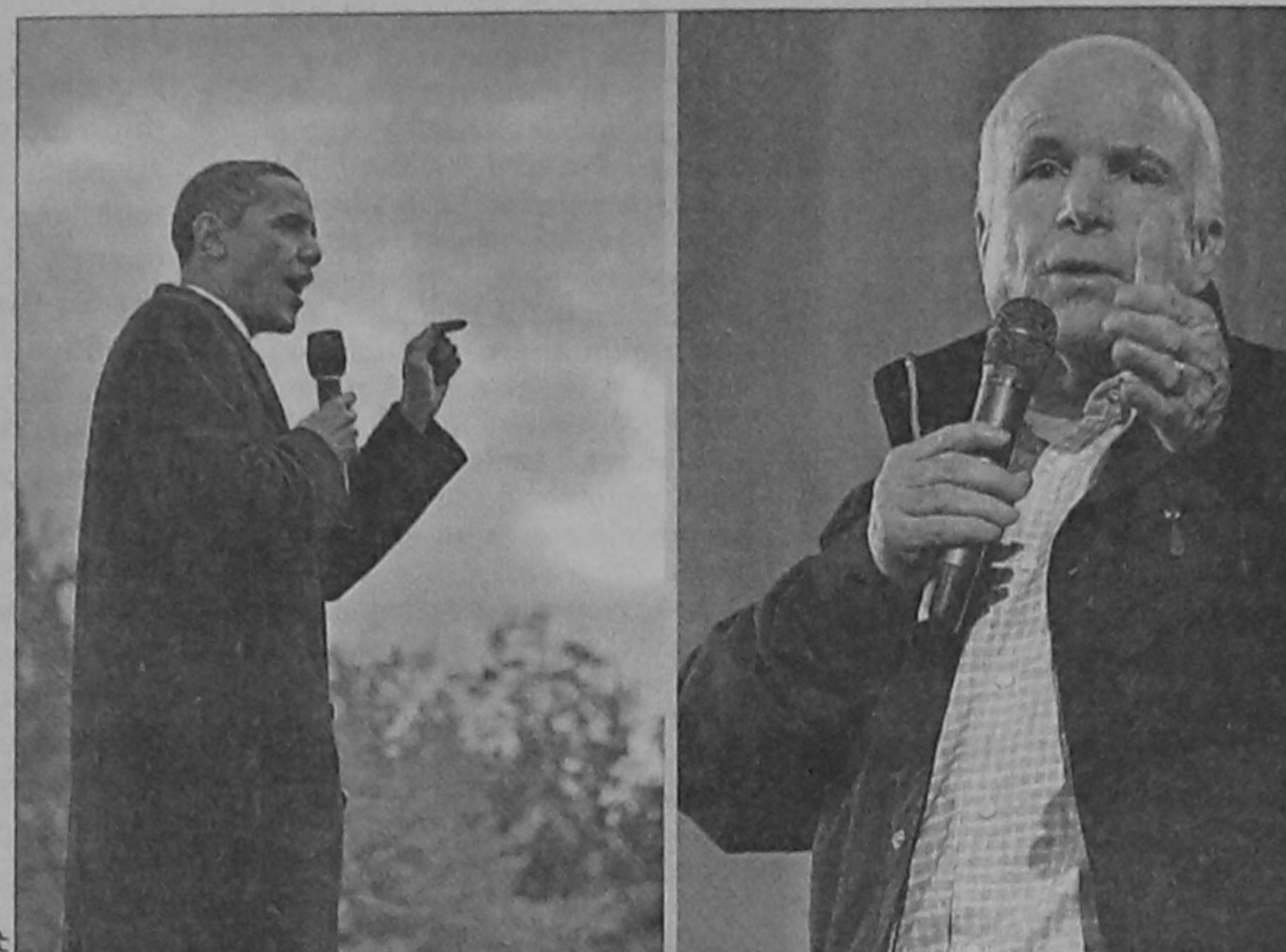
Bangladesh should be cautiously watching the new administration's take on key textile issues -- such as monitoring the withdrawal of Chinese RMG exports into the US market on January 1; US support for the rules of origin and yarn forward policies that favour sourcing of yarns from the US over cheaper yarns used by Bangladeshi factories;

US support for the Berry Amendment that requires the US Defense Department to only source textiles made in the US; US response to Chinese currency manipulations with regards to Chinese RMG; pro-America trade enforcement efforts; and the Doha Round negotiations.

The fate of Bangladeshi RMG already hangs on powerful trade and textile lobby groups operating in Washington. The US National Council of Textile Organizations (a US interest lobby group) recently wrote to the candidates asking for their mandates. While McCain is yet to respond, Obama replied in a letter to the council in a letter dated October 24: "My trade policy rests on that same belief in change. Our country can benefit from trade, but I will insist on a trade policy that will work for all Americans. That means opening markets abroad for our manufactured exports, and including enforceable labour and environmental standards in free trade agreements. It also means strong enforcement of our trade remedy laws at home and of our trade rights abroad."

Bangladeshi RMG owners should interpret this message with caution -- while Obama is against the massive current account surpluses accumulated by China by currency manipulation, this may mean that his administration might be open to Bangladeshi RMG imports because of our LDC status, however, RMG producers like India and Bangladesh also artificially devalue their home currency to remain competitive -- does this mean that we might be next?

McCain has a clear record of voting for free trade, which will be beneficial for Bangladeshi RMG (88% of the time he voted against creating trade barriers, while Obama has done so only 36% of the time). Obama



On whom will fortune smile?

supports intensive monitoring of textile imports, the Berry Amendment, and the yarn forward rule, and strict monitoring of free trade agreements for American interests.

Bangladeshi RMG is heavily dependent on trade agreements -- the most recent being the NPDA (New Partnership for Development Act). While a Democrat senator is pushing for NPDA duty-free access for Bangladeshi RMG into the US market, the new Obama regime may potentially be less enthusiastic about trade liberalisation in the current recessionary mode. Already the NPDA has run into trouble as apparel exporting countries under AGOA are opposing the entry of Cambodia- and Bangladesh-made trousers, knit and non-knit shirts (worth about 70% of our RMG exports) into the US.

As it is, with the looming recession, prospects for "cheap and basic" clothes from Bangladesh face a harsh squeeze -- the lower and middle classes in the US are expected to reduce consumption, which will directly hit the Bangladeshi RMG segment. In this situation, what will happen to social compliance is anybody's guess. What will be the next US administration's point of view on this is a billion dollar question. How much of their insistence on social compliance will be

genuine concern backed up by fair prices paid for compliant labour, and how much of it will be short-hand for trade protectionism?

Sad to say, Bangladesh has no clear indication whether McCain or Obama will be better for our largest export sector.

Lastly, let me remind you that like Bangladeshi politicians, everything Obama and McCain say are old fashioned campaign rhetoric -- seasonal and on the side of winning votes. Obama has shown he can flip-flop on issues, as can McCain. So even if they are saying the wrong/right things before November 4, they might change their minds and do the wrong/right things after inauguration.

The reader may interpret the previous sentence picking the combination of words that give you the most peace of mind. It would be great to have a black American president who is less racist, intellectually challenged, morally corrupt, and militarily adventurist than Bush, yet his Senate voting records make him a less triumphant choice from the Bangladeshi viewpoint than popularly imagined.

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## McCain's last stand

The handling of the economic crisis will probably cost McCain the presidency. It will cause a generational shift in Congress. Younger people, especially in the Republican Party, such as Gov. Sarah Palin and Gov. Bobby Jindal will step up to re-brand the party.

MIR MAHFUZ UR RAHMAN

POLITICS is the game of creating a message where there is none. Striking a chord, more in perception than reality, of a monster in the darkness or a victimisation of a major voting block, and there you have it -- presto, a winning campaign.

It has been done numerous times by "great" leaders and is practiced with great gusto by Ayatollah Khomeini, George Bush, Hugo Chavez, Kim Jong-Il, and many others. In the past three US elections, George Bush and to a lesser extent, John McCain, have been pushing Osama bin Laden and homeland security as the only test worth submitting oneself to.

However, during the US presidential election of 2008, there was a bigger demon whose shadow cast the fear of Obama out of the minds of most Americans. From the maze of Iraq and homeland security, immigration and welfare reform, health care reform and choice for abortion, campaign finance reform and earmarks in bills and global warming, it was the "It's the Economy, Stupid" slogan, carved by James Carville for Bill Clinton in 1992, which have set the tone for this campaign.

It was at this point, that McCain the maverick senator who has fought his own party on issues such as immigration reform, earmarks and global warming, and who never had any fondness for subjects such as the budget and the economy, could have made his greatest and last stand.

He should have broken with a President with whom he had no loyalties, and a party which has always tried to alienate him, and tried to connect with the electorate. Surveys have showed that since the Wall Street crisis erupted in September, public anger about the initial \$700 billion bailout by the ex-Goldman Sachs CEO turned treasury secretary, Henry Paulson, and its preceding mortgage meltdown, high oil prices, and credit crunch has pushed voters towards Obama.

It would have been a risky stance, given that there was still twelve weeks to go when the credit crunch hit the major headlines. McCain did try to keep his White House anointed image and try to meander through the maze but by then, the maze controlled him and he was not in charge any more.

First, the members of the House of Representatives were not really involved in the negotiations about the bailout plan. Initially Paulson seemed like the right person to be on the job for such a crisis, but he could

not sell it initially to the Republic base.

Second, there was tremendous unrest among voters against the plan. Many saw it as a betrayal of Republican principles, as a government intrusion into free markets. Democrats could not believe that highly paid CEOs and investment bankers were being bailed out.

Third, McCain, following Paulson, also communicated badly. He could have made clear that the taxpayers were likely to get much of the \$700 billion back eventually. But he did not communicate it well. He took his time off and went back to Washington and made an effort to be at the center of the negotiations. However, it is interesting to note that the Democrats control Congress; and when McCain returned to Washington, they basically shut him out of the negotiations.

Fourth, he could finally use the debate to bring out the issues to save the plan and his campaign. But, he was beaten by Obama in the debates. He should not have let it linger to such a late stage in the campaign. That is where his initial stance of opposing anything going on in the beltway as a tactic to connect with the people's anger and frustrations.

Even today, Obama is using the "rearview mirror" ad, showing George W. Bush, in the mirror, in the same manner, as Osama videotape four days before the last election pushed a slight George W. Bush lead into a healthy margin against the already doomed John Kerry.

This is the reason that as of writing, McCain is behind Obama in nationwide polls, and battleground polls show McCain behind in all states that he cannot afford to lose: Nevada, Colorado, Ohio, Florida, Virginia, and North Carolina. No Republican has ever been elected president without winning Ohio, and losing Florida would signal big shifts in voter preference compared to the past 2 elections.

The handling of the economic crisis will probably cost McCain the presidency. It will cause a generational shift in Congress. Younger people, especially in the Republican Party, such as Gov. Sarah Palin and Gov. Bobby Jindal will step up to re-brand the party, while the Democrats will look to eight years under President Obama. McCain will go back to the Senate, shunned by an angry Republican Party and ignored by a Democratic Party. If he does not run for re-election from the Senate in 2010, he will probably be a quieter personality. The Bush Era will be over.

Mir Mahfuz ur Rahman, a student of economics and international relations from Johns Hopkins University, is a merchant banker and a freelance contributor.

## What to watch for

NATE SILVER

6 PM EST (4 AM Bangladesh Standard Time). Polls close in portions of Indiana and Kentucky.

Traditionally, these are the first states to get called by the networks, spotting the Republicans a quick 19 points in the Electoral College. This year, however, is liable to be a little bit different. Indiana is far more competitive than usual, and is probably the state with the greatest disparity in ground games: the Obama campaign has 42 field offices open there, whereas McCain neglected the state entirely until recently.

If the state is called before 7 PM for John McCain, that probably means we're in for a long night. If, on the other hand, the state is called for Obama in the first hour after the polls close, that could indicate that the force of Obama's field operation has been underestimated, and that McCain is in for a catastrophically poor evening.

7 PM EST (5 AM BST). Polls close in Virginia and Georgia, as well as most of Florida and most of New Hampshire.

Virginia, for my money, is the most important state in this election. If John McCain loses it, his path to victory is exceptionally narrow -- he would need to pull out an upset in Pennsylvania, while holding on to Florida and Ohio, and avoiding a sweep out West.

Georgia and New Hampshire are a bit less essential electorally, but they may tell us the most about whether the polls are off in this election. If there's one state where Obama is likely to over-perform his polls, it's in Georgia, where 35 percent of early voters are African-American, and where almost 30 percent of them did not vote in 2004. These are the sorts of voters that may erroneously be screened out by "likely voter" models that rely on past voting history.

On the other hand, if there is any state where the polls might over-estimate Obama's numbers, it's in New Hampshire, where nearly the entire electorate is white and where Obama was famously upset by Hillary Clinton during the primaries. If McCain holds Obama to within about five points in New Hampshire -- closer than any current polls -- we may need to be worried about some sort of Bradley Effect.

7:30 PM EST (5:30 AM BST). Polls close in Ohio and North Carolina.

The dynamic to look for in these states involves early voting: more than twice as many people have voted early in North Carolina as did in 2004, and nearly three times as many in Cuyahoga County (Cleveland), Ohio. Recent polling indicates that Obama may have a lead of 20-30 points among early voters in Ohio and a 10-20 point lead in North Carolina. If Republican turnout is at all depressed on Election Day -- because of anything from bad weather to low morale -- that may be too large a deficit for McCain to make up.

8 PM EST (6 AM BST). Polls close in Pennsylvania, Michigan and Missouri.

Use caution when interpreting the results from these three states; Missouri in particular is notorious for nearly having been called prematurely both in the 2006 senate race and in this year's Democratic primary.

In each state, Barack Obama will rack up huge vote totals in the cities (Philadelphia, Detroit and St. Louis respectively) while trying to hold his own in the rest of the state. If the city numbers come in first, Obama's margins will be exaggerated. If the rural numbers come in first, Obama's prospects will be much better than they appear.

But Pennsylvania in particular is the one to watch. If Barack Obama holds onto Pennsylvania -- the only state where John McCain seems to have been closing the gap over the last week of the campaign -- then winning virtually any red state (Virginia, Florida, Ohio, Colorado, Missouri) would probably clinch the election for him.

9 PM EST (7 AM BST). Polls close in Colorado, New Mexico, Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Wisconsin and Minnesota should be called fairly quickly for Obama; if they aren't, that's a sign that something has gone truly wrong for the Democratic ticket. New Mexico looks like a safe Obama-state too, but since its vote-counting is notoriously slow, it may take longer to call.

Colorado, meanwhile, is the last of what I'd characterise as this year's "Big Three" states (the others are Pennsylvania and Virginia). If Pennsylvania and Virginia have split their votes (and Obama hasn't picked up Ohio or Florida), then Obama probably wins if he wins Colorado, and loses if he doesn't.

10 PM EST (8 AM BST). Polls close in Nevada, Iowa, Montana and New York.

This is the earliest point at which the race might be officially called for Barack Obama -- there just aren't enough electoral votes out there, even if he's swept every swing state, to get him to 270 until New York's 31 come in. But assuming that we don't know the outcome of the election by this time, Nevada, where Obama has expanded his lead and where much of the state has already voted, could be Obama's ace in the hole -- possibly offsetting a loss in Pennsylvania if paired with other pickups like Colorado and Virginia. The key area to watch in Nevada is Washoe County (Reno), which John Kerry lost by 4 points in 2004 but where the Obama campaign has registered thousands of new voters. If Obama wins Washoe, that means the state -- and probably the country -- is his.

Nate Silver is the creator of FiveThirtyEight.com, a popular political blog.

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## TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

### 'The government is on its knees'

A.S.M. Shahjahan was born in Noakhali in 1941. He obtained MCom degree in combined commerce from Dhaka University. He joined Pakistan police service in 1966. Shahjahan served as IGP from 1992-1996, and later as youth and sports secretary from 1996-1999. He served as education and youth and sports adviser to the caretaker government in 2001. He also served as vice-chancellor of Asia Pacific University from 2001-2003. Shahjahan is a member of Shushashoner Jonnoy Nagorik, a senior adviser of UNDP, and chairman of the advisory board of Coordinating Council for Human Rights. Shamim Ashraf took the interview.

What are the advancements since 1/11?

1/11 saved us from hell, but it could not take us to heaven as we dreamt. Among the positive changes are separation of judiciary from the executive, boosting up of ACC and giving autonomy to EC, giving some neutrality to the administration and law enforcing agencies, which were gravely politicised, and reorganising the PSC.

But the main task of the government, which is to help the EC hold the general elections, suffered as the CTG took many things beyond that. The CTG didn't do the registration of parties and holding of dialogue with political parties in the whole of 2007. They rather said they didn't want to hold dialogue with parties. These have become counter-productive now. We're now talking about doubt and uncertainty centring the elections, which is the consequence of avoiding dialogue with the political parties in the first year.

The government should have settled these issues in 2007, when it was in a strong and dominating position to eradicate ills of the politics and democracy, and the parties would ask for compromise then. The goal in 2007 was to improve democracy and have a better political culture through free, fair acceptable elections and reforms. Now the goal has changed, and the government is holding dialogue with parties to please them and bring them to general elections at any cost. That's why they are sitting in dialogue with a wanted and accused Jamaat leader.

Where else do you think has the government failed to show wisdom?

Why did it form the Truth Commission so late? Immediately after coming to power, the government could have declared amnesty for all. The Truth Commission came into being after some people were convicted. Isn't it double-standards when you are now saying that you will free some people if they surrender their money?

Evaluate the EC's works?

The EC failed to work by the roadmap. It should have started the main task immediately. Had it formed the RPO, finalised the conduct rules and asked parties for registration, the parties could be compelled to go by those. They are now saying they don't have time to do all these. Now the government is on its knees, in 2007 the political parties were.

Why did the government fail to realise this at the beginning?

I don't question their intention and I don't think there is any conspiracy. I would rather say the government didn't have the wisdom needed in that situation.

BNP earlier demanded going back to the old RPO and Khaleda Zia demanded resignation of all the election commissioners...

The chief election commissioner (CEC) did a mistake by not inviting Khondoker Delwar. He then tried to cover it by calling it a doctrine of necessity, and recently admitted it was a mistake. These are very important for a political party, and the BNP has point to blame the EC. The party split and suffered a setback.

But I can in no way support the demand to go back to the previous RPO, considering the unacceptable legal loopholes like the EC's independence. There should be constructive criticism, but no comments that can aggravate the situation. I think the politicians should not miss the opportunity of election in anyway. Such comments divert attention, and are against the spirit of moving towards democracy.

Why the doubt and uncertainty over election?

The two leading parties' failure to come to a unanimous decision on withdrawal of emergency, upazila election timing and the two leaders' participation in the election freely, and uncertainty over registration caused the uncertainty. Delimitation should have been decided long before.

How can the government ensure the two leaders' release with cases pending against them in the court?

The government can withdraw the cases even after charge framing in the court. Sheikh Hasina was sent abroad on executive order. The government can show its intention by issuing executive orders. However, I think there is question about how essential was their arrest. They could be arrested later.

Now the government is bowing down and sending the advisers to their houses and trying to please them. Does it look good in the eyes of law; does it look good when the government is compelled to sit with a wanted Jamaat leader?

What made the government arrest them?

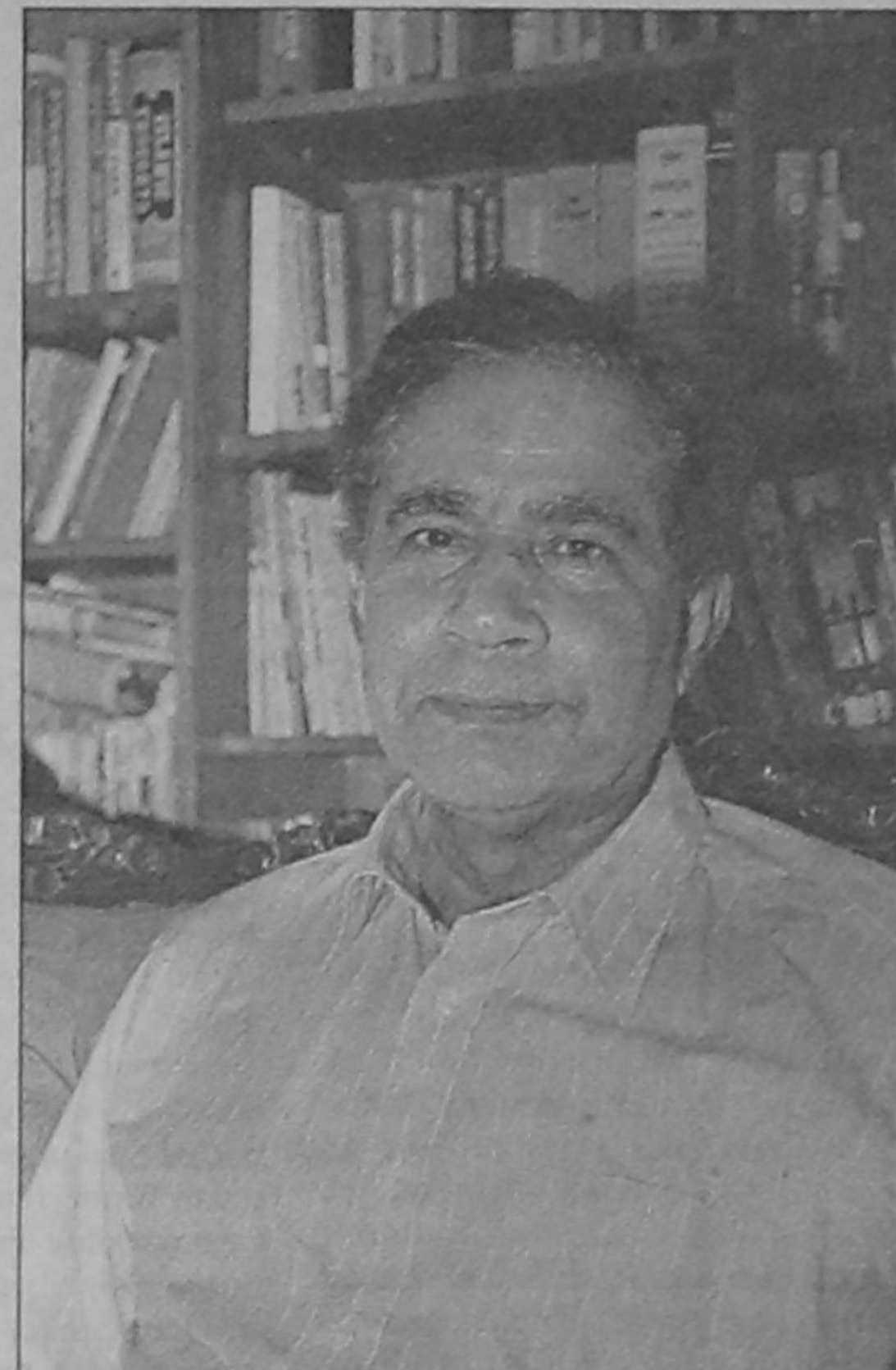
We saw the government attempting to enforce the Minus-2 formula. They later went for arresting. They should go for arresting them only when they have necessary evidence for investigation. I think the situation that has arisen now wouldn't have arisen had the government avoided arresting them.

Do you see any qualitative changes in political culture?

I would have expected the parties to make some plan for self-purgation before the dialogue. But I don't see any change in their mentality. The BNP is demanding the previous RPO, and both the main parties are demanding allowing the convicts to contest in elections. The parties should have said that they wouldn't allow any accused people in their parties.

Why didn't the change come?

The parties have become emboldened, and they can dictate to the government instead of being dictated by the rules and laws made by the government. They say they want reform, but their actions do not prove it. I think people's expectation has been marred. However, they will get a lesson because the anti-corruption drive



A.S.M. Shahjahan

has sent a message door to door that nobody is above law.

How much has been done for change in political culture?

We've introduced some laws, which they are yet to accept. But experience shows that the parties have disregarded the laws over the years, and the EC didn't play its due role. It didn't even play its expected role in the last city and municipality elections. It's true that the parties have brought some changes in their constitutions, but who can ensure that those will be followed? Is our country's constitution followed properly?

Are we going to bid goodbye to confrontational politics soon?

I don't think we will, because going to power is their main goal at any cost. Some big politicians were shaken, but not the cadres. Besides, I am not sure how independently the administration and law enforcing agencies will work during the tenure of an elected government. The CTG has failed to carry out any reforms in the administration -- which may lead to its neutral functioning during a political government regime -- or ensure professionalism.

How do you see the election environment in the country?

Not up to expectation. The emergency should go first, and the government needs to look at the uncertainties I mentioned earlier. There is a lack of vision and understanding on the government's part about the political and public sensitivity of the issues. Where is the place of the people who supported the government when it took over?

You talked about legislation earlier...

The government has mixed up legislation with the executive. They introduced so many laws and ordinances. By blocking bail, the government is taking judicial power. Lawmaking should have been kept limited only to election, and the government could leave guidelines regarding other issues. The government is not as good as its promises and constitutional pledges.

What about election under emergency?

There will be some sort of panic even if the emergency is relaxed. Besides, how far will the government relax it? It is mentioned in the constitution that some fundamental rights like freedom of speech and expression will remain suspended during emergency.

Emergency is against human rights. Besides, emergency is not for day-to-day violence; it is for state terrorism. We need a joyful environment for election, and emergency should be withdrawn immediately.

How do you see parties' allegation imposition of reforms?

Morality can't be enforced by any authority. We can recall the pledges made by the three alliances during the 1990 movement against Ershad, BNP's reforms demand while in opposition and Awami League's 31-point reforms demand. The parties themselves wanted reforms and the CTG just attempted to implement some at the will of the people. But the parties said they wouldn't sign any document when the CTG proposed signing of a national charter.

Do you think parties now need to reach agreement on some national issues?

Yes I do. And there is already agreement among the leaders.

Why don't people see any result then?

It's due to a culture of intolerance. A party doesn't want to accept that what the rival party is saying could be something good. Tolerance also means accepting what's good in others.

How do you see the anti-corruption drive?

The Anti-corruption Commission tried their best. But the process will have to be institutionalised for sustaining the effect. Without depending only on the ACC, every institution will have to use the hierarchy to keep watch on each other to stop corruption. Supervising authorities should also be caught for their inaction in this regard.