

Sheikh Hasina's welcome return

AL should unveil its vision for future

WE welcome Sheikh Hasina back to the country after her medical treatment abroad, consigning any speculation mongering to the bin. With the election schedule having been announced and the emergency relaxed, the country is set on the election track. The Awami League chief's return adds to the fullness of the electoral atmosphere. Her presence and leading the party up front rather than from a long distance would surely help invigorate the party and steer it steadily on course to the upcoming general election.

Apart from giving positive vibes overseas about her party taking part in the polls, on arrival she has made an emphatic statement against any effort to foil the election and urged all concerned to be united in their bid to participate in the national poll. For our part, we have been constantly imploring the political parties to concentrate their attention on the election because the people look forward to it as a way of marking a qualitative difference in the type of leadership offered and in terms of future governance of the country.

BNP leader Begum Khaleda Zia has warned that the country is in a crisis. To our mind, the solution to the crisis lies in election. We also believe that non-participation in the election by a major party can create a crisis of its own which palpably the people don't want.

The Awami League is a political party with a glorious legacy anchored in its participation in all movements for securing the rights of the people, culminating in its leading the freedom struggle. The AL needs to be revitalised through internal democracy, the party has had provisions for. Now that Sheikh Hasina is back, she is definitely expected to strengthen intra-party democracy, as a first sign of which her party is already working towards implementing the bottom-up nomination process envisaged in the amended RPO.

The AL owes it to the voters to let them know what concrete plans and programmes the party has to address the burning issues facing the country. Actually, the people are keen on seeing the major parties share their vision for the future to make informed choices in the next election.

The sordid happenings at BSMMU

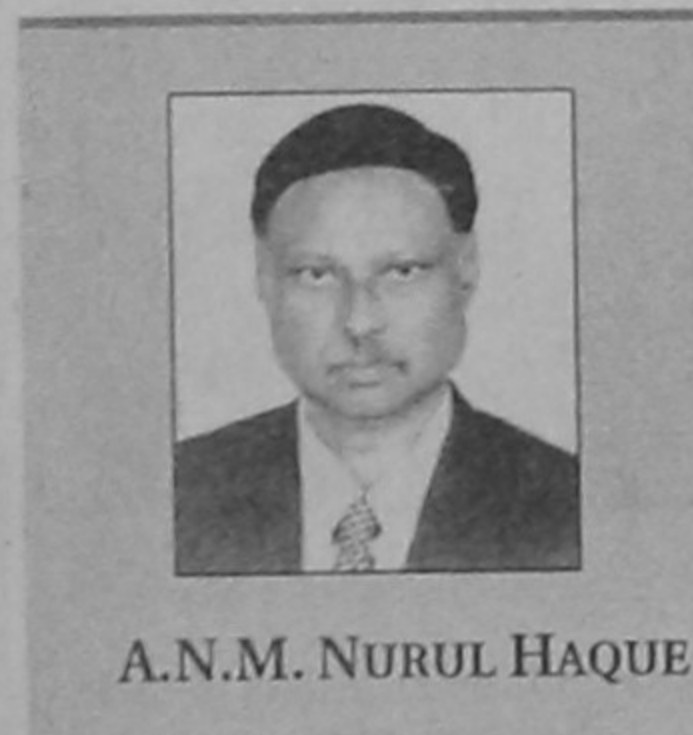
Meaningful action needed to restore credibility

THE removal a few days ago of some senior officials, including the vice chancellor, of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University on charges of irregularities brings to light the questionable manner in which the institution was being run. When BSMMU began its journey, it did so with high hopes about offering excellence in medical education and research. However, in recent years there have been allegations of a politicisation of the BSMMU administration, with the result that the organisation has been in decline as far as medical education and the provision of services to patients are concerned. The recent instance of doctors at BSMMU producing a false medical certificate and without proper approval for a detained politician, to the effect that he needed to be treated outside, speaks volumes about things going wrong at the institution. There are set criteria about medical certification through a formation of medical boards that cannot and must not be disregarded.

The extent to which BSMMU may have become hostage to partisan politics was illustrated once more by the agitation put up by a section of staff there on Wednesday against the new vice-chancellor, pro-vice chancellors and treasurer. These new appointees found the way to their offices blocked by doctors and staff allegedly loyal to a political party, which shows that unless serious and drastic measures are taken to arrest the decline at BSMMU, we might soon have the sight of a good medical institution falling into disrepair and disrepute. And among these measures is the very real need of identifying the corruption of the last few years. Appointments and transfers were made on the basis of political requirements, which obviously goes against the tenets of the medical profession. That is unfortunate and should not have happened.

There is little question that the ethics of the medical profession need to be restored at BSMMU and indeed at every other hospital where they have been given short shrift in recent years. The moral bankruptcy that has for the past many years driven holes into our health care system puts us all to shame. When doctors, who clearly enjoy an exalted position in society, think little of undermining their own profession by resorting to unethical practices, what confidence can the public have in the premier medical institutions of the country? Let an example be set through weeding out the elements who have had a hand in bringing BSMMU to its present sorry state.

Bumpy ride on electoral highway



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

AS things stand, the country is set to go through an electoral process to vote for an elected government to run its affairs for next five years. "The country is already on the highway of election," said education and commerce adviser Hossain Zillur Rahman after holding the latest round of dialogue with the major political parties.

But a smooth ride to the parliamentary election set for December 18 is still suffused with confusion, as the major political parties have continued bickering on certain electoral issues, principal among them being the withdrawal of the state of emergency. The caretaker

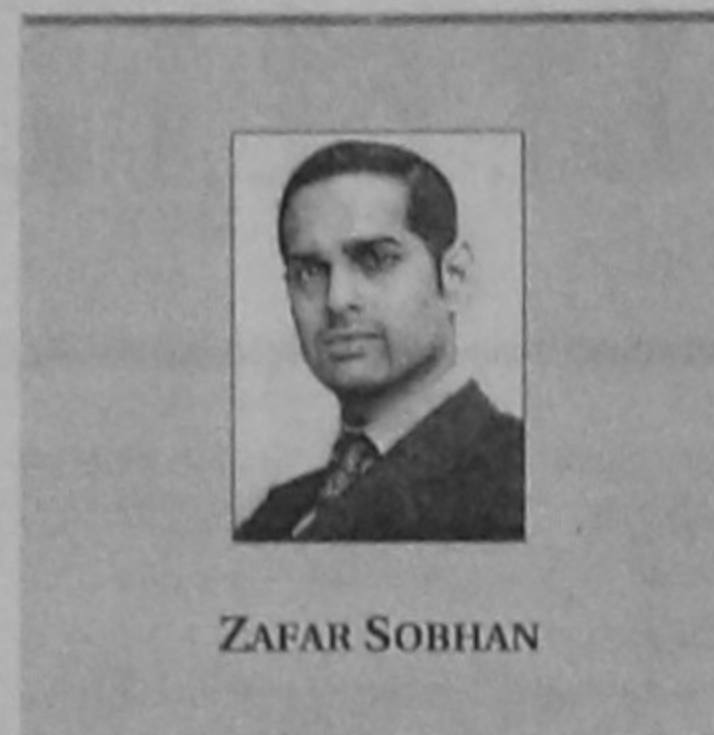
BY THE NUMBERS

As things stand now, with the ninth parliamentary election just around the corner and no sign of any election fever in the country, the political parties should backtrack on their demand for a total lifting of state of emergency and move full steam ahead towards election. Any unforeseen development may disrupt the electoral process and invite a tragedy of sweeping proportions for the nation.

government (CTG) and the Election Commission (EC) are out to hold the parliamentary election under the state of emergency despite objections raised by major political parties. Though the major political parties haven't taken any anti-election stand, they have been pressing the CTG hard for complete withdrawal of the state of emergency.

The demands placed by BNP and Awami League (AL) in the latest round of dialogues with the CTG on October 23 were much the same -- total lifting of the state of emergency, ensuring participation of their two top leaders in election,

Yes we can



ZAFAR SOBHAN

WHAT, if anything, does the election of Barack Hussein Obama as the 44th president of the United States mean to us here in Bangladesh? There are those who would argue that any euphoria on the part of Bangladeshis would be misplaced -- that his election means nothing to us and will do nothing for the nation. But I think that such a narrow and determinedly cynical reaction misses the full picture.

For starters, at a very basic level, Barack Obama's election as president will make a significant difference for the better when it comes to US policy, both domestic and international.

The entire world, Bangladesh included, has suffered a great deal due to the ill-conceived policies of the Bush administration, and when it comes to a host of issues as far ranging as energy policy to nuclear environmental policy to nuclear non-proliferation to family planning funding -- there is no question that an Obama administration will be an immeasurable improvement on the present.

But it is more than just policy. It is a question of the kind of man who will sit in the White House come January 20, 2009.

Obama's election means that

the new US president will not be someone who has contempt for world opinion, but one who wishes to re-integrate the US into the community of nations as a good global citizen.

Obama's election means that the most powerful office on the planet will be inhabited by a man with true compassion and empathy in his heart for the downtrodden, even those far from America's shores, and who understands the impact that US policy can have, for good and ill, on the wretched of the world.

Above all, Obama's election means that the next occupant of the White House will be a man of unusual thoughtfulness, judiciousness, and integrity, who believes in and appeals to the best in human nature, and who will strive, even if he cannot always succeed, to do the right thing.

I do not care that he will put American interests first. I would expect nothing less of any American president. It is how these interests are defined and how he will balance competing humanitarian interests that are important.

I do not care that some would consider him a protectionist. It is more important to me that he is a compassionate person with empa-

STRAIGHT TALK

We can't all be Barack Obama, but we can all be foot-soldiers and do our little bit to build this country into the land our fore-fathers and mothers fought for. We just need to believe that we can do it. If there is a lesson to be taken away from Obama's victory, it is this. Yes we can.

thy for working people the world over. I would take someone like Obama over a right-wing so-called free-trader who has contempt for the rest of the world and cares not a whit about the rights and dignity of working men and women, every time.

So that is why I think it does make a difference to have this man in the White House, and why I think it is important to Bangladesh that a man such as Barack Obama has been elected US president.

But I would go further, still. I think that it is important that the US play a constructive role on the international stage and I think that it is important that the country will once again, after eight long years, show its best face to the rest of the world. A more progressive and enlightened America will undercut our Bangladeshi obscurantists in the same way that having George Bush in the White House these last eight years has helped them.

And the institution of policies that are both more fair-minded and effective will be a welcome counter to the cynicism that is the mother's milk of both the pseudo-religious militants and other enemies of democracy who believe that things are so bad that

the only way to fix them is to blow it all up and start over.

Nor is it true that for most Bangladeshis Obama's election will not mean much, that it only holds meaning for the elite who watch CNN and BBC. Give people more credit than that, their awareness, their capacity for hope, and their desire for and ability to seek inspiration more respect.

The story of a black man of humble origins rising to the highest office on the planet, the living proof that anything is possible in this world, is one that is already beginning to ring in every corner of the country, warming hearts and fueling dreams.

This is the greatest gift of Obama's presidency to all of us. It has shown us all that there is always hope, that anything can happen, and that, as easy as it is to find reasons to retreat into cynicism and gloom, that to believe that change is possible is the better, more fulfilling path.

The road may be long, the journey may be arduous, and we may not get where we would like to go in our life-time, but the first step is to believe that it is possible.

The biggest enemy we have is cynicism, the belief that things are hopeless, that things cannot get better. When a critical mass of



Pointing the way.

people believes that there is no hope, it makes it exponentially harder to turn things around.

So the lesson for us all is to take heart and to harken to Obama's message of hope. We can argue that we do not have a leader like Obama to lead us to the promised land of our dreams. Well, maybe we don't, but, then again, who knew who Barack Obama was five years ago? For all we know, our own Obama is out there, just waiting to emerge.

But, ultimately, the lesson to be learned from Obama's rise isn't the lesson of the difference that one extraordinary person can make. The lesson is the difference that millions of ordinary people can make if they get together with the belief that they can change history.

Obama is a truly remarkable leader, but, as he himself understands, his story is not just the story of Barack Obama. It is the story of the millions upon millions of common men and women who put him where he is today by

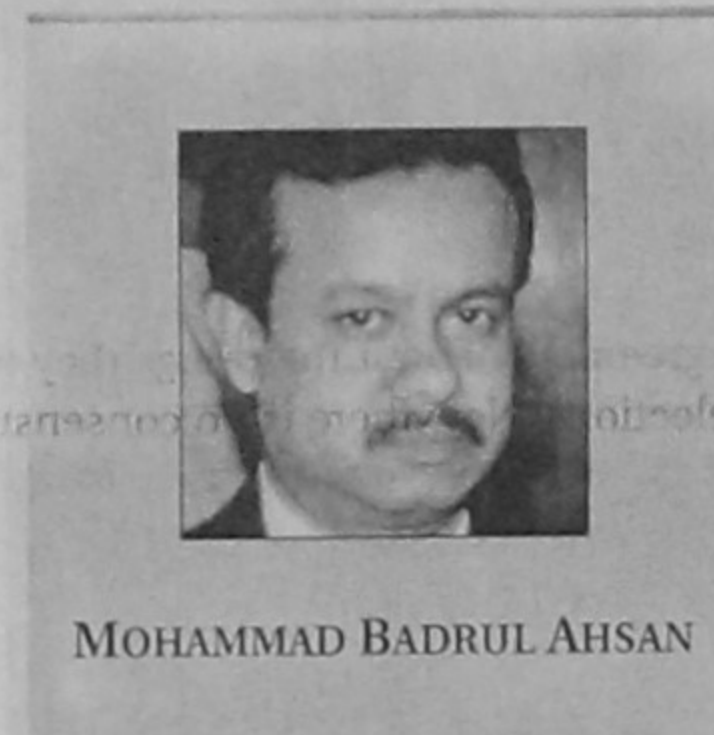
donating small amounts of money, holding neighbourhood meetings, persuading their friends, going door to door, and, finally, voting for him on November 4.

If we want the world to change, we cannot sit around waiting for a messiah to come and change it for us, we need to get out there and change the world ourselves. We need to organise, one person at a time, we need to forge alliances, we need to do the difficult, back-breaking, often unrewarding work to build a movement and then a country.

We can't all be Barack Obama, but we can all be foot-soldiers and do our little bit to build this country into the land our fore-fathers and mothers fought for. We just need to believe that we can do it. If there is a lesson to be taken away from Obama's victory, it is this. Yes we can.

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History has moved again



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

ALMOST 370 years after the first African slaves reached the American shores, an African-American has been elected the 44th president of the United States. It comes as the culmination of history set in motion after the English captured the Pequot Indians and shipped them to Bermuda in exchange for the African bondsmen who were sent to Massachusetts.

In that context, the victory of Barack H. Obama is more significant than the victory of one man or a single political party. It turns a new page in American history. It marks a new beginning for the human race.

It may sound hyperbolic, but the newly elected US president is a one-man melting pot, a convergence of cultures, a confluence of races and religions. Son of a Kenyan Muslim father and a white Christian mother, one who was registered as a Muslim and studied the Koran as a boy in a madrasa in

Indonesia, where his mother was married a second time to another Muslim man. Obama embraced Christianity when he returned to the United States with his mother after her divorce. Thus, the Harvard-educated Obama was born and raised on critical junctures and grew up to shine with many splendours. He is an African to the Africans, a one-time Muslim to the Muslims, a Christian to the devout Christians, a beacon of hope to the minorities in America, and a man-of-the-hour to the rest of the country.

But Barack Obama is more than a mandate for political change. He is a mandate of destiny, the instrument of force larger than politics, shaped by the events of the last few years. The terrorist attack of 9/11, heightened security in the United States and rest of the world, escalating extremism in Islamic coun-

tries, invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the nuclear tension with North Korea and Iran, and, last of all, the massive financial upheavals which have lately shaken the world.

Obama is expected to be more than a US president. He is expected to be a human face to unbridled capitalism, a sobering effect on the American bullyism, and a symbol of deliverance from the dread of terrorism and economic mess.

Will Obama be able to deliver what is expected of him? When the euphoria of victory subsides, he is going to face this reality check. No doubt he has already earned his place in history, taking the struggle of African Americans to a respectable height.

No doubt he has elevated the African-American cause in the long and overbearing tradition of such luminaries as Benjamin Bancker,

CROSS TALK

Obama's win is the sign of healing. It shows that America has finally overcome the hurdle of racial bitterness. From slavery to segregation to affirmative action and, finally, election to the highest office of the country; it's a positive signal that the present generation of Americans may have buried the racial hatchet. In the humdrum of political wins and losses, that one thing is the real hero of this election.

Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King. No doubt he has brought that cause from the sideline to the midfield of American idealism. But how is he going to take it to the next level? How is he going to transform himself from a successful African-American politician into a responsible leader of whole of the United States, and, for that matter, the free world? It's likely that Obama is going to be guided by a worldview from a wider angle.

The blend of two races and two religions, his experience of growing up without a father, then living in another country early in life in the house of a stepfather, his Ivy League education, all of which broadened his horizon to become tolerant, liberal and enlightened compared to other US presidents.

This unique position could

break or make Obama's presidency in the coming days. His stay in power could be marred by the uphill struggle of being a black president in a white majority country. He will remain under the hawkish eyes of conservative Americans, who will spare no chance to undermine his presidency every step of the way.

He is likely to face challenges from the military-industrial complex in his decision to withdraw the US soldiers from Iraq. The handling of the economy, needless to say, is going to be a daunting task.

He will remain a suspect for being lenient towards the Muslims because of his middle name. Obama might overlook to quell that suspicion, and prove his intransigence by launching an attack on Pakistan, for example. Not to say, he will have to brave the threat of assassination hanging over him like the sword of Damocles.

It's also likely, and that has been the wellspring of support for Obama around the world, that he could be a breath of fresh air in the post-9/11 world. He could bring a new perspective to the world order and redefine the American leadership in a new context, rescuing it from the clutches of the neoconservatives who entered the White House eight years ago. Obama should be able to build bridges between religions and races, review US intervention in

foreign countries, and restore the trust in the American leadership.

Which way his presidency will go remains to be seen. But, no matter what, Obama's victory is a welcome change. It has the hope of building the confidence that was frittered away under George Bush's two-term presidency. It has the hope of putting the lid back on the Pandora's box, giving peace a real chance in the strife-torn countries.

Above all, Obama's win is the sign of healing. It shows that America has finally overcome the hurdle of racial bitterness. From slavery to segregation to affirmative action and, finally, election to the highest office of the country; it's a positive signal that the present generation of Americans may have buried the racial hatchet. In the humdrum of political wins and losses, that one thing is the real hero of this election.

One triumphant step for Obama has been a transformational leap for mankind. It's a victory of history, shaped by many centuries. Once, the blacks weren't allowed to eat with the whites in the same restaurant. Once, they weren't allowed to drink water from the same fountain. Twist of irony, a black man is going to occupy the "White" House. History has made Obama. It's his chance to make history.

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the country and trained the deputy commissioners as part of its preparations for election. These are positive developments for holding the upcoming election in a neutral and credible manner.

The AL and some other left-linked political parties have welcomed the announcement of the election schedules but stressed that the state of emergency must be totally lifted to create a conducive atmosphere for election. They have also reiterated their demand for deferring upazila election to a rational time to give political parties a breathing space between two elections.

The BNP-led four-party alliance is yet to comment on the election schedules. The decision on whether the alliance will contest in the election is likely to come after the chiefs of the components meet on November 5 to finalise the issue.

In a meeting with the visiting Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, the BNP leaders said that, as a pro-election party, it wanted to contest in the election but an atmosphere conducive to holding a credible election had not been created, as

the CTG had not met any of its seven demands.

Smelling a rat in keeping the state of emergency during the parliamentary election, the BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia said that the CTG wanted selection in the name of election. She has instructed the party leaders and the activists to strengthen their organisations and get ready for both movement and election.

The BNP chairperson demanded resignation of the election commissioners, claiming that they were not neutral and could never hold a free and fair election. Though there is hardly any reason to agree with this rationale, the CTG should not dismiss the accusation as "personal frustrations" of Khaleda Zia.

The CTG should seriously try to find out if there is any genuine reason for calling the EC's neutrality into question. The CTG needs to remember that there is no last word in politics, and that the election seen as most important in the country's history may lose acceptability if any of the major political camps keeps away from the election.

The AL kicked off its prepara-

tions for the forthcoming parliamentary election on October 26 with finalisation of its draft policy to seek names of the possible candidates from its grassroots level committees. But things have become seemingly entangled, as the Supreme Court has denied bail to AL president Sheikh Hasina in an extortion case, putting her release in limbo before the parliamentary election.

The acting AL president Zillur Rahman regretted terming the outcome of the October 23 dialogue with the CTG as "positive." He categorically said that the AL would not contest the upcoming parliamentary election without Sheikh Hasina.

Sheikh Hasina, now abroad on parole for treatment, has vowed to contest the parliamentary election despite the higher court's denial of her bail. After playing a cat and mouse game for a long time, the CTG finally declared that there were no bars for Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia in contesting the ninth parliamentary election.

Almost all election-related activities of AL have remained suspended due to absence of

Sheikh Hasina, who is likely to return home this month.

Dispelling doubts about her contesting in the election, the BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia recently told newsmen: "Certainly I shall take part in the election. Where is the obstruction to my taking part?"

The country's development partners and the bilateral donors are also keeping a close watch on the developments towards holding of the election, which is seen as very crucial for the country. The USA, the European Commission and the Commonwealth will send observers to monitor the election.

As things stand now, with the ninth parliamentary election just around the corner and no sign of any election fever in the country, the political parties should backtrack on their demand for a total lifting of state of emergency and move full steam ahead towards election. Any unforeseen development may disrupt the electoral process and invite a tragedy of sweeping proportions for the nation.

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