

UNESCO IN 63 YEARS

Focus on education and human rights

The purpose of the organisation is "to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations."

QUAZI FARUQUE AHMED

THE United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) a specialised agency of the United Nations, was established on November 16, 1945. Its constitution was adopted and signed on this day in London. The constitution however, came into force on November 4, 1946, after ratification by twenty countries: Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Egypt, France, Greece, India, Lebanon, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States.

Unesco is the heir of the League of Nations' International Commission on Intellectual Cooperation. It has 193 member states and 6 associate members. The organisation is based in Paris, with over 50 field offices and many specialised institutes and centres throughout the world. Most of the field offices are "cluster" offices covering three or more countries; there are also national and regional offices.

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Unesco pursues its objectives through five major programs: education, natural sciences, social and human sciences, culture, and communication and information. Projects sponsored by Unesco include literacy and technical and teacher-training programs; international science programs; the promotion of independent media and freedom of the press; regional and cultural history projects; the promotion of cultural diversity; international cooperation agreements to secure the world cultural and natural heritage

(World Heritage Sites) and to preserve human rights; and attempts to bridge the world-wide digital divide.

Global shortage of teachers

Unesco estimates that 18 million more teachers are needed worldwide if universal primary education is to be achieved by 2015. This shortage of qualified teachers is considered one of the biggest obstacles to achieving the Education for All (EFA) goals. Teachers' low wages are at the root of the global shortage. Around the world, teachers are crying out for the resources they need to meet the needs of their students, their families and their communities. Millions are living below the poverty line, struggling to feed their own children as they strive to educate others people's children.

That's why teachers' unions around the world are demanding living wages and decent working conditions, including adequate learning resources and reasonable class sizes, in order to recruit the best and the brightest young people into this vitally important profession. Active recruitment and retention strategies are an essential part of the solution, but the task of training millions more new teachers remains a challenge.

Increase in attacks on teachers

According to Unesco, there has been a dramatic and disturbing increase in attacks against teachers over the past three years. Unesco journalist and researcher Brendan O'Malley's report, entitled "Education Under Attack," provides the first global study on political and military violence against teachers, education unions, schools, government officials and institutions.

It documents atrocities like targeted assassinations, illegal detention and torture, rape, recruitment of child soldiers, occupation and destruction of school buildings, and threats of the above. "The motive is to deter the education systems from functioning," O'Malley said his research showed that the most dangerous countries for teachers include



Eager to learn. Help them.

Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq, Nepal, the Palestinian Territory, Thailand and Zimbabwe. The number of attacks rose six-fold between 2003 and 2005.

Clearly, this violence is having a devastating impact on efforts to achieve EFA. About 40% of the 77 million children who are not in school live in conflict areas. In Iraq, only 30% of children were in school last year, compared to 75% the previous year. In Afghanistan, as many as 300,000 children, especially girls, are not in school due to threats, arson of schools, and killings. "The psychological impact of this gruesome violence is immeasurable," O'Malley said, referring to the 2006 rape and murder of a Baghdad teacher whose body was hung outside the school for five days, or the Thai teachers who were shot in their classrooms or in the school library. "What is the long term impact on students?"

He urged the international community to take action in response. All countries that are committed to the Millennium Development Goals should work to end impunity for these attacks. Imposing conditionality in aid and trade deals could provide another form of leverage. Widening the application and use of human rights instruments could also be beneficial. And keeping up vigorous international solidarity campaigns can make a life-and-death difference for teachers at risk.

Unesco and Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of the 58 members of the Executive Board of Unesco, and its present vice-president.

Bangladesh became a member of Unesco in October, 1972 in pursuance of Article VII of the Unesco Constitution. The Bangladesh National Commission for Unesco is headed by the education minister, and has 69 members. Its activities, however, are not upto the mark. There is enough scope left for further expansion of its functions, especially in rendering assistance in drawing-up training programs for the teachers in their related fields before bringing any change in the syllabus, in the development of curricula, bringing out regular periodicals etc, and facilitating various programs in conformity with the provisions of Unesco Constitution for the improvement of education, culture, science and technology. After all, the assistance of Unesco, and the lessons and experiences of its national commissions in different countries, can contribute significantly to the development and appropriate management of human resources in Bangladesh, especially in the light of the unprecedented progress in the field of science and technology including Information Technology.

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TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

'I believe several elections will shape our democracy'

Professor and head of the department of Computer Science and Engineering at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST), Dr. Muhammed Zafar Iqbal obtained his Bachelors in physics and Masters in theoretical physics from Dhaka University. He did Ph.D in experimental physics from University of Washington, Seattle and post-doctoral work at Caltech. He joined SUST as a Dean and the Department of Computer Science and Engineering as the Head of the Department. Dr. Iqbal was a pioneer in the development of Bangla computerization in the country. Zafar Iqbal is a prolific writer, the author of more than 119 books on fiction, science fiction, science and mathematics. His books earned him numerous awards including the prestigious Bangla Academy Award. Abul Kalam Azad took the interview.

Do you think Hasina-Khaleda talk is necessary to end the ongoing political crisis?

I don't think there is any connection between their sitting and the country's politics or elections. The planned dialogue has been imposed, and you can't get anything good out of this. Things would have been different had the two leaders sat together willingly. It will be worth it if their parties sit and talk.

One party says election must be held on schedule while another is for a delay....

The caretaker government is supposed to take three months to hold an election. The present government is taking two years. So, people will not accept if they fail to hold the election on December 18. There is no logic in demanding delay of the polls. There is no scope of it anymore.

You were vocal about changing the political culture. Do you find any changes after 2 years?

There are some changes. At least one big political party is choosing candidates through their grass-roots level leaders and activists. I have been saying for a long time that former bureaucrats, ex-army chiefs and officers should not get into politics. They hold good positions and get good facilities. It is not acceptable to see them in parliament after retirement. Politics is for those who work at the grass-roots level. Maybe we don't see them, maybe they are not well educated or national figures, but they do politics with people and know their sorrows and sufferings. One party has done it and I hope the rest will follow them.

Secondly, after 1/11 many were arrested, although we don't know whose arrests were politically motivated and whose were for real reasons. But we know the perpetrators. Most of them have been arrested. But the arrest and imprisonment will surely have an immense impact on them. I believe they will think of the consequences before committing the same offense again in future. Most of the problems will be gone if many grass-roots leaders are elected.

Do you think politicians will learn a lesson from this?

One thing is that the arrests and imprisonments did not take place quite properly. Seeds of suspicion have been sown because the arrested don't know whether they were arrested for their crimes or for political reasons. They may not be convicted, but it is now proved that they are offenders and we have read numerous stories on them in newspapers in the last two years. As for example, we all now know about the Bashundhara murder case, taking of bribe and how the money was transacted. I would be happy to see them tried and punished. But the government could not do it and it is their failure.

Do you support holding election under emergency?

It depends on the intention of those who are arranging it. If they think they need emergency for various reasons, and if a fair government comes through it, then it is okay. But I am not saying that I want emergency. Emergency should be lifted. Because, if a major injustice takes place during election there will be no protest against it. Election should be held without emergency so that there is no scope of hatching conspiracy or doing anything unjust in the dark.

Evaluate the post 1/11 situation....

The situation before 1/11 was terrifying. I must say 1/11 was a positive step as it rescued us from the dreadful situation. The biggest contribution of 1/11 is establishment of the true history of our liberation war in text-books. It has been possible as there is no political government in office. The distortion of the history of the liberation war has been removed from the text-books, and I believe no political government will be able to change it. The government also placed some good people in some institutions. But they did nothing in the education sector. Our universities are in a dismal state. The two years of caretaker government was just a continuation of the past alliance government. The government should have sacked the political vice-chancellors, who keep on appointing their own party people, and the partisan teachers do not teach but manipulate results to recruit more partisan teachers. I expected that the government would clean the universities.

Businessmen play a big part in politics. How do you see this?

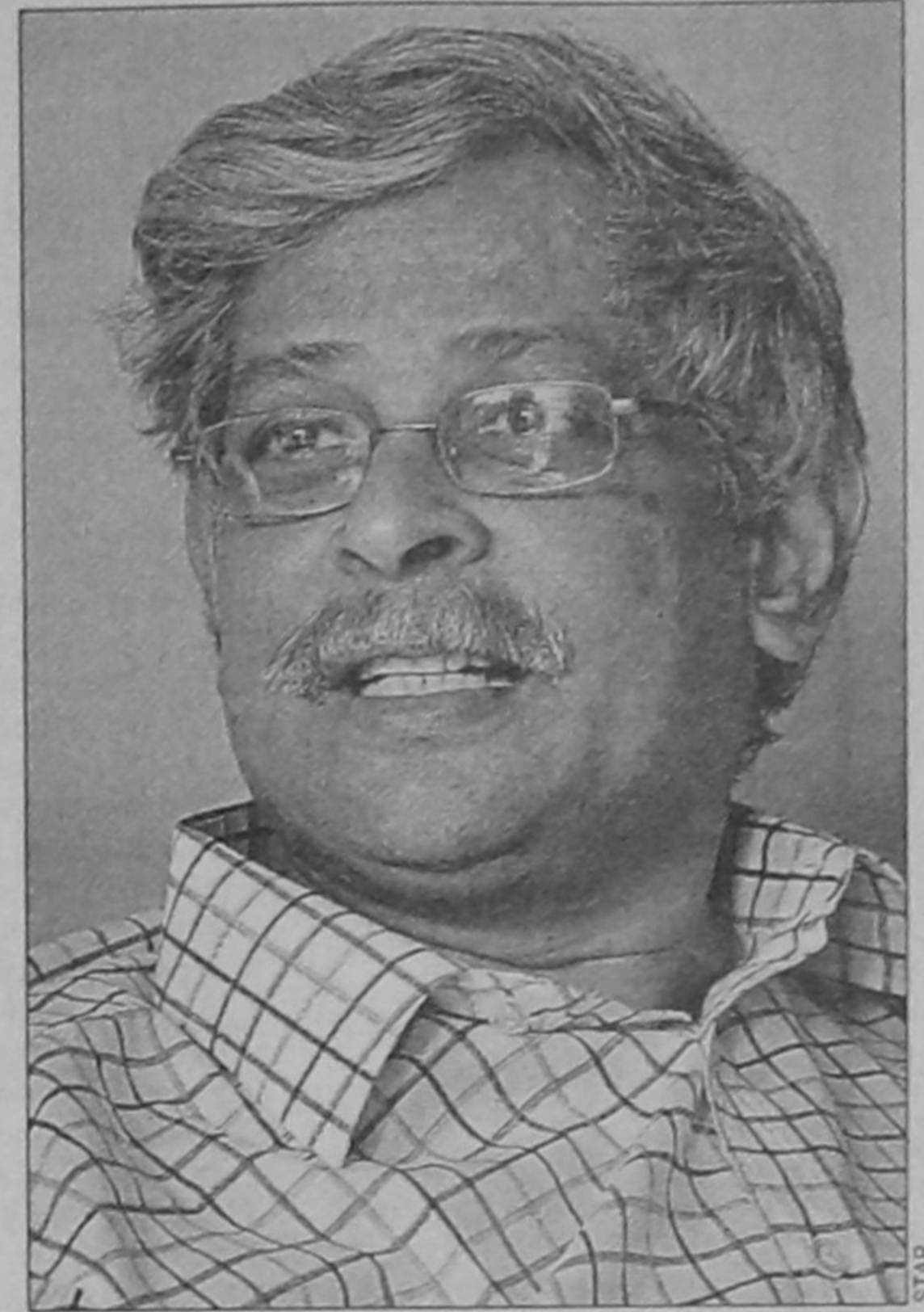
If they get involved in politics, contest elections and become lawmakers for consolidating their business, like we have seen before, then I must say no to them. If they talk about economic development, stability of the country and holding of proper election then it's okay. Instead of contesting the polls they can give suggestions to the political parties.

The major parties are again back to their old habits. Many talk like they did before 1/11....

If anyone expects everything will be fine in two years he or she will not be right. Democracy is a lengthy process... it moves ahead gradually. One elected government will be better than the next one. If election is not held and emergency continues then nothing will happen. But I am not frustrated. If I look back to the past governments I see that the last alliance government made some big mistakes and corruption became deep-rooted in the society. I hope the coming governments will not make the same mistakes. Democracy has to be exercised on the ground, not on paper. Whatever the problems are, and no matter how political parties practiced corruption, we must hold elections, form the parliament and move ahead. I believe several elections will shape our democracy. So, the election must not be delayed. The more we delay the more we will be lagging behind.

Evaluate the performance of the Election Commission (EC)?

The role of the EC is very important. If we had a strong EC many of our problems might have been solved.



Dr. Muhammed Zafar Iqbal

Although we sometimes get confused, the overall role of EC is more or less just. I give them credit for preparing a voter list, which will be very helpful for elections.

Is there pressure on the EC?

Yes, both internal and external. When Nizami was arrested there was a problem in Kuwait relating to our Bangladeshi workers. But we suddenly discovered that Bangladeshi workers from Saudi Arabia were also being sent home. The incidents followed the release of Nizami. The matter was not projected in the media in that way. But we know the facts. So, we can't deny that there is no outside pressure. I hope the EC, despite the pressure, will play its role rightly.

Explain the role of the caretaker government?

I tried to understand their role in the last two years but failed. People in the government are all very educated and modern. But sometimes they act more like fundamentalists. For example, they handed over the Women Development Policy to some religious persons, and we don't know where it is now. They pulled down the sculpture of Lalon and they did not arrest any of those who manhandled a freedom fighter in daylight. I don't understand their role. It really worries me.

Evaluate the anti-corruption drive? Is it losing the momentum and pace?

If we compare this Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) with the previous Anti-Corruption Bureau, we must say the present one is more efficient and effective. The ACC has many limitations but it is trying, and has gained successes which we hadn't seen in the past. But it failed to maintain neutrality in arresting corrupt suspects. It was selective and did not arrest many who should have been arrested too.

List the failures of the government....

The caretaker government got immense support of the people but failed to retain it. Now, many may say "this government gave me nothing other than buying rice in higher price." After assuming office, this government launched a massive demolition drive in the country, causing immense sufferings to the poor people. The arrest of university teachers and landing them in jails was a big mistake.

The minus-2 move was also a big mistake. Somehow, the government assumed that all the problems would be solved if the two leaders could be "minused" from politics. As they failed to do it directly, the government hatched a conspiracy and put pressure on them. This put in question the government's other activities. There should be transparency in the government's activities. Another weakness of the government is it started preparations for election too late. The biggest hurdle for the government will be holding the election on December 18. If they fail they will be held responsible. Being a teacher, I must say they could contribute hugely to education sector. They could stop many malpractices.

Do you think that government is compromising with the political parties?

It has been more or less clear to us. It is a weakness of the government, which they should not have shown. They people once arrested for corruption are being freed. Why were they arrested when they were going to be released?

What kind of role do you expect from politicians?

They are only talking about whether they will take part in the election. They are also pressing for their own issues and interests, which would help them win elections. But we don't find any clear idea or planning yet about how they will run the country and work for the welfare of their countrymen. Time is running out, but we are yet to see their manifestos. No one is talking about improving law and order, solving food crisis, handling climate change or combating rise of fundamentalism. How can we make the parliament effective? We don't practice democracy. If a party sees that it will not come to power then it will not contest election. This mindset must be changed. Contesting election does not mean going to power. If you fail to form the government, you must go to parliament and talk about the welfare of the country and the people. Article 70 is also a bar in this regard. An MP should have the right to protest against the mistakes or wrongdoings of his or her party. It is true that if he or she only supports his or her party, he or she may have different ideas.

Obama's landslide victory and its impact

The American people felt the pulse of the world population, and they responded to Obama's call for a change. People across the world have welcomed president-elect Obama's call for a more secure, just, peaceful and prosperous world. They wanted an end to the "hawkish" foreign policy pursued by the Bush administration to establish American supremacy in the name of war against terrorism.

MOHSIN ALI KHAN

THE landslide victory of Senator Barack Obama proves that truth prevails over falsehood. In the election, the Americans gave their verdict against the Iraq war and the misuse of the Bush administration. Not only the American people, but also the entire world had desperately sought a change of leadership in America. The reasons are obvious. The eight years of the Bush administration's arrogant rule had pushed the world towards an unnecessary and unjustified war in Iraq, which caused the loss of innocent lives and trillions of dollars.

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policy pursued by the Bush administration to establish American supremacy in the name of war against terrorism.

Against this background, president-elect Obama should act promptly to bring some visible changes in foreign, security and economic policies for a new, positive image of America. America should now take decisions on all international issues through multilateral forums instead of unilaterally. Obama has already indicated that America will initiate a culture of dialogue with others to solve all regional and international crises. Against this backdrop, the new Administration may consider the reduction of troops in phases from Iraq. In Afghanistan, however, it is expected that Mr. Obama may further strengthen the Nato-led forces to deal with the Taliban.

As regards Iran and North Korea, the existing US policy may remain unchanged as America is against proliferation of

nuclear weapons. In Asia, Mr. Obama may continue the US policy of close cooperation with India for its big economic market and also its strategic importance in the region. It may be recalled that president-elect Obama had himself proposed some amendments in the draft US-India nuclear agreement and had voted in the senate in favour of the US-India civilian nuclear deal.

Mr. Obama is also expected to continue the existing US policy of friendship towards China in view of its growing military and economic strength. With Russia, the Obama administration may have a cordial and constructive engagement on overall bilateral, regional and international issues of mutual interest, particularly on Georgia. Russia, on the other hand may show its eagerness to have more fruitful discussions with the Obama administration as they were disappointed with Bush's hawkish attitude towards the Georgian issue.

On the Palestine issue, the Obama administration may adopt a "go-slow" policy as it may first like to consult both the parties -- Israelis and Palestinians -- and try to assess their respective positions before taking any initiative.

Although security and foreign policy matters will be on his priority list, Obama will put more emphasis on the current global economic crisis. He has already talked with G-8 leaders for a combined effort to solve the crisis. The economic crisis has hit the low income people and the middle class in America. Both Obama and Joe Biden, coming from humble backgrounds, will show sensitivity to the sufferings of the poor citizens and shall try to give them immediate tax relief and create job opportunities for them.

In the debates and in his victory speech, Obama has shown affection and compassion towards the developing and least developed countries. As such, the developing countries may expect some favourable trade liberalisation measures from his administration. How will Bangladesh be benefited by the new administration's economic and trade policy toward the developing nations?

In order to seize the opportunity opened up by the change of the leadership, Bangladesh should prepare a list of

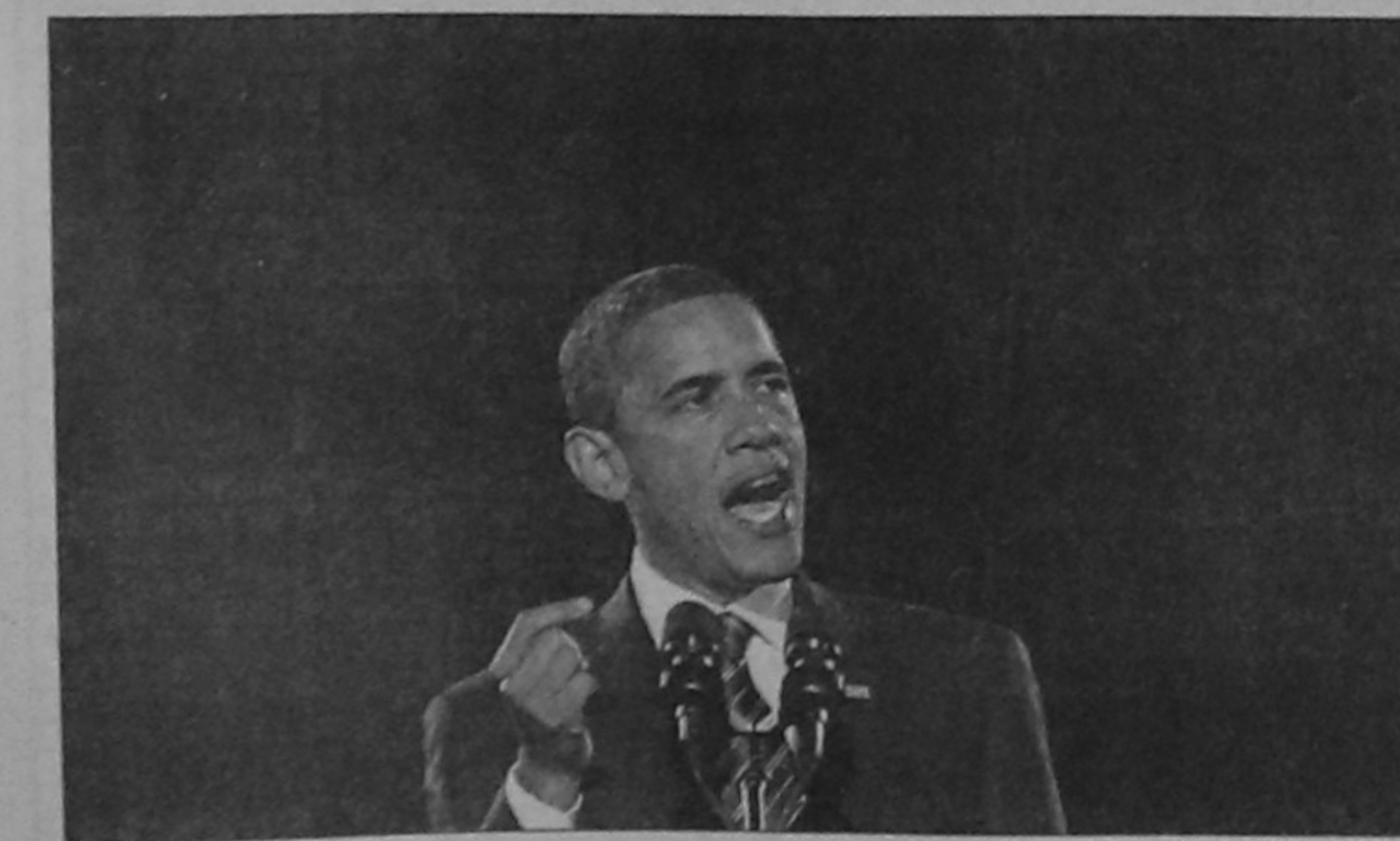
priority items on trade, investment and technical assistance from the Obama administration. "The New Partnership Act on Trade" (NPAT) for granting duty-free access to Bangladeshi products to the US market is still pending in the Congress. Our Foreign Ministry, our embassy in Washington, BGMEA and the Bangladesh caucus in US Congress and Senate should immediately start lobbying with the new policy makers to get the GSP concessions for our RMG products. Besides, we have about 500,000 Bangladeshi expatriates in the US, many of whom are still living without proper documents although they have submitted their supporting papers to the Immigration and Homeland Security Department. Therefore, it is important that our government urge the Obama administration to regularise them on special LDC grounds.

Bangladesh may propose signing of a "Strategic Partnership Agreement" (SPA) with the US, which would have a beneficial effect on our foreign and security policies, and on economic, trade, investment and cultural relations between the two countries.

The US can undoubtedly play an important role with its economic, military and technological strength, and all nations should actively cooperate with president-elect Obama to bring about a peaceful and more prosperous world in a win-win situation for all countries, rich and poor alike.

Let us remember the victory speech of president-elect Obama, in which he reminded us that the true strength of America did not come from its armament but from its strong tradition and values of democracy. Let us hope that it will be reflected in his deeds in coming days of his tenure. Let us also hope that we in Bangladesh can also take pride that we believe in and practice democracy and its values as we march forward to further consolidate our democratic ideals by participating soon in a free and fair elections for a peaceful and meaningful transition of power to an elected government for a prosperous future for our younger generation.

Mohsin Ali Khan is a former Foreign Secretary and former High Commissioner.



The world awaits his "change."