

Election for the economy

Leaving aside the interest of political parties, the economy urgently needs an election and elected government. Major economic decisions that embrace national interest must come from an elected government. Poverty level has shot up recently after a long-term decline.

ABDUL BAYES

OVER the last two years or so, Bangladesh had to live without an elected government. This goes against the very spirit of the constitution, which stipulates sovereignty of people to choose their own representatives to rule the country. In a modern world, nothing short of an elected government would be expected to claim a berth in a club of civilised nations. Why it took so much time to turn to election is a long story, and the author has no intention of delving into it. Suffice it say, however, that the country had been under emergency rule for the longest period in its history.

Under emergency rules, the freedom of people is forfeited and "un-freedom" breeds underdevelopment. Recall Amartya Sen's seminal book, *Development as freedom*, where he linked development to freedom under

an array of empirical evidence. Thus, despite the dilly-dally, the declaration of a date for the election is welcome in the wake of a demand for national polls from home and abroad and, more importantly, on the heels of the commitment of the government to return to democracy. However, we agree that holding an election does not imply establishment of democracy. Election is a necessary condition for it; the other condition is reforming of institutions that uphold democratic values.

These days we hear that politicians have to learn a lot from the bitter experience of the last two years. The advocates mainly point at corruption, confrontational politics, muscle and money power, and lack of democratic values prevalent in our political arena. Political parties must behave differently this time. The Parliament should be the center of gravity -- not the streets -- to invite support or criticism. Hartals



Can the up-coming election resolve our economic problems?

should be halted; parliamentary bodies should be strengthened; opposition in the parliament should be respected as a shadow government, etc.

Any deviation from this might cost them heavily in future, as it did in the most immediate past. But why only politicians? We strongly feel that politicians and non-politicians equally have good lessons to learn. First, the former

have to note that without election, they are fish out of water. An election puts some in power, and others in the opposition bench. Any excessive actions to cling to power might cost heavily, not only for the party but also for the nation. The post-January events are clear pointers to this.

The Democrats in America came back to the White House after one decade. The

Republicans will now try to come back to power in the next election. In India, Congress or BJP rules the country on the basis of franchise. Thus, election is always a win-win game for political parties. Second, the so-called civil society members -- elite, educated and urbanised -- and technocrats have to know that elected political parties, despite all criticisms against them, perform better than unelected ones as far as socio-economic uplift of people is concerned.

It should also be noted that there was no hartal, no street agitations, no siege during the last two years, but socio-economic indicators deteriorated over time, investments fell and uncertainty loomed large on the horizon. Support to unelected governance through rhetoric might bring some personal gains to an individual, but hardly has it seemed to serve the society. It is not possible that Bangladesh will be governed like America or Britain, whose systems of governance are centuries old. Bear in mind, uncertainty is the bitter enemy of an economy. Therefore, a bad election is sometimes better than no election.

Under this scenario, we would expect that all political parties will participate in the upcoming election. The government should also see that genuine demands are met in due time. "Lack of

preparation" cannot be an excuse since most of the parties (especially the two big parties) demanded election even last October, when their organisational setups were in disarray.

In any case, as we mentioned before, the election will be a win-win condition for politics, politicians and the economy. Political parties must come out of the power-craze, otherwise the specter that haunted them during the last two years might stage a revisit. The sooner it is understood, the better it will be for the nation.

Leaving aside the interest of political parties, the economy urgently needs an election and elected government. Major economic decisions that embrace national interest must come from an elected government. Poverty level has shot up recently after a long-term decline. An elected government should immediately fix this. The investors are waiting in the wings for credible and consistent policies that are deliverable only by an elected government. Thus, there seems to be no substitute for the election in the offing. Any no to this would imply that our learned politicians are still leaning. And the price to pay for this lapse has already been communicated to them by various ways.

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Politics of race

As a "black," Obama is not descended from generations of Americans who were victimised as slaves and blacks till 1865, as blacks under Jim Crow Laws till 1964, and as America's underclass till the present day. Arguably, this made it easier for some whites to vote for the first black candidate for president.

M. SHAHID ALAM

IT is perhaps a bit late in the day, nearly two weeks after November 4, to be writing about Barack Obama's electoral victory. This want of alacrity, however, is intentional.

I thought it would be cruel to write any sooner, when whites and blacks alike were so effusively celebrating Obama's victory. It would be unseemly to strike a discordant note when a clear majority of Americans was savouring this putative post-racial moment in their history.

Did this victory signal a shift in America's racial tectonic plates?

Memories are so short. In the weeks following his choice of Sarah Palin on August 29, John McCain began closing the gap with Obama. The election got closer after Palin electrified the Republican Convention with her line about how "We grow good people in our small towns..." The message to blacks, Hispanics and Asians in America's cities was clear: they are not "good people."

In the absence of the financial meltdown that began in early September, the election could have easily gone the other way. Sarah Palin, too, may have helped Obama a bit when she began displaying the scope of her ignorance.

Who should we thank for Obama's victory?

The answer is sobering. We can thank the

financial meltdown and, in some measure, the threat of an Armageddon -- likely to follow Palin's succession to a geriatric McCain -- for Obama's victory. There was no shifting of tectonic plates on this continent.

If anything, America's unquestioning identification of Obama as a "black" candidate is deeply problematic. It demonstrates that the United States remains firmly rooted in ideas of race that go back to the era of slavery and Jim Crow Laws.

Obama's mother was white and, apparently, so were all her forebears; his father was a black African and, apparently, so were all his forebears. Obama is biracial -- half-black and half-white. Why did that, automatically, make him black? If being half-black makes Obama black, by the same logic we could identify him as white.

Why didn't we?

The answer is rooted in the history of racism in the United States, in the categorical rejection by whites of the mixing of white and black races. A person was "black" if it was known that there was black ancestry, anywhere, in his lineage. This was the arithmetic of white racism. White + Black = Black.

The ban on mixed marriages in the US began quite early. It was first introduced in 1691 in slave-holding Virginia, followed a year later by another slave-holding state, Maryland. It soon spread

to all the states.

At the height of the Jim Crow Era, starting in 1910, one by one the Southern states passed the one-drop rule to define race. A person with any known trace of black ancestry was condemned as black.

This arithmetic was the manifestation of white power. Its power to define race and make it stick. This arithmetic ensured that blacks could not escape their low status by marrying into whites. It would discourage whites from marrying blacks because their offspring -- and their offspring -- would be born into the low status of blacks.

Another aspect of Obama's "race" is conveniently forgotten. Obama is black but he is not quite African-American -- the way that Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were African-American. As a "black," Obama is not descended from generations of Americans who were victimised as slaves and blacks till 1865, as blacks under Jim Crow Laws till 1964, and as America's underclass till the present day. Arguably, this made it easier for some whites to vote for the first black candidate for president.

Lest we forget this shame, Obama's candidacy highlighted a new form of racism that has been on the rise since the fall of the Soviet Union, but has become quite respectable since 9-11. Concerted efforts were made by some Republicans to sink his candidacy by accusing him of being a Muslim, of having attended a madrasah.

Obama protested that he was Christian. He did not seek to distance to himself, however, from the racist premise of this accusation. On the contrary, he took care to stay away from Muslim groups who wished to meet him or host him during his campaign.

On one occasion, his staff removed two

Muslim women from the background that would be panned by the camera during Obama's speech. They were a risk because they were wearing headscarves. Their presence would taint Obama's campaign.

Is there no retreat from race in Obama's victory? Perhaps, there is, but it is mostly symbolic. It is a brilliant victory for one black man, but will his presidency make a difference for the black underclass in this country. Will Obama make amends to the continent of his paternal forefathers by launching a new Marshall Plan for Africa? Can he dare do this?

Gladly, I voted for a Democrat this time, skipping a vote for Ralph Nader. And, when Obama won, I was relieved. We would not be staring over the next four years -- with bated breath -- at a gun-toting, moose-killing, hate-spewing, race-baiting, war-mongering, rapture-seeking Sarah Palin just a heart-beat away from the presidency of this country.

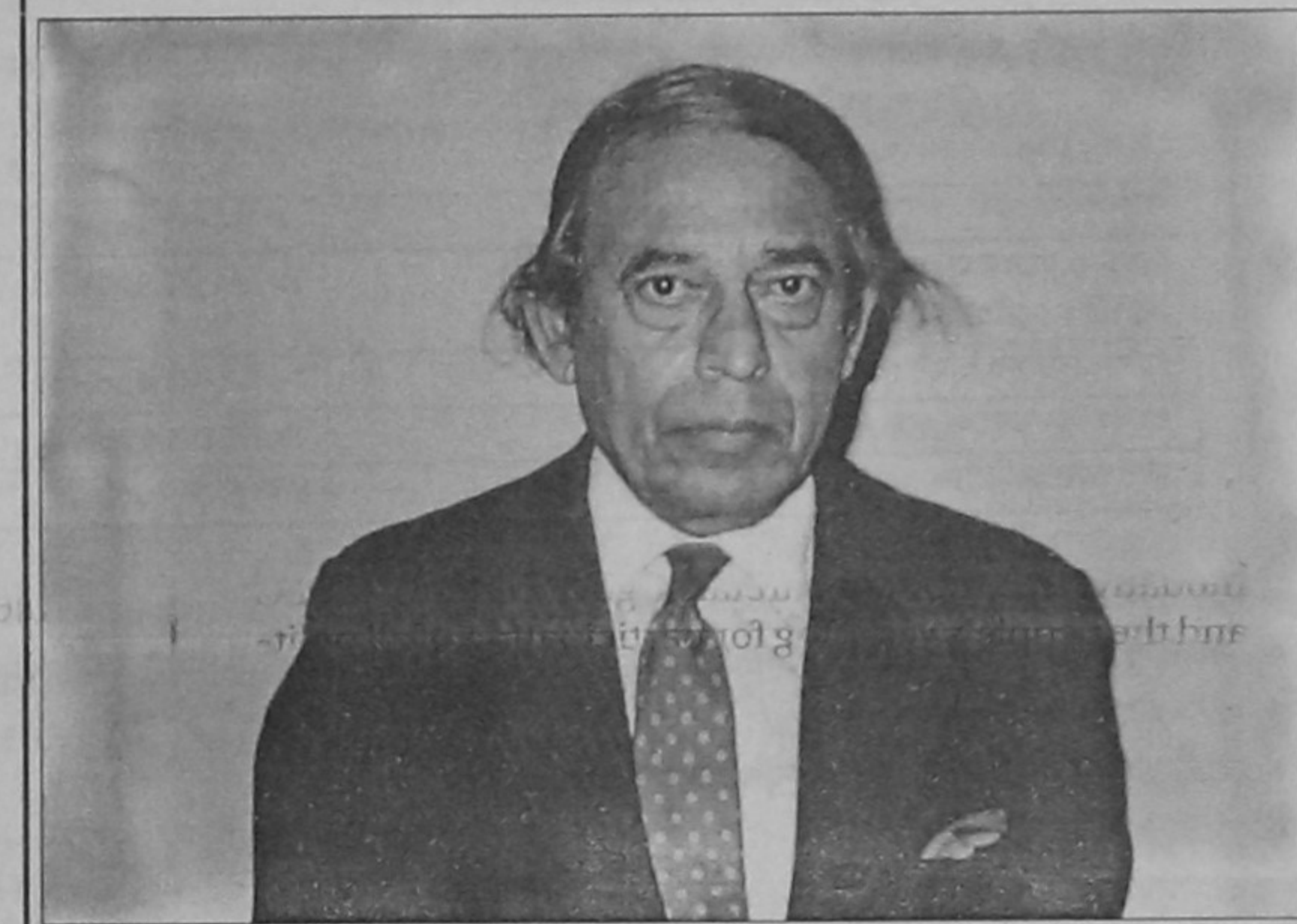
I cannot say that I felt a surge of hope at Obama's victory. A president is only the visible face of lobbies and corporations who own this country and its "elected" institutions. Unless the people are out in the streets demanding change, there will be none. Populist election-year slogans are forgotten once they have done their job at the polling stations.

Alas, my relief may be short-lived. The religious right in this country -- the strongest constituency in the Republican Party -- has been frustrated for now by the financial meltdown. But they are already plotting a comeback -- in partnership with their neo-con cousins -- riding a wave of fear-mongering and fight-them-there, alien-bashing, racist rhetoric.

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IN MEMORIAM

K. Z. Alam, my friend



MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

THE news of his passing away came late to me, but did not come as a shock. It came as an immense sadness. K. Z. Alam, Shelley to his friends, had been fighting death for many long months. He lost the battle on September 14.

Shelley and I had been friends for well over fifty years. We were classmates in Dhaka College in 1949-1951. I did not personally know him then. But I knew those who were expelled from the college for taking part in a student protest against the government's education policy. Shelley was among them. Protest came naturally to him and he paid the price for it.

He transferred to an unknown college from the premier college of Dhaka, passed his Intermediate examination, and entered Dhaka University, without having to lose a year. There, in the first year of our honours classes in economics, we became friends.

Small, slightly built, fair, a scimitar nose dominating his thin face, Shelley was quick to smile. He laughed lustily. Those lips could also curl back as easily in disdain at the slightest hint of hypocrisy from his interlocutor. He remained a straight talker all his life.

February 1952. Shelley was among the thousands of students who plunged into the language movement. No leader, he was not a Bhasa Sainik, but he was indeed a Bhasa Sramik, a term I coined many years later for the countless thousands of ordinary students without whose labour the language movement would not have achieved the glory it did.

In February 1955, when a repressive government rounded up hundreds of students from the Dhaka University campus, the university halls of residence, and elsewhere, we both found ourselves in close proximity to each other in Dhaka Central Jail.

Our contact became intermittent. We met again in England after a long gap, in 1964. I was in Manchester reading economics and he was in London, and had just been called to the bar. In the winter of that year he, along with our common friend Lutful Huq and his 3-year old son, drove to Manchester to see me. Those were days of a great personal tragedy for him but, resilient as ever, he talked of other things and of old times.

Back home in the late 1960s, Shelley

the barrister joined the bar at the High Court in Dhaka. Not long after, he was defending Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and others as an important member of a team of lawyers appearing for the defence in the Agartala Conspiracy case. He was soon to pay a heavy price for this.

In April 1971, he was picked up by military intelligence and taken to Dhaka Cantonment. There he was kept for two weeks in a filthy airless room crowded with detainees, and was interrogated and tortured. He was finally allowed to leave. Barely able to walk, he limped towards the gate of the cantonment expecting at any moment to be shot for "trying to escape."

He managed to reach the house his brother, K.S. Alam, a respected professor of surgery at Dhaka Medical College. Professor Alam was aghast. As the two brothers embraced, the usually stern Dr. Alam cried: "What have they done to you?" Impulsively, he ripped the shirt from Shelley's back, looked at the battered body, and wept.

Shelley and I had been meeting in Dhaka at least once a year since 1978 on my visits home from New York. I would call him and he would turn up, usually unannounced, chewing his occasional paan. He told me the story only sometime in 2004. He kept it to himself all these years. Such was the resistance of the man to self-advertisement to which so many of us succumb so often.

After liberation of the country, he was made a deputy attorney-general. This did not last long. There was violent change in the political regime. He resigned his post and returned to private practice. Somewhat to my surprise, he also became an entrepreneur: he set up a garments manufacturing factory and ran it successfully.

Shelley was an admirer of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. What was more, he was an unabashed admirer. He would defend the Father of the Nation in places where others would consider such an act quite inconvenient. And I never saw anyone daring to tell him to shut up.

In 2007, he contracted cancer of the lungs. It soon spread to his hip bones. Painful surgeries followed, but to no avail. He had been reduced to using a walker when I saw him last. But he was not to be cowed. He laughed as we talked, pretending he had no pain. He was mighty glad to see me. He was still working, still accepting legal briefs.

I salute his courage and fortitude. I shall miss the true friend that he was.

Inside the new US-Iraq agreement

"Iran wants to dominate the country in every area," including politics, security and economics, says a second senior US official. Because the Iran-Iraq war ended in 1988 with an Iraqi victory, Iran wants events in 2008 to end in an Iranian victory, the official says.

LENNOX SAMUELS

AS recently as last May, American and Iraqi negotiators were at a dead end in efforts to forge a security agreement that would cover withdrawal of US forces. For one thing -- an important thing -- some opponents of a deal were framing the discussion in terms of the Americans trying to establish a permanent occupying force in the country.

When US Ambassador Ryan Crocker and Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari signed the agreement on Monday, it was a testament to the fact that both sides had reached a point where they were satisfied, if not thrilled, with the final terms. Perhaps more important, it showed that negotiators could read a calendar.

That calendar has an asterisk at December 31, the date the United Nations mandate expires, leaving the US military with no legal basis for being in Iraq. There was much talk that the US and Iraq would be unable to reach common ground by that deadline, and chatter swirled around possible scenarios for such an eventuality.

Would the Americans simply stay on "illegally?" Would the two sides stitch together a temporary pact setting up an extra-legal interregnum? No scenario had the US packing up its 150,000 troops, plus equipment and ordnance, and leaving. As the deadline loomed, real politics set in. December 31 "focus(ed) the mind on what happens the next day if there were no agreement," says a senior US official involved in the negotiations.

A breakthrough came when negotiators began to treat the talks as a framework for establishing a broad bilateral relationship that deals with more than just "the technical matter" of US troop withdrawal, the US official says. Negotiators, who formally began talks in the last March, say the accord really has two pieces: the much-discussed Status of Forces Agreement and a wider deal on matters that extend beyond war.

"This agreement provides the framework for cooperation in the fields of economics, culture, science, technology, health and trade, just to name a few," Crocker said at the signing ceremony. "It reminds us that at a time when US forces will continue to withdraw from Iraq in

recognition of superlative security gains ... our relationship will continue to develop in many other ways."

That development will come despite the apparent machinations of Iran. Last month, Gen. Ray Odierno, the US military commander in Iraq, caused an uproar when he charged that Iraq's eastern neighbor was trying to derail the agreement, going so far as to say the country was bribing Iraqi politicians.

The allegations outraged Baghdad legislators. "The Iranians have not been unduly involved in any way," an Iraqi government official tells Newsweek. But American officials who will not speak for attribution say the Iranians were among those talking up the threat of a permanent US occupation.

"Iran wants to dominate the country in every area," including politics, security and economics, says a second senior US official. Because the Iran-Iraq war ended in 1988 with an Iraqi victory, Iran wants events in 2008 to end in an Iranian victory, the official says.

Even some Iraqis agree that the Iranians have been stoking anti-agreement sentiment. Some point to the exploits of radical Muslim cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who is studying in Iraq to become an ayatollah and has called for mass demonstrations against the security agreement and warned of renewed fighting by his militia, the Mahdi Army.

"He's supported by and working with the Iranians," says an Iraqi journalist who asked not to be identified for security reasons. "Iran doesn't invest millions in

supporting these people and not ask for a return."

Some Iraqi politicians had talked about running any pact by neighboring countries, taken by most observers to mean Iran, for their input. With an agreement signed, Tehran is among the biggest losers in the regional political skirmish. Still, Iran may not be done yet -- it is likely to lobby Shiite Muslims in Iraq's parliament to reject the agreement, which they are expected to vote on in the next week. Both Iran and Iraq have Shiite majorities.

But most Iraqis and American officials expect the parliament to ratify the agreement, which will then go to the presidency council for a final sign-off. The feeling is that both the United States and Iraq have gotten the best deal they're going to get.

"This is in many respects everything we've been working for. The fact that they made tough demands and we made tough demands back was entirely natural," says one of the senior US officials. The American side is well aware that Iraqi factions will spin the agreement in different ways, and to their advantage. Some in the government are already calling it a withdrawal agreement.

"How it is marketed by either side is one thing," says the second US official. "What it is, is something else." Public relations aside, Iraq seems poised to move on to the next phase of its political journey.

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