

## Parties yet to reveal manifestoes

*A concrete and detailed approach to issues is a necessity*

IT is intriguing that with barely four weeks to go before the country goes to the general elections, the political parties are yet to make public their manifestoes on the basis of which they mean to gain support at the ballot box. In fact, by now the manifestoes outlining the positions of the parties on the pressing issues ought to have been in place and a good degree of public debate should have been generated on them. While we understand that the parties are working on them, we still feel that voters should have been given an opportunity to make their informed choices on the issues reflected in the manifestoes a little earlier than now.

One hardly needs to reiterate the truth that this time around, the nation goes to the polls against a background the like of which has not been seen in Bangladesh. A caretaker government has been in office, armed with emergency powers, for close to two years instead of the constitutionally stipulated ninety days. The reasons why such a reality has been there are not hard to fathom. And because of these reasons, or the circumstances, it becomes important that the political parties swiftly come forth with an enumeration of the policies and programmes that, while retaining the positive work done by the caretaker government, will provide the nation with a renewed sense of direction.

A most significant question here concerns corruption and handling the economy, which in light of the on-going global crisis demands an appropriate, well thought-out response from the parties. Obviously, the party or coalition of parties making it to power after the December elections will face an enormous task. Which is why a fully laid out plan on what the parties need to do about the thrust sectors of the economy is of paramount importance. The future of the garments industry, together with the necessity of employment generation for a growing army of men and women looking for jobs, calls for a pragmatic approach by the politicians. Add to that the need for policies on attracting outside investment, especially by non-resident Bangladeshis, in the country. A very large number of Bangladeshis now work across the continents. This resource must be tapped and put to effective use for development.

In simple and yet serious terms, the nation expects from the political parties vision statements that will indicate their preparedness, not only for political leadership but also their ability to govern through providing the greatest good for the greatest number in an environment of peace and stability. The social sector must, therefore, be the focus of the manifestoes. Tapping youth power and handling climate change are surely some of our priorities today. There must be clear, specific targets, buttressed by facts and figures, set by the parties. Let the manifestoes be outlined and made public at the earliest, enough to convince voters that the parties are ready to lead up front. Nebulous promises or mere academic responses to conditions will not help and indeed will not impress the electorate.

## Obama's new team

*Our politicians might take a cue or two*

THE hallmark of a good leader is his ability to choose the right person for the right job. In the case of the US president-elect the rationale behind his choice of secretaries and heads of important national institutions seems unassailable. The fact that he has chosen his rival Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primaries to head the State Department and his decision to retain Bill Gates as Secretary of Defense go only to demonstrate the inclusive nature in the choice of his political team.

Some may question his choice of a few Clinton era functionaries to head some important posts and ask whether that would bring about the much vaunted change which Obama has been calling for. The fact that he has gone for experience reinforces the belief that the government is not quite the place for on-the-job training of heads of departments, but one that requires the department heads to be hands-on from day one.

Both Hilary Clinton and Bill Gates carry with them rich experience in the field of foreign policy and defense, and can indeed implement the changes. Much in contrast to Bush's policy the president-elect has articulated the need to combine power with the wisdom and force of diplomacy. And he feels that his team can help him deliver on his pledges.

The US election and the behaviour of the victor as well as the vanquished after the results were announced are object lessons for our politicians to emulate. It is well to remember that political rivals are not intractable enemies and there is need to reach out across the aisle for the good of the country.

We believe that although our political culture and caveats that circumscribe parliamentary practices may not permit the type of inclusiveness as we have seen in the USA, surely we can expect the winner and whoever forms the next government to reach out to the political rival and ensure that approaches to policies are not motivated by personal or party considerations but by the merits or demerits of the stances taken.

There are many ways that the political temper, which we have witnessed in the past, can be toned down, the foremost of which is the need for the political parties' leadership to not only be good politicians but also try to be good statesmen, for the sake our national interest

## The queer and the bizarre and the dark

### GROUND REALITIES

These are ticklish times. You laugh even if you do not want to. But, then again, politics is often a set of conditions where some of the most queer and some of the most bizarre of things happen.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THESE are ticklish times. You laugh even if you do not want to. But, then again, politics is often a set of conditions where some of the most queer and some of the most bizarre of things happen. Think of this: the ameer of the Jamaat-e-Islami claims in his nomination papers to be a writer. Now that is pretty interesting, especially when you know, or think you know, that you have not had much cause or opportunity to come across the words of wisdom he claims to be earning a living by.

Move on. The chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party has informed the country, again through her nomination papers for the parliamentary elections come December, that she is a self-educated individual. No harm being that, self-educated. Abraham Lincoln did not have much of an education and yet went on to assume immortality. That precedent is cause enough for us to accept Begum Zia's claims

of self-education. But what we remain mystified by is what has till now been given out about her education by her acolytes. And there is the small matter of her birthday.

We do not expect politicians to be perfect, but we do believe they ought to be consistent, especially about facts that relate to them. The principle is the thing. Remember how only a few weeks ago an Iranian minister was forced from office because he thought he had a degree from Oxford. And Oxford University, much to our consternation, had nothing in its records about this remarkable man!

Move on, a little more. You really do not know if Hussein Muhammad Ershad will get to live in Bangabhaban again someday soon. That depends on a whole lot of things, the most basic being the question of the grand alliance his party is part of and whether the alliance does make it to power at the elections. But do you spot the intriguing here? Ershad has been informing us of late that the Awami League promised him the presi-

dency after the elections -- and this was before this emergency bit and its ramifications came into the picture. That was fine, but shouldn't he have kept it to himself? Or was his revelation a matter of strategy, to force the Awami League's hand? Maybe the approach has worked; maybe the former dictator will ride back to high office in democratic manner. Who knows? Miracles never cease.

But there are more things on heaven and earth than miracles. Think of all the mysterious goings-on around us, right when we believe we are going back to government by the consent of the governed. A newspaper editor tells us, without batting an eyelid, why the chief of staff of the army ought to quit. You put the question, to no one in particular: why is he doing that? And then you find that there are other questions cropping up before you.

Have you noticed how some people, unhappy with their present conditions, are getting so indignant about things that they are even questioning the results of the 1970 general elections, the very elections that paved the way for the liberation of this country? And then there are the men who, deeply upset that the January 22, 2007 elections did not come to pass, try to peddle the idea that a conspiracy is underway to bring back Baksal into Bangladesh's politics. That, we guess, is what they say when they speak of selling the soul to the devil. In our politics, more often than not, Faustus has diligently been at work. You simply cannot shoo him away.

And one good instance of how the Faustian remains a part of our collective life comes through the depression and the anger some men deprived of party nominations have been going through. Many of them cannot conceive of life without a seat in the Jatiyo Sangsad and so they defiantly march to the local election office and proffer themselves as independent candidates. Kamal Ibne Yusuf, for example. Well, you really can't stop them. But how is it that they do not remember that there are such things as values in life, that you do not kick your party just because it has chosen someone else and not you this time round?

Speaking of values, there are all these so-called faithful going about with pickaxes and knives and stones and bagfuls of anger. Their nefarious purpose? To strike down aesthetics and to destroy beauty wherever they can spot it. These characters tore down the baul sculpture in front of the airport. And now they have tried damaging the balaka structure in Motijheel. And they do all these things in the deep nocturnal hours. Are we surprised? Not really. Men like these men, if you recall, murdered Bangabandhu in the dark. The Mujibnagar leaders were assassinated in the dark. All our coups have occurred in the dark.

And you speak of hope? Of elections? My dear sir, we are yet in the dark -- about what is to be, or what might yet be. The Lord have mercy on us! Amen!

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsan@rediffmail.com

## Obama takes charge

### LETTER FROM AMERICA

In basketball jargon, Obama went full-court press the day after winning the presidency. Obama did not take a single day off after election because he realises that monumental hurdles await him when he takes office.

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

AMERICA is unique among the world's democracies. The transition to a new administration takes close to three months. In the UK, if a party wins the election, it takes over in a couple of days. Obama was elected president on November 4; but will not be sworn in until January 20.

The current president cannot take major decisions that are not to the liking of president-elect. The president-elect has no real power to exercise for three months. Both have their hands tied.

Obama supporters keep on reminding everyone that there is only one president, President Bush. However, President Bush is not to be found anywhere, whereas president-elect Obama is omnipresent.

Anytime President Bush makes a public appearance, the stock market takes a nose-dive. Every time Obama rolled out new members of his cabinet on television, the stock market shot up!

The writer has never seen a president-elect act so quickly to fill all his cabinet posts. In basketball jargon, Obama went full-court press the day after winning the presidency. Obama did not take a single day off after election because he realises that monumental hurdles await him when he takes office. He wants his cabinet members to start working on the solutions before they are sworn in.

With the country's economy in a deepening recession, Obama introduced his economic team first. Next week, Obama will introduce his national security team, the importance of which was underscored by the events in Mumbai.

Obama will draw down the US troops from Iraq quickly, probably before 2011. However, Obama will redeploy many of those troops in Iraq to take on Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. This may not be a wise move. The British and the Russians fought a century-long Great Game for the domination of Afghanistan and Central Asia, but did not succeed. America will fare no better.

American and Nato presence in Afghanistan has destabilised Pakistan, which in turn is destabilising India. It is better to leave Afghanistan to the Afghans. As for India and Pakistan, will they ever solve Kashmir? This dispute between two nuclear powers makes Kashmir the world's most dangerous dispute.

Al-Qaeda's second in command greeted the election of Obama by calling the president-elect a "house negro." Now we know that, like the Ku Klux Klan in the US, Al-Qaeda is not only a terrorist organisation, it is also a racist organisation!

Paradoxically, President Bush had a lot to do with Barack Obama's election as president. Americans have caught on to the fact that Bush is not what he was packaged to be by Karl Rove and the Republican Party machine. He is neither a leader nor someone who grasps things easily.

The job proved way over his head. President Bush's first question after learning of 9/11 was: "Where's Cheney?" Disdainful of deliberation, like someone with little knowledge but eager to make a big impact, he acted first and asked questions later. Despite warnings from his father's



advisors not to invade Iraq, he rushed in where angels fear to tread.

Americans saw the nightmare of the Bush presidency unfold before their very eyes. Chastened, they wanted someone different. They wanted intelligence in place of bluster. They wanted deliberation before action. In Obama they found one. Americans now feel proud that they have a president-elect who is articulate and intelligent, and who knows what he is talking about.

Of course, Barack Obama can be mad-deningly honourable. He advised the Democrats to not only let Joe Lieberman, who backstabbed him and the Democrats repeatedly as a John McCain surrogate, to caucus with them, but also to let him keep his chairmanship of the Homeland Security Committee. Such magnanimity has rewards.

Democrats now have 58 Senators; only two less than the filibuster-proof 60. If the Democrats can win the run-off in Georgia on December 2, and if the recount in Minnesota favours the Democratic candidate and former Saturday Night Live comedian Al Franken, they will have it.

As with comedian Al Franken, American politics has been enriched by the infusion of talent from every profession. The writer's boyhood hero, former world mile record holder, Jim Ryun, was a Congressman from Kansas for ten years (1996-07). Olympics gold medalist in basketball (1964), Rhodes Scholar and the New York Knicks' superstar, Bill Bradley, was a US Senator from New Jersey for 12 years (1984-97).

Austrian-born action hero and movie star, Arnold Schwarzenegger, has been the Governor of California since 2003. And a B-rated actor, Ronald Reagan, went on to become a two-term governor of California (1966-74) and two-term president of the United States (1980-89).

As the Bangladeshis go to the polls, hopefully, they too will look for talent outside the realm of pure politics.

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed is a Rhodes Scholar and Daily Star columnist.

## Green energy

### NO NONSENSE

This price hike becomes more real given that production in many top oilfields is declining slowly, which will only accelerate over time. Just to make up for that drop-off, the world will need an additional 45 million barrels a day by 2030.

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

GREEN energy encompasses alternative environmentally friendly energy sources that are virtually non-polluting. They include geothermal, wind, solar, biomass etc. In 2006, renewables provided nearly 18% of global energy consumption, of which 13% was provided by biomass, such as wood-burning, 3% by hydroelectric, 1.3% by solar heating, and 0.8% by geothermal, wind, solar, and ocean energy combined.

The following examples are noteworthy:

- With over 50 countries installing wind turbines, investment in wind energy climbed to \$50.2 billion in 2007. The worldwide installed capacity is about 100 GW and is growing at 30% annually.
- Photovoltaic (PV) industry output reached more than 2,000 MW in 2006. Spain's PV plant produces 60 MW and a 62 MW.
- The world's largest geothermal power installation is The Geysers in California, with a rated capacity of 750 MW.
- Brazil's ethanol fuel production from sugar cane -- accounting for 18% of the country's automotive fuel.
- Solar Thermal Power stations already operate in the US and Spain. The 354 MW installed capacity in the solar energy generating system in the Mojave Desert (California) is the largest in the world.
- Kenya has the world's highest household solar ownership rate.

The promises of green energy have pushed China's capital investment to grow from \$170 million in 2005 to more than \$720 million in 2008. According to a UN study, global investment in green energy is expected to hit \$1.9 trillion by 2020, generating millions of jobs worldwide.

Brazil's bio-fuels sector has been creating nearly a million jobs annually. Environmental technology in Germany is projected to quadruple in a few years, accounting for 16% of manufacturing output by 2030. Mexico already employs 1.5 million people to plant and manage the nation's forests.

In March 2007, EU leaders agreed in principle to harness 20% of their nations' energy from renewable fuels by 2020. Green energy leaders in the US are asking for a national renewable-energy portfolio standard, requiring a certain percentage of US electricity to come from alternative sources.

A coalition dubbed Bicep (Business for Innovative Climate and Energy Policy), along with Ceres, the existing Boston-based coalition of businesses, investors, and environmental groups, has formulated the following proposals for all concerned. Bicep wants to:

- Set greenhouse gas reduction targets to at least 25% below 1990 levels by 2020 and 80% below 1990 levels by 2050.
- Establish an economy-wide greenhouse-gas cap-and-trade system that auctions 100% of carbon pollution allowances, promotes energy efficiency, and accelerates clean energy technologies.
- Promote fuel-efficient vehicles, plug-in

electric hybrids, low-carbon fuels, and transit-oriented development.

- Increase investment in energy efficiency, renewables, and carbon-capture-and-storage technologies while eliminating subsidies for fossil-fuel industries. Also limit construction of new coal-fired plants to those that capture and store carbon emissions.
- Adopt a national renewable portfolio standard requiring 20% of electricity to be generated from renewable energy sources by 2020 and 30% by 2030.

Industrial scale production of solar power is not feasible in Bangladesh because of the vast stretches of land required for installation of solar panels. However, Bangladesh can easily copy the Kenyan system primarily for office and apartment buildings and individual houses. The huge stretch of coastal belts also provides an enormous potential for wind-turbine generated electricity. Photovoltaic power plants between 50 MW to 60 MW are another option for Bangladesh.

Because of the initial cost and the problem of managing hazardous waste, some environmentalists consider nuclear energy as being neither efficient nor green, or effective in cutting CO2 emissions. These concerns ignore the fact that over 75% of French electricity comes from nuclear power, yet its per capita CO2 emissions are among the lowest in the developed world, with 10 tons of CO2 equivalents. Bangladesh has little choice but to exploit nuclear power for rapid industrialisation and poverty alleviation. If the energy planners in Bangladesh are hibernating in their usual comfort zones, they will see people being deprived of income growth and employment prospects offered by the green energy revolution.

The US imports 70% of its oil at a cost of nearly \$700 billion a year. With Obama's promises of accelerated investment in green energy, oil revenues of the Middle Eastern countries will drop drastically -- causing general infrastructure investment to slow down -- and so will job prospects of expatriate workers from Bangladesh, which will result in the eventual loss of foreign remittances and rise in domestic unemployment.

IEA predicts that crude oil consumption will rise from 86 million barrels a day to 106 million barrels by 2030 -- a reason why triple-digit oil prices will return again. This price hike becomes more real given that production in many top oilfields is declining slowly, which will only accelerate over time. Just to make up for that drop-off, the world will need an additional 45 million barrels a day by 2030 -- nearly four times the current production capacity of Saudi Arabia.

From this disquisition, we can see that the coming of industrial scale exploitation of renewable energy sources is inevitable, and Bangladesh must start investing now before it is too little and too late.

Dr. Abdullah A. Dewan is Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University.