

Is Obama magic on the wane?

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President Obama could not resist blaming his predecessor for a lot of the current mishaps to shore up his declining approval rating. In his state of the union address on January 27th, his second since becoming President and given on completion of his first year in office, he said early in his address: "one year ago, I took office amid two wars, an economy devastated by recession, a financial system on the verge of collapse and a government deep in debt." He said that although the worst was over, deep problems remained with job loss being the most serious where 1 in every 10 Americans was unemployed.

Senator McCain, his opponent in the presidential elections, while giving his reaction on the speech, said that the President did a BIOB or, "blame it on Bush", to explain the not so satisfactory state of the union. The USA is still involved militarily in Iraq and Afghanistan despite the President's election promise to bring the troops home. In fact, he has sent more troops to Afghanistan. Job losses have not yet been contained. These factors have neutralized "Obama-mania" that had brought the President to power last year amidst great expectations.



In fact, going to the address, the approval rating of the President had fallen to 48% in Gallup's daily tracking poll. A year ago, when he had entered office, the approval rating was 67%. That was not the only bad news for him. A week before the address, the Democrats lost the Massachusetts seat of late Senator Edward Kennedy that was considered the safest seat for the party in the country. The loss of the seat was a case of double jeopardy for the Democrats because as a result of the loss, the party also lost its super majority of 60 seats in Senate that was a shield for them against filibustering by the Republicans at a time when the White House had a number of important agenda, including the very crucial health care, in the Congress. More significantly, the loss of such an assured seat for which the President himself had campaigned, hinted at the waning of the Obama magic although the lackluster and casual cam-

campaign attitude of the Democratic candidate Martha Coakley was also an important factor for the loss. Earlier in November last year, the Democrats had lost the Governor's elections in Virginia and New Jersey.

Despite McCain's criticism, the President was justified to do the BIOB because a lot of the current problems that the President is facing are indeed because of the misadventures of President Bush abroad and his mishandling of the economy. It is just not that President Bush took the country first to Afghanistan for fighting the war on terrorism; he left that war unfinished to take USA to Iraq where there was no war on terror to be fought. In between the two wars, the USA has spent hundreds of billions of US dollars abroad. At home, President Bush, too busy fighting wars overseas, allowed the economy to fall into the hands of corrupt and greedy bosses of leading financial institutions who helped bring the US economy face to face with its worst economic predicament since the Great Depression that forced President Obama's new administration to pump close to a trillion dollars to save the economy. It is to the President's credit that he has taken up the challenge to take the US out of the doldrums into which President Bush had led the economy and foreign relations instead of putting all the blame on his predecessor. Even in his state of the union address, President Obama has been not been very explicit. He has been forced to do the BIOB because the Republicans have been insensitive, even blaming him for the job losses that have been entirely due to the actions of President Bush.

Not very long ago the elder Bush had lost his re-election bid for his failure to focus on the economy. Success in the first Gulf War and ending the Cold War had convinced him of getting elected for a second term easily. After the state of the union address in January 1991, his approval rating soared to 84%. He did not pay attention to an economy that was on the slide. A virtually unknown Governor Clinton of Arkansas who accepted the democratic nomination that many in his party was not too eager to accept cashed on people's frustration with a President engrossed in his achievements abroad and voted him to office on the slogan "it is the economy, stupid." Although the cases are not similar, the issue is and it goes to the credit of President Obama that he has realized it and devoted the major part of his speech on the economy and job creation.

The priorities in the speech were well conceived for reaching the average American. The health care bill that the President prepared as a top priority in his first year figured inconspicuously in his

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address with little time wasted to make the case. Foreign policy and national security issues were given 9 minutes only in a speech that was over an hour where the President re-iterated his election promise to bring the troops home. On Afghanistan, where he has committed extra troops against his election promise, the President devoted just one paragraph in which he said that though there were difficult times ahead, he was confident that USA would win. While putting the economy ahead, the President also called for new spending and tax cuts to add to the US \$ 787 stimulus package he announced last year that will push stimulus measures beyond the US\$ 1 trillion mark. Pushed ahead in the agenda to substantiate his seriousness with the economy and job creation were issues such as doubling exports over next five years that would bring extra 2 million jobs; a 3 years freeze on domestic spending except Medicare and social security that will help save US\$ 20 billion for reinvestment to create additional jobs. While admitting that the measures he had pro-

posed in his speech would address the economic ills, he did not think the measures would do enough to bring unemployment down from the 10% at present. For the middle class, the President offered nearly doubling child tax credit and benefits for college education. He called for building more nuclear power plants for encouraging American innovation and emphasizing upon clean energy, offering rebates for energy efficient homes.

The speech should go down well with the majority of Americans whose lives have been turned upside down by eight years of President Bush. The President has acknowledged the dangers about what goes with "it is the economy, stupid," by putting economic issues affecting majority of the Americans ahead of issues of foreign policy and national security. A newspaper carried the story under the caption "a dose of reality; a bid to restore magic," that aptly captured the rationale around which the President built his speech. It has also helped the President to touch base with supporters in his own party very effectively. The Rasmussen Report daily Presidential Tracking Poll returned a figure of 50% Democrats who strongly approved the President's performance on the morning of his speech. Two days after the speech, the figure rose to 65%. The figure is significant because in the Massachusetts Senate election and the two governor's election that the Democrats' lost, disaffection among the party supporters was a major cause for the defeats. With mid-term Congressional elections later in November when 1/3rd of Senate and the whole House of Representatives will be elected, this surge in the President's approval rating among the supporters of his party is very significant because it could herald the re-energizing of the party for the electoral test ahead. The speech may also have addressed the concern in the party that the diverse coalition that President Obama had brought together to win the White House was not re-kindled in the seams. It may not have re-ignited the "Obama magic" or Obamamania but it may have stopped it from waning.

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Is Sri Lanka leading to authoritarian government?

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

Sri Lanka is known to pride itself as a democratic country since it achieved its independence in 1948. But the latest Presidential election on January 26 and President's post-election actions have raised grave doubts in many quarters that the country is heading towards an authoritarian government. Opposition leaders are severely disappointed to witness such dramatic anti-democratic actions.

Incumbent President Mahinda Rajapaksa was declared elected on 27th January for another six year term and the court has ruled that the term will begin from November this year. During the election it is reported that the President had not spent this extended term of office to voters.

His main challenger, retired army chief, General Sarath Fonseka, rejected the tally and demanded a new vote. It is reported that on 8th February he has been arrested and would be put into trial before a court martial for "military offences".

The wife of Sri Lanka's defeated presidential candidate arrested on charges of plotting a coup has accused the government of abducting him and treating him "like an animal".

police officer at the scene said they were looking for 'illegal material' in the compound.

Opposition spokesman Rauf Hakeem told reporters the search was an infringement of democratic rights and branded the raid government intimidation. "This is an assault on democracy," Hakeem told reporters. "They are trying to intimidate us as we collect evidence of vote-rigging."

Although there was no major fraud in the voting, election observers and advocacy groups have questioned the fundamental fairness, accusing the President of using state-resources to run his campaign. Reportedly state-owned media all but shut out opposition candidates. In essence the equality of opportunity was not provided to the opposition candidates and as such the election failed in maintaining fairness to all.

The head of a Commonwealth observer mission to Sri Lanka, K D Night, the former Jamaican Foreign Minister who led the mission, expressed concern about the abuse of state media and other government resources in the pre-election period by the President. He told The Times that the abuses did not substantially affect the results of the first presidential election since the defeat of the Tamil Tigers in

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Supporters of General Sarath Fonseka say military police "dragged him" away after storming the offices of the opposition alliance in Colombo which had backed his candidacy in the January 26 election.

A tearful Anoma Fonseka said on 9th February that her husband had been "abducted" and that she has not been allowed to see him. "This is not an arrest. It is an abduction," she said. "What I want to tell the government is: 'Just be reasonable. Treat him like a human being.'"

Earlier the President has reportedly dismissed about a dozen senior military officers.

The whole country has gone into a "waiting game" and the people are curious to know what other actions the President would take to consolidate his power.

Observers believe that General Fonseka was arrested because he rejected the result.

"We have already collected enough evidence of sophisticated vote-rigging at counting centres and at the time of computer processing of the results," Fonseka told reporters at his Colombo home, reports AFP.

Rajapaksa had stolen 1.4 million votes, he said. "I should have been the president. I am the people's president," he declared, adding that he would contest parliamentary elections that are due before April.

Meanwhile on 29th January, the police raided the office of defeated presidential candidate while press photographers and television crews were kept away by security forces. A

May 2009 but did affect its freeness and fairness, as well as Sri Lanka's reputation inside and outside the Commonwealth.

Until such problems are addressed the electoral process in Sri Lanka will not fully meet key benchmarks for democratic elections, he said, urging the government to implement an overdue constitutional amendment that would de-politicise state institutions.

The United States has pressed for a probe into the charges of vote fraud. The European Commission too issued a statement calling for an investigation.

On 28th January, a Swiss public radio reporter was asked to leave the country; a move she attributed to questions she asked at a government press conference about alleged voting irregularities.

Some election observers said that explosions and other disturbances along with the heavy militarization of northern and eastern Tamil areas discouraged them to vote as well.

The international community believes that the President has damaged the country's international reputation by taking actions against the defeated candidate General Fonseka and his supporters.

Meanwhile, Rajapaksa has ordered the dissolution of parliament with effect from 10th February, clearing the way for early elections. Official sources said elections for a new parliament will probably be held on April 8.

The author is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

India tests nuclear-capable missile

INDIA successfully tested a nuclear-capable missile on February 7, a defence ministry spokesman said, days after the government proposed a resumption of talks with archrival Pakistan.

The surface-to-surface Agni-III missile with a range of more than 3,000 kilometres (2,000 miles) was fired from Wheeler Island, off the coast of the eastern state of Orissa. "It hit the target with pin-point accuracy and met all the mission objectives," ministry spokesman Sitanshu Kar told reporters in New Delhi.

The trial meant "now the missile system will be fully inducted into the armed forces," he said. It was the fourth test of the weapon, which can carry conventional or nuclear payloads of 1.5 tons and uses solid fuel.

Defense Minister A.K. Antony congratulated organizers on the "remarkable success" of the project, which came as a breakthrough

appeared possible in India's fraught relations with Pakistan.

India on Wednesday said it was open to foreign secretary-level talks with its neighbour, signalling an improvement in ties badly damaged by the 2008 attacks in Mumbai.

The two nuclear-armed nations launched a peace dialogue in 2004 that helped lower tensions but India halted talks after the Mumbai siege and steadfastly refused to restart them until Islamabad brought those behind the attacks to justice and cracked down on militant groups on its soil.

The United States, battling the Taliban in Pakistan's neighbour Afghanistan, is keen to calm friction between New Delhi and Islamabad to prevent any further regional instability.

The Indian-built Agni-III missile - Agni means fire in Sanskrit - was first tested in 2006 and brings major cities in China, such as Shanghai, within



striking distance, defence analysts say. The missile tested on February 7 was fired from a mobile rail launcher,

government sources said. Source: www.defenselink.com

US gains momentum destroying chemical weapon stockpiles

THE US Army has destroyed more than 70-percent of its stockpiles of chemical weapons some dating as far back as to the World War I era as part of an elaborate, decades-long process slated to be largely completed by 2012, service officials said.

"As of 26 January, 2010, the US has destroyed a 22,322 tons of the original 31,500 tons," said Greg Mahall, chief of Public Affairs for the US Army Chemical Materials Agency (CMA).

The US arsenal which used to include 31,500 tons of chemical weapons such as Sarin, VX and Mustard agents is systematically being

destroyed at an increased pace, Mahall said.

"It is a tremendous success story. Not only is the US doing all it can to meet its international commitments, but more importantly the Chemical Materials Agency is contributing to the national security of the United States in the process. These weapons in the wrong hands can do harm. They are safely and securely storing and destroying them while providing maximum protection to the public and environment," said Carmen Spencer, deputy assistant Secretary of the Army (Elimination of Chemical Weapons).

The Army's Chemical Stockpile

Elimination mission, which destroyed more than 3,084 tons of chemical weapons at four facilities during 2009, has been working since the early 90's several years before the 1992 drafting of an international Chemical Weapons Convention arms control agreement calling for the destruction of chemical weapons stockpiles and a prohibition on their use and production.

The Annual Status Report on the Disposal of Chemical Weapons and Materiel for Fiscal Year 2009 states that \$1,548 million was appropriated during the year for chemical agents and munitions destruction.

In addition to the weapons stored

on Johnston Atoll in the Pacific, chemical weapons stockpiles were dispersed among eight locations within in the continental U.S. at Army facilities in Anniston, Ala., Pine Bluff, Ark., Tooele, Utah, Umatilla, Ore., Aberdeen, Md., Newport, Ind., Blue Grass, Ky., and Pueblo, Colo.

Destruction of the stockpiles at Blue Grass, Ky., and Pueblo, Colo., now falls under Defence Department management with Army assistance; the remaining sites are currently part of the Army's Chemical Stockpile elimination program.

Source: www.defenselink.com

Unmanned US Navy jet gets more punch

A small, experimental jet intended to demonstrate a UAV's ability to operate off aircraft carriers just might see operational action, according to two top US Navy officials. The aircraft is the X-47B, being developed by Northrop Grumman under the Navy Unmanned Combat Air System (N-UCAS) program. Roughly \$2 billion has been added by the Pentagon over the next five years to give the program a major boost. Most of that money, said Rear Adm. Bill Burke, was at the best of the new Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR).

"What we think it ought to do is deliver some sort of capability," QDR, the Navy's QDR director, told reporters February 4 at the Pentagon. "It would be a real program; it wouldn't be a demo. We'd like it to be able to deliver kinetic effects or do [intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance] missions for us." Burke cautioned that many decisions still lie ahead.

The first of two X-47Bs is scheduled to be delivered by Northrop early this year, with the second to follow late in 2010. Carrier-based tests are to begin next year.

Unlike other unmanned aerial vehicles, the X-47B - which looks like a miniature B-2 Stealth bomber - is intended as a strike aircraft that can operate from aircraft carrier flight decks.

X-aircraft are generally intended as technology demonstrators and not prototypes of operational aircraft, although both contenders for the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) program came from the X line. The N-UCAS program has been envisioned as leading to an operational Navy aircraft in about a decade, but the QDR may have spurred an effort to accelerate that timeline.

Source: www.defenselink.com

Iran builds own aerial drones with strike capabilities

Iran started on Monday production of two domestically-developed unmanned aerial vehicles capable of delivering high-precision bombing strikes and performing reconnaissance missions, the Fars news agency said. Iran unveiled the drones, dubbed Ra'd (Thunder) and Nazir (Harbinger), at a plant in the northern province of Mazandaran.

"We plan to manufacture UAVs...at this site" Fars quoted Hamed Saeedi, managing director of Farnas Aerospace Company in charge of the project, as saying. He said both UAVs were short-range, low-altitude drones with reduced radar-detection signature.

According to analysts, Iran has recently made significant progress in developing various types of combat planes and succeeded in gaining the technical know-how for producing aircraft and drones with stealth capabilities.

Iran launched a domestic arms development program after a US weapons embargo was imposed during its 1980-88 war with Iraq. Since 1992, the Islamic Republic has reportedly produced its own Saeqeh and Azarakhsh jet fighters, stealth-capable Ghadir submarine, missile boats, torpedoes, tanks and armored carrier vehicles.

Source: www.defencelink.com