

A good election held

A party should accept verdict even when defeated

THAT the by-polls at Habiganj-1 and Brahmanbaria-3 passed off with relative peace is cheering news for all of us. It bears a good omen. There's reason to be happy about the whole process starting from the steadfast role of the Election Commission, through the campaigning of the candidates and the enthusiastic participation of the political parties and voters to declaration of results. In all, it finished off on commendable note. It's no doubt a booster to the democratic process.

The turn out of voters was on the lower side though, it was 55 per cent. However, more than 50 per cent is considered reasonable particularly in a by-poll. It is heartening to note the gradual assimilation of people, especially of the rural masses, with the democratic practice. Stray incidents apart, the country witnessed peaceful elections to two seats that fell vacant due to deaths of lawmakers of the two constituencies. We are elated to say, the law and order situation was not of fear and there was no report of hostility of any severe nature. On the whole, the results have been a true reflection of people's choice.

Kudos to the Election Commission. It deserves appreciation in managing the whole operation with authority, integrity and efficiency. It was under pressure prior to polls as many questions and concerns were raised. It was a challenge amongst such odds. The main task of identifying the troubled zones and taking measures to maintain law and order in those areas was done with great deal of effectiveness. The voters have exercised their franchise freely. Credit is also due to local administrations and law and order forces for their performance.

We can't help express our reservations on the reactions of the losing candidates after the outcome of polls were declared. The tendency to reject verdict when a party has lost and own up when it comes out victorious is dispiriting.

Accepting popular verdict in good grace, even when defeated is a test of democratic maturity we are yet to graduate into. That's a pity.

The people rise in Egypt

Mubarak must accept reality

AS we reflect on the state of things in Egypt today, the situation takes increasingly newer dimensions with every moment that goes by. Tens of thousands of Egyptians keep pouring on to the streets, demanding that President Hosni Mubarak quit power. For his part, the long-time Egyptian leader has tried to pacify the country by sacking his ministers, which of course is not enough. He has promised to carry on with what he calls reforms, a promise he has made over the years without meaning to carry it through. In these past thirty years, politics in the country, never very enlightening, has stagnated. Mubarak has not only ensured that he wins elections with no less than 98 per cent of the vote every time, but has seen to it that his opponents cannot raise any protest on pain of being locked away. Meanwhile, in the manner of so many other rulers in the region and elsewhere, he has carefully been grooming his son Gamal to take over from him.

If Egyptians can sustain their protests, which they have done for five days now, everything Mubarak has done since succeeding the slain Anwar Sadat in 1981 will be set at naught, which will certainly not be a bad thing after all. Indeed, with Tunisia showing the way (and its president scampering off into exile in Saudi Arabia), it is now pretty much obvious that something of a domino effect has seized the Arab world. Protests have erupted in Yemen and Jordan, where calls for change first made in Tunis have now found their way into a wider ambience. That is as it should be, for there is in these popular protests a reflection of a new wave of resistance to entrenched authoritarianism. The army is out on the streets. The soldiers are being cheered by the protestors. At the same time, many may have died while violating the curfew imposed by the authorities. The truth today is that Mubarak's rule has been exposed for the hollowness of power it has always been.

The end game has not been arrived at yet in Egypt. The situation remains extremely fluid. But what is clear is that the writing is out there on the wall for President Mubarak. Despite Washington's call for restraint on both sides, despite his making a scapegoat of his cabinet, Egypt's leader must look at reality in the face. He should step down gracefully, unless he wishes to make a dash for exile. Egypt's people deserve a lot better than what they have come by thus far under Mubarak.

What is wrong with USA, mon cher ?

ASHAQUR RAHMAN

LAST Tuesday, President Barack Obama gave his annual State of the Union address to the members of both houses of Congress. In an almost one hour speech he outlined his plan for what he calls "winning the future" for the United States of America.

The president is obligated under the US Constitution to keep Congress informed every year about the State of the Union and to recommend for consideration measures which he judges necessary and expedient. It is not mandatory that it should occur in January and through an address. But ever since President George Washington delivered the first annual message to Congress, the ritual has stuck.

This year, President Obama made two clear points among others in his speech. First, jobs need to be created in the US quickly. The second is that jobs cannot be created fast if the American people do not understand how technology has transformed the way the people of the world live, work and do business. China and India have made some changes of their own, and now compete effectively in the world.

But more important than just understanding the changes, these countries have also started educating their children earlier and longer, with greater emphasis on mathematics and science. These emerging giants are also investing in research and new technologies.

The moot question for America is, can it out-educate and out-build the rest of the world? Only then it can create new and large businesses and provide jobs for its own people. If not, then the jobs would move overseas and would be taken up by other nations.

In this context, let us therefore briefly look at how US students fare in schools now, compared to students from other developed countries. This will give us a sense of whether US is likely to fall back in its race to grow economically in the future.

On virtually every international assessment of academic proficiency, the performance of US secondary school students varies from mediocre to poor.

Human capital is the prerequisite for success in the global economy. Therefore, US economic competitiveness is unsustainable with poorly prepared students coming into the

US work force.

By 2050 the rapidly growing minority populations in the USA like the Hispanics and the African-Americans would comprise 50% of the entire population. Their children even now represent the lowest achieving students.

The present state of affairs is quite disappointing:

- **Reading literacy:** US is 15 out of 29 OECD (developed) countries;
- **Scientific literacy:** US is 21 out of



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30 OECD countries. (1/4 of the students do not reach baseline level science achievement);

- **Mathematics literacy:** US is 25 out of 30 OECD countries (1/4 of the students perform below baseline level of mathematics proficiency);
- **Problem solving:** US ranks 24 out of 29 OECD countries. (1/2 of US students fall below the threshold of problem solving skill).

Given this state of affairs, the US president is rightly concerned that the USA is falling behind in the world. The USA, therefore, needs to reinvent itself. He recommended incentives that could call upon teachers and scientists to create the best minds and assemble the sharpest brains to address the greatest challenges that face the US economy.

An interesting reference made by President Obama in his speech was

about the children of illegal workers in the USA. According to him, these children are growing up as Americans. They also pledge allegiance to the USA. Yet everyday they live with the threat of deportation.

On the other hand, foreigners who come to study in the US educational institutions obtain advanced degrees and go back to their countries. Once they return they with the knowledge acquired in America, they become competitors to US business and industry. To the president it made no

sense, as the children of illegal workers are often very bright kids and if given legal opportunity to stay they can make America equally competitive in the world. These are the kids who would also be staffing US research laboratories and creating new businesses.

The president was also concerned about the quality of US infrastructure. In his speech he called for the rebuilding of America. According to him, South Korea has greater internet access than the USA. China hosts the world's fastest computer and is building faster trains and new airports. The American engineers themselves have graded their own infrastructure as "D."

The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), in its latest "Report Card for American Infrastructure," estimates that USA will need \$ 2.2 trillion over the next five years to fund

all the repairs and the upgrading needed of their roads, railways, airports, waterways, energy grids, etc.

But a deep sense of pessimism prevails among US infrastructure advocates. First, there is a perception that the USA cannot afford it. Secondly, Americans do not think that the present American political system can handle such massive projects. And finally, Americans have lost faith in themselves to build an infrastructure necessary for 21st century America to retain its economic power. Mon Dieu!

The State of the Union address by President Obama is in many respects an eye-opener for developing countries, including Bangladesh. By trying to add urgency to his appeal to change and calling Americans to "our generation's Sputnik moment" he is spurring his nation to accelerate and move forward. This message seems generally relevant and can find some resonance here.

But on the other hand, Obama is firing at a moving target. He is hoping that the USA would be able to catch up with the others where his country lagged behind, due to its pre-occupation with the 9/11 tragedy and its aftermath. But the world, especially China, Korea and Europe have already jumped ahead. They continue to move faster and at tandem.

The American population in the meantime has also begun to age, relative to China, India and Korea. The old in the USA are going to further slow down the growth of its economy, unless fresh immigration is allowed to fill the void in its workforce.

The population in smaller countries like Vietnam and Bangladesh are also going through a changeover. These countries are in the cusp of enjoying a demographic dividend. The average age of their citizens is going to be lower with the advance of time. Their young population would be dynamic, resourceful and, once educated, would be highly competitive.

Can we, therefore, hope to compete with the USA in the future? Maybe if our leaders work with a vision and our people agree to revitalise and seek to be more innovative.

Only then, can we dare say, what is wrong with the USA, my dear?

Ashaqur Rahman is a former Ambassador and Chairman of the Centre for Foreign Affairs studies. E-mail : ashaq303@hotmail.com

New policy for poverty reduction

GEOF WOOD

I have had the privilege of working on the problem of widespread poverty in Bangladesh for the last 36 years as a researching anthropologist, policy advisor, project designer and reviewer. When my daughter was 9 years old in the mid-'80s she observed to me that I must be rather useless because I had to keep spending more time in Bangladesh while the problem of poverty remained unresolved. I clearly had to re-double my efforts, according to her.

Bangladesh has moved on since then with remarkable changes and advances. In a relatively short time of 4 decades, the nation has moved from large-scale devastation, including the genocide of an intellectual class alongside the widespread deliberate destruction of infrastructure by "friends" and foe alike, towards steady economic growth, a rising middle class, a stable currency, urbanisation, avoidance of endemic famine, a main winter rice crop (irri-boro) to match the traditional aman, expansion of education at all levels, large-scale remittances and attractiveness to FDI.

If all this had been achieved with population levels of 4 decades ago, Bangladesh would now be a middle-income country in per capita terms. The population, however, has grown by more than 50%, leaving the country with continuing large-scale poverty, with a significant 25 million plus at the very lower end of the BPL range -- the extreme poor.

In many significant ways, Bangladesh has pioneered approaches and methods of poverty reduction for the world. It has reduced fertility rates, decreased infant mortality and maternal mortality rates, introduced pervasive forms of micro-finance and mobilised the poor to secure rights of access to key resources and to proper wage

rates and conditions. It has done so in a predominantly rural country where the majority of rural dwellers have been effectively landless.

Most of the innovation in poverty reduction has been indigenous, and much of it outside government, though sometimes with key, visionary sponsorship and support from gifted senior officials and politicians. Some of these non-government organisations now have a worldwide reputation not just for their work in Bangladesh but for their direct work in other poor and war torn countries. And some international charitable organisations have developed their global reputations through their exposure to the creativity of Bangladeshi activists and the poor themselves.

There will always be a need for strong public provision from public revenue sources. That requires a new policy settlement with the rising taxpaying classes.

But the extreme poor are different from those families and individuals hovering around the poverty line, sometimes just above and sometimes just below, according to lifecycle events. Extreme poverty is less amenable to "business as usual" in income generation and small scale entrepreneurial business activity. It is partly spatial in character, with clear statistical concentrations in ecologically vulnerable areas: haors, chars, coasts, hills and even Barind tracts.

These areas all have precarious single cropping in common, reducing the value of landholding and the prospects for agricultural wage labour. Sometimes the extreme poor inhabit these vulnerable areas because they have been pushed out of richer, securer areas by landlords and even

richer family members hungry for land and bari space. In other words, processes of historical geo-political economy have been at work.

But extreme poverty can also be more idiosyncratic, less systemic, reflecting particular family dynamics and composition, morbidity, disability and learning difficulties, and desertion of females by males. Idiosyncratic extreme poverty is more scattered, harder to identify, and thus certainly harder to reach with programme support.

For both types of extreme poverty there is also an overwhelming capability issue expressed as weakness across a profile of resources -- material, human, social, political and cultural. Many of the tried, tested and reasonably successful strategies with the near

poverty line poor (NPL) explicitly rely upon their counterpart social action: i.e. their ability and capacity to fulfil the programme conditions of risk-taking, challenge to authority and power, and physical use of new resource opportunities.

Can the extreme poor be realistically expected to imitate such capability from well below the poverty line? The Empowerment of the Extreme Poor (EEP) programme of a local NGO is exploring the limits of that capability issue through operating a Challenge Fund on behalf of GOB to support NGOs in that endeavour through programmes of small scale, homestead production prompted by asset transfer and enhancing market linkages.

The programme is accumulating

evidence that small economic and subsistence gains are being made, which can be converted into more sustained capabilities and thus access to other opportunities for securing livelihoods in the longer term.

But two key issues remain: how to support the extreme poor when capability weaknesses are intransigent; and how to protect the small gains currently being achieved, to avoid beneficiary households falling back into penury and destitution? While asset transfers and market linkages may be necessary conditions, they are unlikely to be sufficient.

In other words some elements of social protection and safety nets in different forms will therefore be necessary for the extreme poor. Some of this protection may be self-provided, with careful support, through forms of social insurance of the ROSCA and ASCA type involving collective action (itself a capability and trust issue). The NGO is currently researching this nexus across a range of interventions and innovations with its partner NGOs.

But, at the same time, there will always be a need for strong public provision from public revenue sources. That requires a new policy settlement with the rising taxpaying classes in Bangladesh.

This is a complex issue involving: rights and correlative duties; good governance as an incentive to reduce tax avoidance and evasion and to actually expand the direct tax base; and thus more buy-in from the rising middle classes in Bangladesh that their bonanza years of rent-seeking are coming to an end as the price to be paid for more political stability and the expansion of public goods in the society.

Geof Wood is an Emeritus Professor of International Development; formerly Dean of Faculty of Humanities and Social Studies, University of Bath.