

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

# America decides 2012: It's not only the economy, stupid



SABRIA CHOWDHURY

THE re-election of President Barack Obama in the 2012 elections depends largely on the state of the economy. In fact, it may depend solely on the state of the economy. There is so much rhetoric, arguments and mostly criticism of Obama's handling of job creation and the economy and speculations that he can definitely not be re-elected under such gloomy economic conditions.

It is truly startling to read and hear these commentaries. Are peoples' memories just short-lived or are they just not wanting to see the truth? Do they just need someone to blame? Some, actually frighteningly many, believe that just after 4 years, electing another candidate as president will somehow miraculously cure the diseases within the US economy and society as a whole and there will be a boom and prosperity once again.

My take on this entire situation deals with foundations of US policies to begin with. The root causes, I am sorry to say, do not begin or end with President Obama. I for one have a different point of view to the definitions of "boom" and "prosperity."

Did what ails the US economy today begin with Obama? Many have blamed some of the residues of President Clinton's terms in office. We can go further back. In fact, why don't we go much further back to the time of the first US President, George Washington, to search for the root causes?!

Actually, there is no need to look much further than the last US President, G.W. Bush and the colossal mess he left behind. While he and his high powered group of friends vacationed at the taxpayers' expense, the economy due to his complete lack of governance and his inept administration soured largely. The Bush administration is infamous for the disasters it inflicted on the American people: the two wars he embarked upon, the record high deficits and debt, the utter neglect of healthcare, education, energy, environment and infrastructure. It would be a plain and simple lie to ignore the fact, as many are doing now, that President Obama inherited these disasters. Furthermore, he assumed office in January of 2008. In just three and a half years, it is simply illogical and unfair that he is being judged as a president who could not achieve anything.

Obama's biggest critics from the opposing Republican Party have never been heard to take any ownership for the crisis on the many fronts which the US is faced with today. How convenient!

The Republican standpoint that taxes should not be increased, government spending should decrease, the emphasis on less government regulations is a thing of the past. We have seen that it doesn't work. Republican President Reagan's "trickle down economy" and the concept that tax breaks and other economic benefits to the wealthy, whether it be individuals or corporations, will eventually reach the members of society is truly not a viable system. Besides, even during the Reagan administration, the national debt was close to \$3 trillion. I find it very difficult to conceive how this concept and practice could survive successfully and benefit the US on a permanent basis.

In a society where, unlike any other industrialised country in the world, there is continual opposition to any proposal for something so fundamental as universal health care, it is difficult to comprehend how this "trickle down" philosophy can function in any form.

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Presidents Clinton and Obama's proposals for universal health care were shot down vehemently by the Republican opposition -- fearing among other things that this was a Socialist, perhaps even a Communist ploy! God forbid, the haves pay higher taxes, contribute and help the have-nots! How then can a "trickle down economy function?" Did the scholars who helped devise such an economic travesty forget somehow that human nature is such that extreme wealth and tax breaks and benefits on top of that will only create greed? That is precisely what occurred in the banking crisis in 2008 due to complete de-regulation and greed on the part of the banking sector. Complete de-regulation does not work.

The result is that millions of people are now left homeless, their homes foreclosed, with growing health problems, no health care and no apparent hopes for a better future. What is the opposition

party's most obvious trick in such times? Blame it on the current head of state because we have to blame someone and we certainly will not take any ownership for the current state of affairs!

President Obama is not the Messiah. He sure enough did not create this mess and is trying his utmost best to fix it, but cannot even attempt to reach his goals with no cooperation from the Republican Party and the Independents, who invariably knock down every proposition, every bill issued by the president and the Democratic Party. The system of checks and balances involved in investing in disastrous wars seems to have eluded the opposition. It has absolutely nothing to do with patriotism. It is about opposing, pure and simple.

Add to it all this talk about the new presidential candidates and their religious beliefs (as the US media is currently focusing on Mitt Romney) and we have a larger mess on our hands. Deviating from the real issues and focusing on non-issues and simply the creation of wealth is exactly what has largely contributed to the US economical demise to begin with. It is often forgotten, very sadly and mistakenly, that in order for a society, an economy to be healthy, a society must be looked at as a big picture, as one family.

In this regard, the American paranoia of paying higher taxes is inconceivable. It is actually seen as a diminishment of wealth rather than as the establishment of a system whereby the higher taxes fund health care for everyone, better education, better crime control, etc., where the "trickling down" is of a social nature. As a society, we must contribute to help everyone as a whole. This model works and is highly successfully in Western Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Why should it fail in the United States, if given a chance?

The essential point here is that the United States cannot stand tall as a superpower divided against itself. Petty accusations and deviations from the real issues and bi-partisan wars are far from being constructive. There is no doubt that the Democrats and Republicans can achieve a great deal if they work constructively together. In the meantime, it would really be useful for a prosperous future for the US to look at the core issues rather than simply blame the White House and concentrate on the economy.

Will the US learn from its mistakes, create a system of financial regulations, create a social safety net for the less fortunate and not invest in costly, disastrous wars, or will history repeat itself? I am wary of the answer.

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# Human organ trade

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OF late, there have reports on human organ trade in every newspaper. Several middlemen have been arrested, doctors and hospitals have been accused of involvement and courts have intervened. Section 9 of the Bangladesh Organ Transplantation Act 1999 (BOTA) prohibits organ trade, gain by the donor in return for organ donation, and any advertisement for the purpose. It is evident that the law has been violated. It is also evident that Bangladesh has an organ transplantation industry that needs so many organs that it might be using illegal middlemen for procuring them.

BOTA 1999 has laid a basic foundation for organ transplantation in Bangladesh. If implemented and enforced properly, the law would protect organ donors, hospitals, doctors and recipients. Lack of an adequate infrastructure to ensure transparency in implementing the Act has created some confusion.

Organ transplantation has become a routine method for treating end-stage organ failure largely because of the research and development activities in the United States and Europe. In the United States, the National Organ Transplant Act (NOTA) 1984 constituted the legal framework for organ transplantation. NOTA created the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network (OPTN) as a private, non-profit organisation under federal supervision, which maintains a computerised list of potential organ donors and recipients. The United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS), another non-profit private organisation under contract with the federal government, manages eligibility and priority of recipients.

A large network of organ banks procures organs and supplies them to the transplantation centers. Only specially trained teams of physicians and certified hospitals are allowed to perform organ transplantation. Layer after layer of such private and public administrative activities keep organ transplantation activities in the US completely transparent to the public. Lack of such supporting organisations might have contributed to the current confusion in Bangladesh.

BOTA and NOTA have many common attrib-

utes. The most important of them is that both Acts have allowed charity as the only motivation of organ donation and made any type of material gain through the process by the organ donor a crime. However, the Acts do not prohibit organ procurement agencies, hospitals and physicians from making profits through their services.

Transplantation of a typical organ (say a kidney) generates about \$200,000 worth of economic activities and the recipient gets the organ for free. A demand-supply gap is unavoidable in such a situation. As of today, over 112,000 people are waiting for an organ in the United States alone but only about 14,000 organs have been transplanted in the past six months.

Most of the organs transplanted in the developing countries come from brain-dead accident victims. From a healthy accident victim, about a dozen organs can be extracted. A small num-

***The kidney and liver shortages of a nation can be totally eliminated if about 1% of the adult population of a country is motivated to donate an organ as an act of charity or in return for some incentives.***

ber of kidneys and livers come from live donors. An overwhelming majority (about 80%) of patients currently waiting for a donor organ is waiting for kidneys.

A healthy person may donate one of the two kidneys with acceptable level of danger to his health. The severe shortage of kidney donors has created a global crime ring involving hospitals, physicians and many layers of middlemen. The kidney and liver theft reported in Bangladesh is not unique as will be evident from the following:

New York Times, January 29, 2008: A cartel composed of armed bandits, middlemen, surgeons, and hospitals in India kidnapped poor people and removed kidneys; the kidneys were transplanted to patients from western countries visiting India as medical tourists.

New York Times, February 27, 2008: A doctor in California was indicted for overmedicating to precipitate death of a Mexican-American

accident victim in order to extract fresh organs.

BBC News, August 31, 2000: In Thailand, many surgeons removed one of the two kidneys from their patients without their knowledge while performing unrelated surgeries on the subjects.

The demand-supply gap is so severe that arresting a few middlemen will not stop the waves. The hospitals and doctors generally make a financial gain by organ transplantation and they can stop the crime by refusing to take illegal organs. However, poor donors and the middlemen may arrange for the donation process to look legally acceptable. The donor entices the doctors and hospitals into criminal activities, only to act as a helpless victim later. But the actual problem is the severe organ shortage. If there were enough organs, no unethical and illegal activity would be needed.

We need more organs, but how can we get them? The possible alternatives are animal organs, artificial organs, organs made through stem cell technology, and increased public awareness leading to increased charitable organ donation. Experts in the field have concluded that, for the near future, the above alternatives will produce no significant increase in organ supply. We both worked in the field for nearly a decade and saw that the crisis got worse.

One last alternative for increasing organ supply is incentive-based organ donation. Since about 80% of the organs needed are kidneys and since live kidney donation is reasonably safe, this alternative deserves consideration. A large number of transplant physicians, economists, social scientists and ethicists have advocated for this option. It, however, requires amendment of BOTA 1999 or NOTA 1984. The incentive could be cash donation or financial support of various forms to a live donor or the family members of deceased donor. The incentives could include educational grants, contributions to a charitable organisation of the donor's choice, creation of a perpetual charitable fund recognising the donor, and provision of healthcare insurance to the donor or family members of the donor.

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# Has global warming doomed Bangladesh?

ZEESHAN HASAN

READING James Hansen's book, *Storms of my grandchildren; the truth about the coming climate catastrophe and our last chance to save humanity* (published by Bloomsbury, 2009) is quite an experience. Dr Hansen is no scaremongering quack, but one of the world's most respected climate scientists and former director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies in New York. His book predicts the end of Bangladesh through global warming.

The average educated citizen could perhaps be forgiven for thinking that global warming is a relatively minor problem; how can individuals take it seriously when the media and the world's governments ignore it? As Dr. Hansen elaborates, that is because the supposedly democratic systems of government now commonplace have simply resulted in the best governments that money can buy. It turns out that the oil, gas and coal industries have more than enough money to bend practically any government to their will with promises of cheap energy, industrial growth and jobs. This is particularly true in the US, where George W. Bush's refusal to ratify the Kyoto protocol on reducing greenhouse gases led to the collapse of international climate change talks and endangered all of our futures. Dr. Hansen gives a personal account of how the same Bush administration tried to silence him as well as the rest of NASA on the issue of global warming, going so far as to remove any responsibility to study and protect the Earth from NASA's vision statement. The truth is that every day we continue to burn fossil fuels, the likelihood of catastrophic climate change increases.

Perhaps many people have heard and shrugged off the findings of the International Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) which forecasts a likely sea level rise of only a metre or two in the next century. However, Dr. Hansen points out that the IPCC estimate is most likely drastically underestimated, as geological records tell us that sea level rise is likely to be much higher. As he mentions on page 13, "Global warming of 2 degrees Celsius or more would make Earth as warm as it had been in the Pliocene, three million years ago. Pliocene warmth caused sea levels to be about twenty five metres (eighty feet) higher than they are today". Even a 20 metre warming is enough to submerge all of Bangladesh except North Bengal and Chittagong Hill Tracts

It should be mentioned that the focus of all international climate change negotiations is to limit global warming to 2 degrees. This is because 2 degrees warming is the threshold that will cause severe consequences for much of the world, not just low-lying areas like Bangladesh. In effect, this makes 2 degrees of warming the global target; most countries see no benefit from the expensive and politically inconvenient cutting of carbon emissions nec-

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essary to keep global warming less than 2 degrees. This logic virtually ensures that actual warming will be 2 degrees, since that is by definition what all countries will find it rational to aim for in terms of their carbon dioxide emissions reductions. In that case, Bangladesh has effectively been doomed by the global community, which shows no sign so far of even ensuring that global warming is bound to the 2 degree target. Current levels of carbon emissions could easily cause 3 or more degrees of global warming and even more catastrophic effects; not that it would matter for Bangladesh. We'd already be underwater at 2 degrees.

In that case, what are the options for Bangladesh's 150 million people? The wealthy and educated will always find some new country to migrate to. The lower 95% of the population will face a grim end, though it may take a century or so for the full effects of global warming to kick in. If climate change really becomes as bad as Hansen says it will, then the only real way for Bangladesh to adapt is to drastically reduce the population in a controlled way for the next century. This could be done through a draconian one-child policy, similar to China, but that would be extremely unpopular and politically difficult. However, global warming may leave us with no agreeable alternatives.

It is astonishing that major scientists like Hansen can seriously discuss scenarios such as the above in books, and our policy-makers seem to care little about climate change other than getting their fair share of climate change adaptation funds which various donors are handing out. The idea of adaptation to 80% of Bangladesh going underwater is simply absurd. If the rest of the world had any real concern for Bangladesh's survival, it would admit that adaptation to such drastic change is impossible, and try to limit global warming to a level that would ensure our existence. This would need to be considerably less than 1 degree Celsius, requiring almost completely stopping burning of most fossil fuels very quickly. This is the only happy solution; all fossil fuels, especially coal, need to be phased out within the next decade. They need to be replaced by renewable energy such as solar or wind, as well as nuclear power; the latter is the only immediately available non-fossil fuel based electrical source for large industrial power requirements. Dr. Hansen's book is uniquely personal, narrating how the birth of his grandchildren forced him to accept responsibility for trying to safeguard their future by becoming a anti-global-warming activist. Bangladeshis similarly need to start worrying more about the world in which their future children and grandchildren may be born into.

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