

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Hearty congratulations to Obama

Chance for him now to work for a substantive legacy

WE felicitate Barack Obama and Joe Biden on their reelection to US Presidency and express our admiration for Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan who offered a hard fight to Obama and his team, and also for a gracious concession. The proceedings and the results captivated millions of viewers all over the world to the verve and vitality of a democracy in a truly pluralistic mosaic of a society.

People of Bangladesh like the rest of the world evince keen interest in US Presidential election. But the 2012 presidential race between Democrat Barack Obama and Republican Mitt Romney drew an extraordinary measure of importance and attention right from the primaries and nominations through the campaigns to continuously updated Gallup polls and the election day.

Two reasons can be cited for the high degree of enthusiasm and interest in the polls: One, the euphoria of dream and promise that an eloquent Obama victory in 2008 had generated for the US people and the rest of the world fell short of realisation. There was a legitimate debate over how much the war-induced economic recession and mess left by Bush inhibited President Obama from moving forward at a pace he was expected to. Or, how far could it be attributed to a non-cooperative House of Representatives or, indeed, Barack Obama's policy shortcomings? All this promised an exciting contest.

Obama is vindicated in his position that he had to first bring the economy out of recession, which he did as some vital statistics pointed to, and then build on the hard-earned successes of the first term. His message largely sank in with the voters. They didn't want to see bucking of the trend nor snapping of the continuity.

The second point of interest was how nail-biting and exciting the poll outcome would be with the media prophesying a fight right down to the wire. In the end, however, popular vote was evenly distributed between the contestants, but electoral votes proved decisive in mandating Obama for the second term overshooting predictions.

To Bangladesh, Barack Obama's victory comes as redemption of an expectation, and, therefore, something of a relief. In foreign policy, far from being hawkish, he prefers moderation, and avoids direct intervention or confrontation. He wrapped up on Iraq and Afghan wars, has been more or less persuasive with Iran on the nuclear question and dealt with China pragmatically.

But Obama was not hands-on in resolving the Palestine-Israeli conflict where he has his job cut out despite Netanyahu's sworn support to Mitt Romney. Similarly, the US equivocation on Syria gave Bashar Al-Assad a wrong signal to continue brutalising his people.

The interesting thing is both the victor and vanquished echoed similar sentiments for engagement and working together in their respective speeches after the election results were announced. Mitt Romney while formally conceding his defeat said: "The nation, as you know, is at a critical point. At a time like this, we can't risk partisan bickering and political posturing. Our leaders have to reach across the aisle to do the people's work." President Obama, congratulating Mitt Romney for the hard-fought campaign, lauded his contribution to US politics and reciprocated his sentiments to work together to move the country forward.

A word about the mechanics of election, which enriched the quality of the contest to a remarkable level, a point that must not be lost on any democracy. President Obama cheered his supporters with an enlightening message saying that the campaign may at times have been small-minded and silly but that could not detract from the commitment of those who worked and pushed themselves beyond sleepless nights just to reach the message to the voters.

The right to argue and dissent is there not just to be protected but allowed to be exercised with tolerance of each other's viewpoints.

An incumbent in his first term is usually reticent, treading carefully mostly because he has had to take tough decisions which as it happened met with resistance from a Republican dominated House of Representatives. But in the second term, emboldened by popular renewal of trust in him, he can act decisively. This is the term in which the people would expect him to deliver the goods in a full measure. If anything, the first term was literally a test for him, now comes the time for building his legacy and leaving it to rank with that of successful US Presidents.

His call for a generous and compassionate America



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FOUR years after America created history by electing the first African-American president, in 2012 its people by a

majority, albeit extremely slight, chose to re-elect Barack Obama, and give him another four years, to build on what, as President Obama said in his victory speech, has been achieved in the last four. Implied in the statement is the admission that not everything promised before the 2008 election has been fulfilled. But American voters are also aware of the fact that much of what Obama and his party failed to accomplish was the result of the Republican tactics of blocking Democrat proposals in the House.

It was, reportedly, the costliest election in many years dominated by the dollar; and it was a very closely run and bitterly contested race. One commentator described it as a painfully close race, because unlike four years ago it was not a landslide victory and the popular votes this time is even closer than the last, the voters being divided right between the two parties.

Although it was a smaller margin of victory for Obama, and although the Obama camp exuded confidence of a win, the closeness of the contest cannot have come as a surprise to the Democrats. To his credit most of the swing states were taken by Obama, a feat attributed by the pundits to the "ground game" where Obama campaigners were constantly upon the voters till the very last moment persuading them to get out and vote, emphasising on early-voting.

Obama returns



What about the various issues? As usual it was domestic issues, particularly economy, that was in the minds of the majority American voters and which influenced their vote ultimately. And this is what makes very interesting reading, the result having disproved various pre-election opinion polls which projected that nearly 57% Americans were concerned about the economy and nearly 47% felt that it was Romney who was better equipped than Obama to handle the economy.

In an opinion piece carried by AFP, Stephen Collinson says, "Prior to Obama's victory, no president in 70 years had won re-election with the unemployment rate above 7.4 percent. Although the economy has created more than five million jobs since the Great Recession, the rate is now 7.9%." Apparently, as one commentator said, the voters preferred the devil they know. They credited Obama with the ability to create jobs.

In spite of nearly 8% unemployment and their country not yet out of recession, more than 50% of the Americans reposed their faith on

President Obama to deliver them from the mess created by the Bush regime from which the US is still recovering. And many Republicans actually blame the mess created by G.W. Bush for their fate.

Three issues mainly influenced the results, according to the election pundit in the US. It was the Romney gaffe when he wrote-off 47% of the voting public as hopeless welfare recipients, and the three debates. Romney failed to build on his performance in the first debate, before which President Obama admitted he could have done with a few more cups of coffee. And of course there was Hurricane Sandy, which, while wrecking havoc to the east coast of the US brought political dividends for Obama. That is where his leadership qualities became apparent, and it was issue of leadership that came closely after economy as issues modulating the minds of the voters.

Apart from the fact that he failed to realise that running a government is not like running a business, Romney's defeat is encapsulated in one sentence, "in the end, the 65-year-old former Massachusetts governor lost

because he lacked that one critical ingredient -- the political instincts to make the advantages and opportunities count" by Chua Chin Hon of the Straits Times.

President Obama's victory speech, naturally, was dominated by domestic issues, and he gave very little of his vision of the world and how the US will participate in influencing the events in the next four years. However, it is the tone and tenor of his speech that held many people, some very far removed in space from him, spellbound only because of the message he gave to the world and to his people and his political opponents, and from which we could also take cue.

His generous tribute to his opponent, particularly of his and his family's contribution to America, should not be lost upon our leaders, who hardly miss a chance to run their opponents down at every opportunity. Even those that did not vote for him was recognised by him. His intention to employ bipartisan approach to address national issues, to his commitment to upholding the right to differ, because it is through disagreements that democracy can be strengthened, could be replicated in our country too.

We feel reassured by the president's assurance of building up a more tolerant and inclusive society in America, that would be, among others, more compassionate to immigrant issues. And we would hope that in his commitment to end the decade-long war he would address the major causes that generate conflicts of the kind his military is engaged in, in the first place.

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How Obama scored where Romney missed

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THE US elections have ended with the incumbent President Barack Obama returning for a second term. Given that US is perceived to be sole superpower of the world, there has been much interest around the world on who gets to be the leader of the free world for the next four years. While the outcome was not unexpected, the intensity of competition picked up after the first debate which put Obama on the defensive as Romney gained some lost ground.

Given the complex nature of US presidential elections whereby the Electoral College get to elect the president with the possibility that a candidate with more popular vote still may not become president, the opinion polls taken immediately prior to the elections were not necessarily a reflection of the ultimate outcome that was to unfold. Yesterday's results proved that again, as opposed to the tight race projected in the Gallup polls, the difference in the Electoral College vote was quite significant.

Obama knew that he was asking for reelection at a time when the US and global economy are yet to come out of the recession that has been haunting most of the countries in the West. Being the smart Harvard educated lawyer he is, Obama kept on focusing economic policies centering on people who were affected most by the economic downturn -- the middle and lower income class. At a time of joblessness and economic uncertainty, people are unlikely to have an appetite for shifting gears unless the alternative offers something significantly better and immediately available. Romney's economic plans more or less stuck along the old age Republican doctrine of cutting taxes and spending at a time when there are more people in desperate need for subsidy as queues for food coupons

have been only getting longer.

The improving economic indicators just in the week before the elections did not help Romney's case either. In hindsight, it was a strategic mistake for Romney to be looked upon as the protector of the rich through cutting taxes across the board which espousing fighting for the cause of the middle class and small businesses. It was neither a saleable nor a credible proposition. The economic team of Romney failed to show creativity in coming up with policies that could have ushered hope for recovery when people across Europe and North America are facing acute unemployment and soaring budget deficits.

On social issues, Obama took both

The tea-party activists within the Republican Party may have helped energise grassroots conservatives, but they in no way represented the core mainstream American values of tolerance and acceptance, virtues much appreciated during election times.

calculated risk and smart public relation forays. By openly speaking for gay marriages, Obama may have irked the conservatives and the church community but he struck a chord with the liberals and civil right activists at a time when the public mood in America is shifting with more states legalising gay marriages. By projecting himself as someone who cares for the most vulnerable of the society -- the elderly, the war veterans, the poor -- Obama smartly exploited the fax pas in Romney's now infamous "47%" of Americans who according to Romney love to be on government subsidy and would vote for Obama.

Romney never could recover from this costly mistake which alienated him from the disadvantaged population needing state support. The tea-

party activists within the Republican Party may have helped energise grassroots conservatives, but they in no way represented the core mainstream American values of tolerance and acceptance, virtues much appreciated during election times. The Hispanics, who are almost 16% of the electorate, cast their votes heavily in favour of Obama as the proposed tough anti-immigration policies of Romney scared them off. Another miscalculation by the Republicans when states like Florida have a significant Hispanic population.

On international diplomacy, Obama articulated his success well by taking credit on three major fronts -- killing of Osama bin Laden, pulling out of the much controversial Iraq

not appeal to the mainstream voters, nor did his advocating a more aggressive US foreign policy help his cause when people are yet to forget the dark days of Bush presidency that saw an America isolated from friends and foes alike.

In his second term Obama faces a daunting task. He not only has to lead America out of the economic recession but also has to deliver on his promises of "Change" that is supposed to bring a significant qualitative change in the lives of the Americans. He will have to do so by working with a House of Representatives controlled by hostile Republicans who are still angry with his policies like the healthcare policy, popularly known as "Obamacare." Corporate America is not likely to be any friend of Obama who initiated deep reforms into the financial markets that has seen lot of well paid CEOs either lose their jobs or have their perks and privileges downsized.

On the international front, if Obama can't deliver on Middle East Peace, he would have wasted one of the best opportunities to leave a lasting legacy in the international stage which could very well earn him his second Nobel. With a hawkish Israeli government led by a defiant Netanyahu, that prospect seems daunting to say the least with an ever active pro-Jewish lobby making life difficult for any incumbent US president.

Romney was quite graceful and wise when he said: "I wish the president success during challenging times and I hope he can lead the nation to the right path." Yes, Obama has more challenges to meet in his second term than in his first term, both domestically and internationally. From the remote corner of Bangladesh, we can only wish him success as he takes up the mantle for the second time.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

November 8

1917

The People's Commissars give authority to Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Joseph Stalin.

1923

Beer Hall Putsch: In Munich, Adolf Hitler leads the Nazis in an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the German government.

1960

John F. Kennedy defeats Richard Nixon in one of the closest presidential elections of the twentieth century to become the 35th president of the United States.