

President Obama's second term

What it means for Bangladesh

In many respects, the euphoria of the democratic win in Washington was reflected in Dhaka. There exist several dimensions to relations between the two countries and opinions vary widely on change, if any, will come out of the newly re-elected government of President Obama. Of the several sticking points that remain unsolved, the most prominent from Bangladesh perspective is of course, duty-free access of readymade garments (RMG) to the United States.

With forecasts of income tax cuts in the offing for American middleclass resulting in higher disposable income for this important segment of the population could indeed prove a boon for our RMG sector. Again one must put this in perspective since US policy is particularly sensitive to labour and human rights. These are issues that will have to be dealt with and resolved amicably.

Although the newly re-elected President remains committed to programmes such as Feed the Future, Global Health and Food Security Initiative, that can go a long way in assuring food security for countries such as Bangladesh, the flipside to gaining access and deepening relations depend on us resolving unresolved issues. In a sense, for Bangladesh to take advantage of what is on offer revolves around our ability to address issues that are important to our most important bilateral partner. Again, as stated before, it would be unwise to expect radical shifts in foreign policy of the United States. With that premise in mind, it is largely up to us to work towards improving our track record on governance and civil liberties, for at the end of the day, bilateral relations is all about give and take.

JS body to probe approval of housing schemes

Plug the legal loopholes

THE parliamentary standing committee on the ministry of housing and public works, (MOHPW), has formed a sub-committee to probe approvals given to half a dozen private housing projects flouting a High Court order declaring them illegal in June last year. These housing schemes also violate private housing land development rules 2004.

It is reassuring that the parliamentary watchdog on the MOPW has finally taken a step in the right direction.

Some realtors have been developing housing projects upon approval from the MOHPW. And the MOHPW, on its part, gave the approval upon recommendations from the real-estate regulator Rajuk.

But how could the ministry give the nod of approval to these projects in the first place when there is an HC order that declared 70 housing schemes including the six under review illegal?

In an earlier report on this issue in October, it was said the MOHPW had amended the private housing development rules 2004, softening the pre-requisites required for approval of a private housing scheme.

In fact, the housing projects that got the ministry's approval were still defaulting on the requirement of applying for such approval within six months of the said housing development rules 2004's having come into effect.

Taking advantage of this compromising stance on the ministry's part, the realtors behind these six schemes in question have encroached upon government and private lands, grabbed rural households, filled up wetlands including croplands, and destroyed the livelihood of local people. They also inflicted irreversible damage to the delicate ecological balance of these low lying areas on the eastern fringe of the capital city.

It is hoped that the findings of the probe body under the parliamentary watchdog for the housing ministry would identify the loopholes in the approval process and come up with suggestions for urgent action against the

Looking through the American lens



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE US presidential election came to an end when the Republican Party contender conceded defeat. The six billion

dollar race lasted eighteen months and required countless rallies, political stumps, fundraising events, strategy meetings, interviews and debates, not to speak of rollercoaster emotions of losing and winning as candidates slogged through the landmines of swing and battleground states. Yet, as soon as it became obvious, the Republican candidate walked to the podium and accepted defeat. Others may have celebrated Barack Obama's victory that night, but my hero was Mitt Romney.

If we consider his share in the presidential race, it should be half of the money and full scope all the hard work mentioned above. But Romney looked calm and confident as he arrived to tell his supporters that "the nation has chosen another leader." His face looked like a mask, and the man was hiding behind it. Not a twitch, not a grin or the slightest sign of anger, disgust or discomfort. He thanked everybody and bowed to voters' verdict.

We have seen many victories in our own country, and we have also seen many defeats. What we haven't seen yet is someone who can handle

both with equanimity. Romney didn't scream, shout or blame anybody. He didn't ask his people to boycott the election or write to foreign embassies asking them not to recognise Obama as the new president of the United States.

And all that time I was having the experience of Pygmalion, the legendary sculptor who fell in love with the statue he had carved. In my

about people, country and the future, no bitterness of the past, no rancour for the enemy and no vocal inflections for signs of insincerity.

In George du Maurier's novel *Trilby*, the eponymous character is a tone-deaf woman, who is hypnotised by a masterful musician named Svengali and turned into a diva. I was again slipped into fanciful thinking and transformed our leaders, one at a time, into a gifted

Our leaders don't have to be as sophisticated as Barack Obama or Mitt Romney. They don't have to speak as eloquently as either one of them. But if they only believe in their people, it cannot hurt if they lose or win.

imagination I was carving out statues, wishing that our politicians were a lot like Mitt Romney. I placed their heads on his shoulder one by one, and then shuddered at their dissimilarities.

I also observed Obama, the man who made history as naturally as history made him. He became the first African-American president of the United States in 2008. Two days ago he recreated that success for a second time, another historical record, even by a wider margin than before.

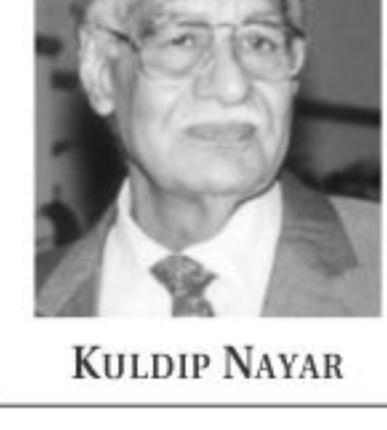
But I mostly listened to the man, whose victory speech mesmerised me. His tone, diction, choice of words and nobility in thought deeply impressed me. He talked

speaker like Obama. I let his words ring out in their voices and was scared by the cacophony.

So I was watching the American election and my mind was busy doing comparisons. What would our leaders have said and done if they were in Romney's shoes? Romney was more on my mind frankly, because a winner doesn't need sympathy. No, this was not the first time I have watched an American presidential election on television.

But this time I watched it for a purpose other than infotainment. I tried to compare the American leaders with those of our own in every move and every speech, what they said, how they walked, zestful to the last minute. Romney may have gone

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

SOME memories do not fade, however old they become. It is really the pain which accumulates because of disappointment and helplessness in not finding justice. I realised this the other day when an old Sikh friend of mine called me from Faridkot in Punjab and cried on the phone. He asked me again and again why the government did not take action against the 1984 anti-Sikh rioters, some of whom he complained were still roaming free.

The simple answer which I gave him was that when protectors become predators, the punishment is negated. This is what happened in November 1984, when 3,000 Sikhs were killed or burnt alive in broad daylight. The then Congress government was reportedly accused of being part of the pogrom. Hence whatever little action taken was perfunctory, not meant to bring the culprits to book.

There was the Chief Justice Ranganath Mishra report and some other assessments. But they talked more about the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi than the killing of the Sikhs. The only worthwhile probe was that of Justice Nanavati. But he too did not go deep enough and did not apportion blame to anybody specifically. Even when, in an interview, I tried to pin him down to name person behind the carnage, he merely said: "You know who he was."

I think the naming of the guilty was important to punish them. Had the law taken its normal course, the killing of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 would not have taken place because the rulers and their associates would have learnt the lesson for complicity. Yet we must know why the Sikhs, as a community, were targeted and what was the motive

behind doing so. I still think that there is a necessity to appoint a Truth and Conciliation Commission like the one the South African government did when the blacks assumed power under Nelson Mandela. Several white men appeared before the Commission and gave gory details of what they did by resorting to untoward and illegal methods to keep the blacks suppressed. The white admitted the abominable role they had played.

None was punished because the very nature of the Commission required true confessions to avoid punishment. Similar confessions are required from the Congress leaders and the authorities of those days. Only then would we be able to

True, one should move on. It is easier said than done. But punishment to the guilty will serve as a balm. The government has to initiate steps that would instill confidence in the Sikh community which should not feel helpless or abandoned.

reconstruct the tragedy, particularly the participation of the top leadership in the party and the government.

"This is happening because we are only two percent in the country," said a young Sikh at Jantar Mantar, adding that even the Muslims met the same fate in Gujarat although they were 17%. His note of helplessness struck me more than his pessimism. His is a telling remark on a polity which takes pride in being democratic and adherent of secular constitution.

The 80% Hindus can brush the criticism aside as most of them do. Yet the fact remains that the taste of democracy goes sour if the minorities feel that they are not getting their due. I must admit that the thoughts and conversations I have shared with the Muslims tell me that they find the millstone of

partition still hanging around their neck even after 65 years of independence. However, some confidence is beginning to build.

In a speech, Jamia Millia Vice-Chancellor Najeeb Jung, said a few days ago: "There is need to understand Muslim concerns and address them to give the community greater confidence, and ensure its greater involvement in the national mainstream. Two committees appointed by the government, both chaired by retired judges of the Supreme Court, have submitted reports underlining the weak economic and educational standards of Muslims, their inadequate representation in government jobs as compared to their population, and suggested means to address them. The government of

and the killings. Only by delving into them would we understand the killing of General A.S. Vaidya or the attack on Lt. Gen. K.S. Brar who led the Operation Blue Star against the insurgents entrenched in the Golden Temple.

Whatever the reason, it does not lessen the sanctity of orders given by the elected government to the army commanders who are duty bound to carry them out faithfully, whatever their predilections. It would be a sad day when the military would question the order of rulers backed by parliament.

However, the role of the army takes me to the theatrical posture of the retired General V.K. Singh. There is something called propriety which he has thrown to the wind and has come down to level of urchins asking for *gehraoing* parliament. I am shocked that Gandhian Anna Hazare, who shared the platform with him, has not realised the harm he has done to the movement he has initiated to bring back the value system.

See the comparison between the two. One is itching to join politics while the other, Brar, a Sikh, is facing the fallout of political rulers' order. The real question is not political but human. The Sikhs are voicing their grievance against non-rehabilitation of the victims' families. "I have been living the horror everyday for the past 28 years. My entire family, including my husband and two sons, were mercilessly killed by the rioting mob. I recount my story every year to the media, but what difference has it made? Have I got justice?" says Surjeet Kaur, one of the victims.

True, one should move on. But punishment to the guilty will serve as a balm. The government has to initiate steps that would instill confidence in the Sikh community which should not feel helpless or abandoned.

The writer is an eminent Indian Journalist.

Beyond the pain

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

November 9

1729

Spain, France and Great Britain sign the Treaty of Seville.

1799

Napoleon Bonaparte leads the Coup d'état of 18 Brumaire ending the Directory government, and becoming one of its three Consuls (Consulate Government).

1921

The Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF), National Fascist Party, comes into existence.

1947

India forcibly annexes Junagadh from Pakistan.

1989

Cold War: Fall of the Berlin Wall. Communist-controlled East Germany opens checkpoints in the Berlin Wall allowing its citizens to travel to West Germany. This key event led to the eventual reunification of East and West Germany, and fall of communism in eastern Europe including Russia.