

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

Hilarity of American hope



WHEN chips are down, the positive and vibrant America sparkles upfront. Just think of the profound change in the US political landscape demonstrated the second time round as a firmed up head-turner trend. One may argue that US has kept to its tradition of not denying second term to an incumbent President except in rare cases. Even so, Obama as a non-white President has scored two firsts: One, coming victorious in 2008 presidential race and then redoing it, this time against insuperable odds.

How America is deriving political dividends from its demographic composition stands out. Even though whites are a majority, a sizeable percentage of them voted for Obama, including women, Obama being gender savvy as he lightheartedly pointed to Mitt Romney at one stage of the campaign. Altogether, this critical element by itself made a difference, let alone "coloured" minorities becoming "electoral majority" sealing a convincing Obama victory.

To say that "purple" (Republican) is turning "blue" (Democrat) maybe a skin-deep observation when you think of the narrow margin of electoral votes tallied between the two parties. Note, however, the increasingly colour-blind voting pattern reflected through the "new edges on the old South" in terms of bagging the swing state votes that made the day for Obama.

Americans know how to humour themselves. Will Rogers, an early 20th century American social commentator, simply wondered: "Congress is so strange. A man gets up to speak and says something. Nobody listens. Then everybody disagrees with him."

A still more devastating comment came from 26th Republican President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909). This is what he said: "When they call the roll in the Senate, the Senators don't know whether to answer 'present' or 'not guilty'."

Balance these out with English humorist-novelist A. P. Herbert's mock-serious comment: "People must not do things for fun. We are not here for fun. There is no reference to fun in any act of parliament."

Neither where the Congress during Obama's outgoing term left matters is any fun, nor what the reincarnated Republican dominated Congress poses to Obama administration offers any savoury prospect for the President to get his legislative agenda through. The only difference is that the circumstances are clearly more compelling now than ever before for bipartisanship to hold and work to pull the economy from the brink of a



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much-vaunted "fiscal cliff." This is obviously no laughing matter.

Simply put, a "fiscal cliff" is approaching as tax cuts are due to expire after December 31 and so are spending cuts. The withdrawal of caps on both means new tax regime in the offing since January as well as increasing government spending. The Republicans and Democrats widely differ on both issues not only in fundamentals but also in details. The twin-devil at work, so to speak.

They have only a few weeks before Christmas to craft a new deal ideally striking a balance between Obama's forward-looking plan and the Republican's known resistance on raising taxes in areas Democrats do not want and increasing expenditure where Obama thinks should be directed. If a deal is not done by December 31 the pre-existing one could reduce up to 4 percent of US Gross Domestic Product (GDP), pushing

the economy back into recession. The businesses will be hard hit and US unemployment figures showing signs of recovery would receive a setback. The whole of America, be it "purple" or "blue" will be the loser.

This would have a worldwide impact including that on EU through China to countries like Bangladesh for which the US is the number one garments export market.

Thus the stakes are high on all sides. Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives John Boehner said in so many words: "We have to respond to electoral verdict," and expressed his desire to "work across the aisle without compromising on principles." Mitt Romney spoke along similar lines in his concession speech but with a passion to come out on the other side working together since the country's economy is at a critical tipping point. It will be hard bargain but in the end a healthy compromise should be possible.

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One interesting sidelight to this expectation comes from a detractor who informed lately that out of nearly 150 golf appearances he made during the last four years he played golf only with one GOP personality. This is hardly throwing cold water on Obama's finest day but just to call his attention to a need perhaps for a tweak here and there to his work style as far as Congress goes.

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Four more challenging years for Obama

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BESIDES the undisputed media projection that Barack Obama will be re-elected as president of the United States for four more years, the US has been showing a constant division in its political map since the 2000 presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore, and one of the debated proposals is whether to reconsider the current Electoral College system.

Different from other democratic countries, the US has a curtain that separates direct presidential election as a national event and the decision of who wins the election. This system delegates the election results in the US's 50 states into a number of electors called the Electoral College that represents the states proportionate to their respective populations. Whether a candidate wins 50%+1 of the popular votes or 99%, he or she will acquire the Electoral College of the state.

Based on this electoral rule, the majority of media platforms in the US, even the most questionable in terms of objectivity among them, had predicted that Obama could secure more than 270 electoral colleges out of 538 in total.

Predictions from CNN and the *Huffington Post* were that would Obama garner more than 300 Electoral College votes; far different from the predictions made earlier based on the campaign trail and the debates.

With this big gap in Electoral College votes, however, the race between Mitt Romney and President Obama showed close competition in the popular votes with only around 0.1% difference in favour of the president.

With media attention occupied by the presidential race, this year's election also strengthened the position of the Republican Party in the House of Representatives, with them winning four of every seven seats contested. The configuration of the Senate, however, remains unchanged with Democrats having a slight majority of the 100 seats.

In the last four years of his presidency, the changes Obama promised in the 2008 presidential race have not all been realised and have failed to bring real impact in Washington due to the polarisation of the country, which can be seen in the political map of the elections in the past 10 years or so.

The Southern and Midwest states have been the stronghold for the Republican Party, while the Democrats are prominent in California, New York, Massachusetts -- majority states on the West coast and Northeast coast -- and several states in the Midwest.

With this division, the race was focused on the so-called "swing states" -- states with undecided constituents -- like Florida, Virginia, and espe-

cially Ohio (the must-win-state for Republican candidate in securing the path to the Oval Office). The myth that, since Ronald Reagan, every Republican president always wins Ohio is thus reaffirmed by the 2012 election.

The high unemployment rate of 7.8% (according to a report by Bureau of Labor Statistics in the beginning of October), income tax level, federal budget, educational policy, as well as foreign policy, have been the red line that divides both parties and the country itself.

Ever since Obama was sworn into the White House in 2009 during a time when Democrats also dominated the Senate and the House, the Republicans have been intransigent in almost every policy carried out by Obama. The division grew even wider when Republicans became the majority in the House. Following the continuous recession in 2009, the division of classes reached farther parameters when the Occupy Movement spread across the country with great emphasis

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on Wall Street.

This division aided Romney in his campaign despite the fact that he weakly represents the Republican Party as a whole with his unclear political stance. In addition to that, Romney's team was unable to use Obama's economic record in the past four years to gain political momentum during the campaign.

The result of the election denies the assumption that the American people want to give Obama four more years to clean up the mess he inherited from his predecessor, George W. Bush. America has decided to move forward.

But, this is not a downhill trajectory for Obama. He has yet to prove the main message in his book, *The Audacity of Hope*, to end the political cleavage and unreasonably high level of bipartisanship in Washington. Different from the voice of the people, politicians in Washington may not agree to move forward.

This is one challenge Obama has to face in his

second term as noted by Romney during the campaign and his unanticipated gracious concession speech that could bring both Republicans and Democrats to a common aisle. Obama acknowledged this challenge, as he did in 2008, in his victory speech, just within three hours after the polls closed in the western region of the country.

Akin to the previous election in 2008, the people who shared the euphoria of the election today are expecting Obama to bring faster growth to the economy and to lower the high unemployment levels that Romney highlighted as a bad record.

Failure to respond to this expectation will only exacerbate the cleavage, thus strengthening the conservatism of the Republican Party that will likely garner bigger support if the recession continues in the American economy.

In addition, to the extent that it will affect partner and adverse countries, the foreign policy and defence policy will continue to be the battlefield for the dovish and hawkish American politicians.

There are pressing issues, such as nuclear technology development in Iran, China's monetary policy, year-long civil war in Syria, continuous unrest in countries in the Middle East, and military budget and energy policies, enveloped in a comprehensive foreign policy projected toward other countries.

The good news in Obama's re-election is that diplomacy will continue to play a role in resolving potential conflicts. Whether or not the US military will be involved in the heightened conflict in the South China Sea between China and the claimant countries of Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia especially), with Obama in the White House and the US rebalance (some call pivot) to Asia, there is a higher possibility that the approach will mean less containment in China's interpretation.

Above all, the unavoidable issue of budget deficit, and the fiscal and monetary policy to reduce the nation's more than \$16 trillion debt and deficit budget, will be among the biggest challenges for Obama in bringing the Republicans to the negotiation table to formulate the nation's upcoming federal budget.

To a large extent, people of Southeast Asia who favour Obama over Romney will gladly welcome the decision of the American people in giving Obama another chance. Finally, the world will watch whether or not Obama's second term will bring harmony in Washington's political bickering.

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Professor Amena Mohsin and Mr. Humayun Kabir give their instant reaction about the result of the US presidential election to The Daily Star.

'It is a culture of democracy both in practice and institution'



Prof. Amena Mohsin

IT is victory for pluralism; it is a victory for diversity; and it is victory for individual rights. Obama stands for gay rights; he stands for individualism; he stands for women's rights; he stands for the rights of minorities, and rights of the immigrant population. Propagating a culture where you have pluralism as well as respect for diversity.

We have a lot to learn from this election. In Obama's election speech he asked people to go and vote enthusiastically; he thanked his own supporters. He also thanked supporters of Romney; and even urged them to go and vote for Romney. It is a culture of democracy, both in practice and institution. And Romney in his concession speech said that he had wished he could have led the nation, but at the same time he accepted the fact that the nation wanted to have another leadership. Both the leaders showed that they could rise above the parties, and they demonstrated their statesmanship, which is very much lacking in Bangladesh. Our leaders cannot get above party politics; they do not think about the state. Our leaders should learn from them.

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'We have to learn that election is not an end in itself'



Mr. Humayun Kabir

THIS is a positive development. For the last four years Obama has been trying to do things in a different way in his domestic policy as well as foreign policy. He introduced a new kind of diplomacy to deal with global affairs. He did a commendable job in ending the war in Iraq and withdrawing troops from Afghanistan. Bangladesh has been getting benefit from his different initiatives, like Feed the Future, Global Health, Food Security Initiative, etc. Bangladesh is also benefiting from the security cooperation with the US. I hope in Obama's second term we will get more attention in all these areas.

We should learn from the US election that one should be ready for win or loss, and show respect to the public's decision. We have seen graciousness in both of the candidates; they acknowledge the effort the other side has made. Romney said that the election had ended but the principle would endure. Obama said that good time is ahead, but we have to work for that. We have to learn that election is not an end in itself, rather it is a means for public service to promote the interest of the common people who put their trust in the leadership.

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