

BITTER TRUTH

# Vices eating into the vitals



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

**M**OST governments use their honeymoon time, the first 100 days in power, to either set the agenda or ram through unpopular decisions. The Al government, during the last four years, dissipated its energies and frittered away its goodwill in fighting BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami.

After waiting four years and hoping their days of suffering, woes, and deprivation would come to an end, people are experiencing a rise in corruption and terrorism. The Al-led alliance has been feeling the pinch of public restiveness over its apparent inactivity, especially in containing terrorism and corruption. Corruption, like democracy is so spectacular, so accommodative, so elastic. Its ways and means these days boggle the mind.

Bangladesh has one of the most corrupt and oversized bureaucracies in the whole Asian region. The argument that it is the underpaid public servant who falls to criminal temptation is not valid. The most shameful cases are from the top echelons, like the Hall-Mark loan scam involving Sonali Bank. Tk.3606 crore could be swindled out of the bank only because the top management of the bank were allegedly beneficiaries in the deal. This happened due to absence of direct control by the Bangladesh Bank.

Financial analysts opine that lack of supervision by Bangladesh Bank, finance ministry's weak control over the state-run banks, and political appointment of directors are responsible for such a big pilferage of public money. The Hall-Mark fraud, dirty deals, money laundering and cheating stemmed from lack of proper vigilance and failure in booking the guilty persons or shutting down the business at the outset.

A report published in a leading English newspaper on November 6 about the seizure of 10,000 bottles of phensidyl from a covered van using a sticker that said "Directot General of Food" raised eyebrows. It points to a close nexus among the smugglers, officials of the concerned department, and law enforcement agencies. How come the officials of the concerned ministry or department evade responsibility in such flagrant violation of the laws?

The education sector, that was once deemed to be sacrosanct and much above any malaise and controversy now appears to be steeped in corruption. A report published in a newspaper indicated that school and madrassah authorities in Lalmonirhat are charging much higher examination fees from

the SSC and Dakhil candidates than the fixed fees. What is worrying is that the school and madrassah authorities continue to indulge in this malpractice ignoring the directive of the district education officer! Shockingly, teachers who are supposed to be adherents of morality and a code of conduct that their students could inculcate are indulging in clandestine activities that shame all sensible people.

Everything, it is said, from power to gas to water connection, passport application or police verification, and business licence to loan application in a

*The crux of the problem is that over the years we have developed a system so callous that it has become governance for the sake of government and not for the suffering people. One of the current buzzwords in government circles is "transparency," which is distinctly missing in government functioning despite what the government preaches all the time.*

bank, and even school and college admission, can be had only in exchange of money! Public outrage has put the battle against graft at the top of the agenda and the press has been working relentlessly to expose the crimes and misdemeanour or harassment by the officials, but to no avail.

The corruption in Bangladesh Biman has not only turned it into a losing concern, it has also put the lives of passengers in peril. Disagreeing with what the acting managing director of Biman said on the issue, that such incidents occurred only once or twice and were being probed, experts opine that such corrupt practices must be stopped by sacking the employees or officials involved. They further assert that corruption is inevitable in a system that disallows sacking of officials or booking the culprits with an iron hand.

Effective management of public finances is the biggest challenge facing all levels of government in the country. In recent years the challenge has become more daunting in view of the economic divide in the society. Some recent happenings will illustrate the case.

Infrastructure development in primary education

through increased budgetary allocation and donor fund should have created a climate of hope and sound economic base for the country because education is the key to all development efforts in the society. Graft, misappropriation of funds and poor quality of work have made the whole move a futile exercise. A report published in a Bangla Daily on November 3 indicated that the government allocated Tk.7,500 crore for infrastructure development, like building new schools, extension of class rooms, sinking arsenic-free tube wells and hygienic toilets in the school premises, along with supply of teaching aids like computer and laptop. But much to our shock and disappointment, most of the work done through LGED has gone down the drain because of poor quality of materials supplied, which resulted from lack of monitoring and supervision. The inspection report carried by IMED after completion of the work in 2011 points to abysmal quality of work -- roofs are leaky, cracks have developed in the wall, plaster has broken down -- and says that money has been devoured without supplying the equipment. Even the education minister has admitted the poor quality of work and pilferage of money in the project.

Corruption has corroded not just our system of governance but also the very soul of Bangladesh. So the problem is not small. If somebody with sufficient political will does not attempt dramatic changes soon not only will we be counted among the most corrupt countries in the world, but the state will also increasingly be seen by our own people as their main enemy. Much to our dismay, successive democratic governments have not done anything to change things, not even in the area of judicial reform. As long as it takes an average of 10 to 15 years for a case to come to court, we can be sure corruption will continue to flourish.

The crux of the problem is that over the years we have developed a system so callous that it has become governance for the sake of government and not for the suffering people. One of the current buzzwords in government circles is "transparency," which is distinctly missing in government functioning despite what the government preaches all the time.

We need a systemic change that would make it compulsory for ministers to provide information to the public at least once a year. It may sound like a radical change but without such steps there is absolutely no likelihood that the wrongs of 40 years of mis-governance will be corrected.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.  
E-mail: aukhandk@gamil.com

SHIFTING IMAGES

# Flawed, but it still works



MILIA ALI

**I**T'S 5 p.m in the East Coast of the United States on November 6, 2012! As I write this column, voting for the US presidential elections is underway. Before I conclude this piece we will know who the next president will be. Whatever the outcome, the election mania will subside in a day or two.

The mania may subside, but Americans need to go through some serious introspection about the election process. The most controversial topic this election season has been campaign financing and advertising. According to estimates, the total cost of the elections was \$5.8 billion -- more than the entire annual GDP of Malawi. For the presidential elections alone, the Obama campaign raised \$1.08 billion and Mitt Romney garnered \$1.13 billion. Apart from personal contributions which have a cap, the new funding mechanism is the Super Political Action Committee (PAC) which came into existence in 2010 by a US Supreme Court ruling. Super PACs can receive unlimited amounts of money from corporations and unions for supporting or opposing a candidate. In addition, campaign activities could be funded by non-profit organisations that are not required to reveal their donors.

The bulk of the money raised by campaigns is used for advertisements and advocacy, ostensibly to inform voters about candidates and their key policy choices. Instead, the voter pool is preponderantly subjected to a tirade of negative ads and robot calls which essentially run down the opponent. Sometimes the attacks can become vicious --

*While every election has long term implications, this one was especially crucial. In simple terms it was a victory of the progressive forces against conservatism at its extreme.*

for example the false allegations that President Obama is a Muslim born in Kenya. (The US Constitution, however, does not bar a person of any faith from running for public office).

The phenomenal influx of money from interest groups comes with a heavy price. It can influence and skew subsequent public policy to serve vested interests. In addition, when electoral outcomes are primarily determined by the amount of money spent, the fundamental principle of one-man one vote is substantively undermined. Higher influence of special interests means lesser electoral equity.

Those who read my columns regularly may be a bit puzzled by my reservations about the US electoral system. You might ask why, despite my qualms, I have been so proactively involved in the presidential campaign. It's a perfectly reasonable question. And my answer is: because I still believe in the democratic process. As I cast my vote this morning, I felt empowered because, in the final analysis, every vote counts. Al Gore was defeated by only 537 votes and we know how those 537 voters changed the world...

It's past midnight and we now know that Barack Obama will return to the Oval Office for four more years!

The country is not poised at the best place right now and many of us are disillusioned. But I still believe that a second term presidency for Barack Obama will make a big difference. While every election has long term implications, this one was especially crucial. In simple terms it was a victory of the progressive forces against conservatism at its extreme. Apart from the debates on "more government or less government" and "higher taxes or tax cuts for the rich," there were critical social issues at play. Equal pay for women, a woman's right to make choices about abortion and her reproductive health, universal health care, safety nets for the retired and disabled, equal rights for gays and lesbians being some. The country has overwhelmingly voted for these reforms despite the noises created by big money trying to convince voters otherwise. Post election analysts and politicians continue to attribute President Obama's victory to demographic factors like Latino and female votes. But, for me, the results indicate that the common people comprehend the gravity of the impact of the president's proposed policies and have opted to change the trajectory of the US toward a new frontier.

When I first came to this country I was impressed by the diversity of races, religions and ethnicities. The election outcome has demonstrated the collective power of these diverse forces in influencing the direction of political discourse. It has also proved that when common people take ownership and fight for a cause their voices can make a difference.

On a personal note, I believe that President Obama really cares for all of us. True, sometimes he is caught up in the tangle of partisan politics. But I know that his heart is in the right place. He has been on the other side of the isle, having been raised by a single mother in a racially mixed family. Hence he understands the struggle of the common man. It's comforting to know that the man sitting in the Oval Office empathises with 100% of Americans and not just the top 1%.

The doomsayers will continue to tell us that the president's efforts will be blocked by the Republican Congress and he will be ineffective. May be that's true, but tomorrow is another day. Today, I want to sleep with a single thought in my heart: "HOPE!"

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

# America decides

MAHMOOD HASAN

**B**ARACK Obama remains the president of the United States after a stiff contest. The 57<sup>th</sup> presidential election of the US concluded on November 6, ending an 18-month long fierce, bruising yet fascinating campaign by both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney.

The 435 members of the House of Representatives, 33 Senators and 13 governors were also elected during this election. All these Congressmen and governors were also engaged in bitter campaigning alongside the presidential candidates.

In terms of popular votes the difference was not that significant. According to *Washington Post* Obama got 50.3% of the votes as against 48.1% that Romney got. But that marginal difference converted into an overwhelming victory for Obama with 303 Electoral College (EC) votes as against 206 for Romney. Unofficial figures suggest that roughly 67% of the 170 million registered voters took part in voting.

The "battleground" or "swing" states, where voters were undecided, played a crucial role. Ohio (18 EC votes) was constantly in the media as both parties campaigned there even on Election Day. Obama carried the state because he bailed out its bankrupt auto industry in 2009. The other swing states were Iowa, Virginia and Colorado, which also went to Obama.

Romney lost because of several reasons. The most important reason was his shifting stance on key issues and some very damaging remarks. His disdain towards the middle class and the poor alienated him from a large segment of the voters. He continuously boasted about his successful business and claimed that he could fix the US economy. His hard line estranged immigrant, women and black voters. His attack on Obama's health care reform was fatal. Critics described him as an "out-of-touch elitist" candidate.

Romney's repeated assertions on reviving the economy, reducing deficit without raising tax, and creating 12 million jobs, without any clear strategy, appeared rhetorical. His tactic of blaming Obama for the slow economic recovery and asking "Are you better off than you were four years ago" simply did not carry with the voters. Running a business and governing a nation are certainly different cups of tea.

Though people considered that economy was the most important issue in this election -- the

majority knew that Obama inherited a battered economy from his Republican predecessor, George Bush. Although Wall Street executives favoured Romney's economic plans, middle class voters were apprehensive that the corporate sharks would repeat the "housing bubble burst" that led to severe recession under George Bush.

Demographically, the US has been going through conspicuous change. Hispanics, Asians, African-Americans and other immigrant communities are growing fast in the American "melting pot." Republicans failed to understand this transformation. Their traditional vote bank was the older generation whites, which has shrunk significantly over the past three decades.

Democrats took full advantage of the changing demography and succeeded in mobilising and connecting with those communities. Obama's moderate stand on immigration won him 71% of the Hispanic votes. He emphasised the contributions and values of the middle class in the American society.

*A commentator once appropriately remarked that the Oval Office is as big as its occupant. Nobel laureate Obama will need to demonstrate strong leadership to unify a divided America.*

Obama's re-election was a clear endorsement of his economic policy that focuses on more employment, and tax increase on the richer segment to reduce the fiscal deficit and balance the budget. Figures released before the election showed that economic recovery was well underway.

On foreign policy, Obama earned credits for ending the Iraq war, setting a date for complete withdrawal from Afghanistan and eliminating America's biggest enemy -- Osama bin Laden. Without starting a new war he secured UN resolution and changed the regime in Libya. He also got UN backing for stringent sanctions on Iran.

However, Obama's second term will not be easy. To pass any law the president will need Republican support in the House of Representative. The 435-member House is controlled by the Republicans.

They have 233 seats against 192 Democrats. In the 100-seat Senate, however, the Democrats have a majority -- 54 as against 45 Republicans. In the past four years every time President Obama pushed for legislation the House stymied his initiative. This time too, it is not likely to be different.

According to opinion polls, the performance of the House was rated at 9% -- reflecting that it has become dysfunctional. The president will need to be more imaginative and make deals. Obama, in his post-victory speech, remarked that he was going back to the White House much more "determined," indicating that he will try to "reach across the aisle," push for consensus and get things done.

The Republicans will now have to do some serious soul searching as Mitt Romney passes into history as an asterisk. They are in a state of anger and depression. They will need serious introspection to reinvent the Party and fix its battered image. The impression across the people is that because of obduracy of the Republicans in the House of Representatives, President Obama had not been able to do more for the economy. No wonder, soon after the Obama's re-election, Speaker of the House John Boehner (Republican) announced that he "was ready to agree to new revenue from tax system that would generate faster economic growth."

The second term for any president is more daunting than the first. Two very critical areas will require Obama's constant attention -- domestically, growth in the economy; and some success in foreign policy. On the economy he will need the total support of the Congress. On foreign policy he will need the cooperation of Israel to push for settlement of the Palestinian issue and maintain peace in the Middle East.

Second term presidents normally devote more energy on foreign policy issues. US foreign policy has always been related to its military power. Military might is the product of strong national economy. Obama desperately needs a strong economy to lead the US.

The campaign has sharply divided the Americans into two ideological camps -- conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats. A commentator once appropriately remarked that the Oval Office is as big as its occupant. Nobel laureate Obama will need to demonstrate strong leadership to unify a divided America.

The writer is a former ambassador and secretary.