

# Significance of Obama's Myanmar visit

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IN contemporary international relations, the first official visit of a country's newly elected president or prime minister is an indicator of its foreign policy direction. When the visit is by the president of the world's only superpower, then obviously it is even more significant.

After his reelection, Barack Obama is going to visit Myanmar on November 19 during his four-day tour of Southeast Asia. It clearly demonstrates that the Obama administration has a special foreign policy goal in relation to Myanmar. There are a number of reasons why the Obama administration has focused on Myanmar in recent times.

First, the Obama administration realises the geopolitical and strategic significance of Myanmar, especially in the current dynamics of international politics. Geopolitically, Myanmar is of strategic importance in at least four ways: i) land border with India, often termed as the regional hegemon of South Asia; ii) land border and stable relationship with China, often called an upcoming superpower; iii) direct access to the Indian Ocean, frequently identified as one of the centres of future world politics; iv) land and maritime borders with other Southeast Asian countries, which have some of the world's most important Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). The Obama administration could not, therefore, overlook the importance of maintaining a sound relationship with Myanmar.

Since 2008, the US and its allies in Europe have made a number of withdrawals of economic sanctions from Myanmar and inspired the country to open its doors for democracy. Given the historical antagonism, Myanmar also responded to the Western initiatives through freeing Aung San Suu Kyi and holding national election in April, 2012.

*Tatmadaw* (Myanmar's army) has perhaps realised that the perpetuation of peace and stable relationship with the outer world could no longer be maintained by keeping itself isolated, or even depending on a single power, China. The November 2011 visit of US Foreign Secretary Hillary Clinton to Myanmar, therefore, proved fruitful to the development of bilateral relationship between the two countries.

Second, geographically as well as historically, Myanmar has a sound relationship with China, which is perhaps the strongest economic and military contender of the US in world politics. China is now the third-largest trading partner of Myanmar with wide-ranging military and aid support. In 2007, for instance, bilateral trade between the two countries crossed \$1.4 billion. For decades, Beijing has been giving strong diplomatic support to Nypidow when the international community abandoned Myanmar after the advent of autocracy in the country. China has given strong military and strategic support to Myanmar.

Through this relationship China has also gained a lot. For instance, through Myanmar, China has got an important strategic access to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. China has been able to reduce its import costs by using the road link from Myanmar sea ports to Chinese territory. A close monitoring of SLOCs in Southeast Asia has also become easier for China through Myanmar. In addition, Myanmar serves as a regular market for Chinese products for long. Realising the geo-strategic importance of Myanmar as well as its relationship with China, the US moved towards developing bilateral relationship with Myanmar through some ice-breaking initiatives, like removing sanctions and initiating top-level visits.

Third, though the process of improving bilateral relationship started long ago, I would say, Arab Spring contributed greatly to speeding it up. Arab Spring and its aftermath have caused a great shift in American foreign policy towards the Middle East region. Along with the US, China and Russia are now projecting equal or even more influence over the Middle East. Monopoly of US foreign policy visions and power projection in the region has already been reduced dramatically. The US has most likely realised the possibility

of a future multi-polar world order. Therefore, Obama has put great emphasis on the Asia Pacific region, so that the US does not lose its influence over the region as did in the Middle East after the Arab Spring. The recent Chinese initiatives and power projection regarding the proclamation of South China Sea has also been considered seriously by the US.

In response, the US has also taken a number of counterbalancing initiatives, such as the planned deployment of at least 60% of its naval strength in the Asia Pacific by 2020 and

deployment of US Marines in Australia. The clear linkage between the Arab Spring experience and the contemporary US initiatives towards the Asia Pacific is, thus, likely to prevent China from being more influential in international politics. The gradual improvement of bilateral relationship of the US with one of China's closest allies, Myanmar, may, therefore, be considered as master strategy by the US.

The reelection of Barack Obama has demonstrated the support of the American people for the Obama administration's pragmatic foreign policy. In the line with containing the growing Chinese influence over the world, the improvement of bilateral relations between the US and Myanmar is considered as one of the biggest foreign policy achievements for Obama. The forthcoming visit of the US president to Myanmar, therefore, is of importance to future world politics. The future will show whether China or the US will be the powerhouse of the Asia Pacific region.

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**The improvement of US's bilateral relationship with China's ally, Myanmar, may be considered as master strategy by America.**



# Time to break the silence

FIRDOUS MURSHID

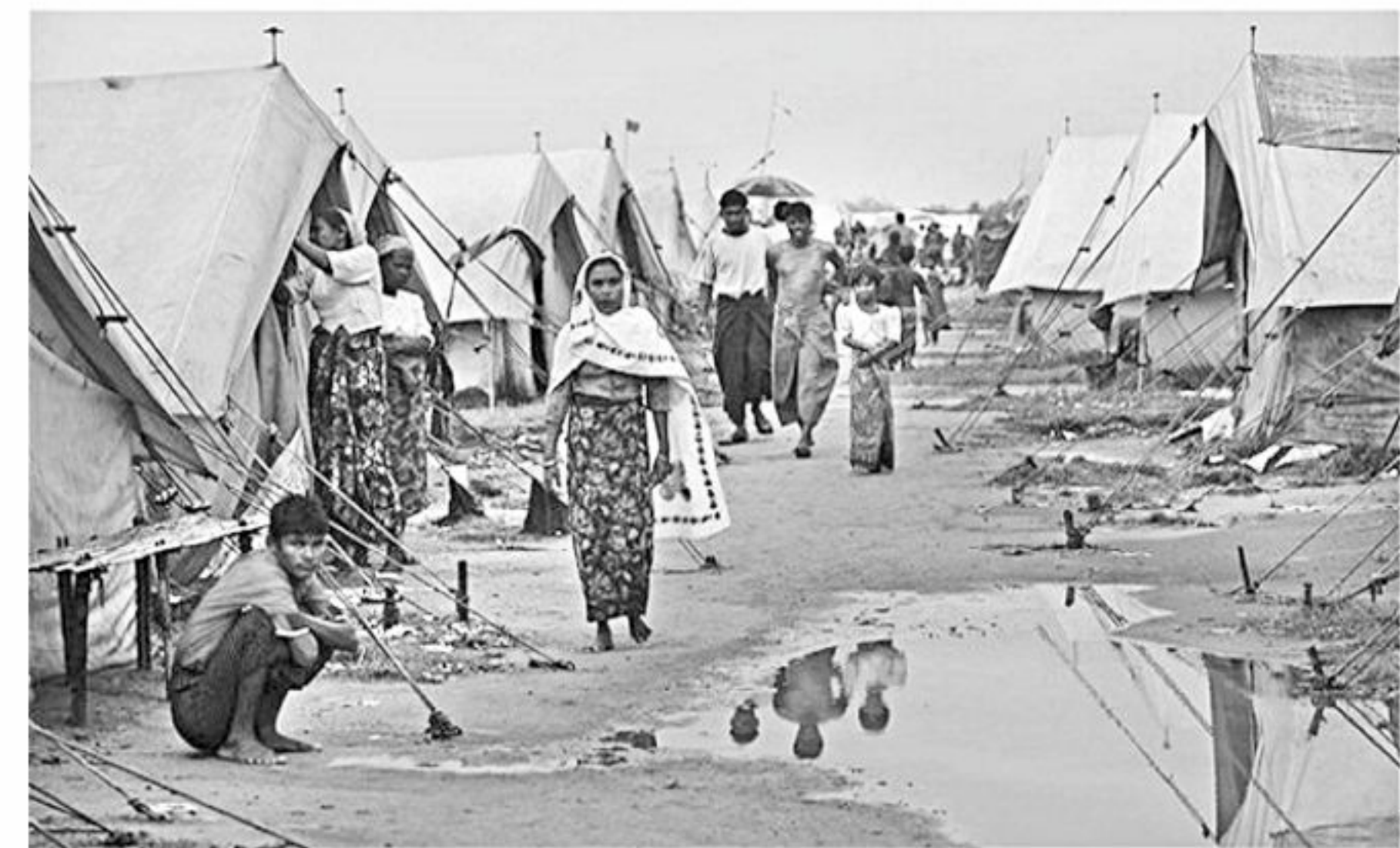
THERE is wholesale attack on civilians going on in our backyard. Villagers have been massacred, their houses have been burnt to the ground, a hundred thousand have been made homeless and corralled into virtual concentration camps, and hundreds, perhaps thousands murdered. Inevitably, women and children have borne the brunt of the brutalities perpetrated in the name of Lord Buddha whose ashes must surely be in turmoil.

There is no need to identify these hapless people as Muslims, Rohingya, Bengali or indigenous -- it should be sufficient that they are human beings who now face extermination despite being in Arakan for a very long time because "they are not of our ethnicity." The world needs to wake up to this unfolding human tragedy, and I believe that we in Bangladesh have a duty to sound the alarm bells as loudly as we can.

It is time for our civil society to make itself heard. It is time for our media to face up to this tragedy squarely for what it is worth. It is important that our mainstream political parties prevent the Rohingya issue from being marginalised as an Islamic issue, which it clearly is not. Most importantly, and this is something that the international community can perhaps identify with, the Rohingya issue should not be allowed to degenerate into an Islamic jihad. However, if the Rohingya have no one to turn to their only alternative would be to turn to jihadi groups -- the implications of that surely should give us some pause.

The international community needs to get off its haunches and urgently review its Myanmar strategy -- with Arakan in flames and zero concern for human rights, the government in Napatow must be held to account. Burmese security forces and Rakhine vigilantes engaged in human rights violence must be reminded that they will have to account for their crimes against humanity, and that great Nobel Laureate should be made to understand that she did not deserve that honour.

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I am waiting for a call for a vigil in front of the Central Shaheed Minar for the godforsaken people of Arakan. I am hoping that this call will come from the Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Muslims of Bangladesh.

I am hoping that our foreign minister will take up the issue in all major world capitals and in the UN.

I am hoping that the world will not abandon the Rohingya.

The writer is an economist and an occasional contributor.

# What US presidential election result means

BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

THE American electorate has spoken: they have given President Obama a historic victory over the Republican candidate, Mitt Romney, defying many pundits who had written off the Democratic ticket after the first presidential debate. The Obama-Biden ticket received 332 electoral votes and about 51% of the popular vote as opposed to 206 and 48% for Romney-Ryan. Significantly, Romney and Ryan even lost in their home states of Michigan and Wisconsin, and also Massachusetts, where Romney was an elected governor. The victory was historic in that Mr. Obama is only one of the 17 presidents, and the first and only African-American president, who won re-election.

Obama's victory is also significant on another count. The support by the majority of American voters, despite high unemployment rate, represents a small "mandate," which should strengthen his position in dealing with the Republican majority in the House of Representatives. In addition, although conservatives talked about not only capturing the White House but also gaining a majority in the Senate, Democrats actually picked up two Senate seats and at least ten House seats.

What factors contributed to the re-election of Obama and the Democratic gains in the House and Senate? What significance does this victory carry? In spite of the nation's economic challenges, and Obama's inability to bring about major "changes" in the way the country is governed -- it may be recalled that, four years ago, he came to power as an outsider who promised to shake-up Washington -- what does it mean for the future of America?

One important factor behind Obama's victory, in the perception of many voters, is his work in preventing an economic depression that might have been precipitated by excesses in mortgage lending rates, major collapses of banks and financial institutions, and the potential bankruptcy of the auto industry.

Strong recovery of the auto sector in fact helped him win the all important swing state, Ohio. Dealing with these challenges earned him the "forgiveness" of

many voters for not initiating major reforms. Some voters also came to appreciate that it is difficult for a president, in his first term, to be too bold, given the fact that he has to think of re-election.

On the economic front also, despite 7.9% unemployment, there has been steady improvement. The number of Americans working has been gradually increasing and 5.5 million new jobs were created. The deficit has begun show declines. The Affordable Care Act -- also known as "Obamacare" -- helped him gain the support of many young people and minorities.

In the areas of foreign policy and national defense, the president's leadership has earned him the confidence of many Americans. Even his challenger, Romney, in the final presidential debate, agreed with the president's basic approach and approved almost all of his foreign policy initiatives. Many voters also felt that in the second term, President Obama, free of re-election concerns, would be able to more effectively address other important issues and come up with comprehensive immigration, entitlement and economic reforms.

The devastation wreaked by super-storm Sandy also appeared to have helped Obama's re-election. During the almost weeklong emergency, while Obama assumed a

presidential role, staying above partisan bickering and working with local elected leaders irrespective of party affiliation, Romney was sidelined, unable to get his message out. Arguably, the super-storm put Romney's campaign off-course. The recent showering of praise of Obama by Chris Christie, the popular Republican governor of New Jersey -- who, previously, had vehemently attacked the lack of presidential leadership during the Republican convention -- only enhanced the standing of the incumbent. The positive role played by the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) -- an agency which Romney had earlier proposed to abolish -- during the emergency also

made the challenger look silly and out of touch with the reality.

Another major factor contributing to Obama's victory was the inclusiveness of his campaign. In fact, Obama owes his victory largely to non-establishment and largely disadvantaged groups -- Blacks, Hispanics, other minorities and women -- whose support for him was overwhelming. Young voters, by large majority, also voted for him. Election results show that Republicans are clearly out of touch with these groups. Obama's "ground game" -- i.e. his campaign's grassroots organisational structure composed of innumerable volunteers -- was able to mobilise diverse groups of voters from walks

of life. The big money behind Romney could not match such "people power."

Romney himself and the Republican Party itself are also to a great extent responsible for the Obama victory. Romney, a moderate Republican, projected himself as a conservative during the Republican primary. For example, during the financial crisis, he wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* opposing the bailout of the auto industry. After the nomination, he tried to moderate his position to appeal to the non-conservative voters, thus

seriously hurting his credibility. He also sometimes twisted the truth in criticising the Obama administration. For example, while Chrysler was increasing the production of Jeep-brand cars in Ohio, he falsely accused the company of shifting its production to China.

Mr. Romney also embraced the conservative position of lowering taxes for the rich, while cutting social programmes, such as "Obamacare," which benefit the poor. At the same time, he advocated increases in defense spending while simultaneously reducing deficits. To many critics, his math did not add up. More importantly, while Romney came across as a

candidate promoting the interests of the rich, Obama appealed to the poor, minorities and women, and portrayed himself as their champion in Washington. Romney, a rich man himself, did not pay what many perceived as his due share as taxes, and this also did not help his cause.

The Republican Party's declaration after the 2008 election, to make Obama a one-term president, and their obstructionist policies of the last four years against almost all major initiatives of the Obama administration did not also help their cause. The extremism of the "Tea Party" movement further alienated many voters.

Obama's re-election has enormous significance. In the backdrop of the Great Depression of the 1930s, President Roosevelt introduced the New Deal, giving the government significant roles in economic and social arenas. After World War II, this role of government to provide a safety net gained widespread acceptance and, over time, expanded enormously. Even Republican presidents like Eisenhower and Nixon introduced new initiatives, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, to expand government's role in the production of economic and social goods.

In recent years, the Republicans, pushed by the neo-conservatives, religious fundamentalists and Tea Party extremists, worked to undermine the basic philosophy underlying the New Deal's programmes. They wanted to do away with government regulations, abolish many government agencies and privatise many entitlement programmes, such as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. They wanted the "market" -- only the market -- to rule all decisions. The Republicans and their intellectual ideologues were counting on a Romney presidency, along with a presumed majority in both Senate and House, for such a rollback of government programmes. Thus, too much was at stake in this election and the re-election of Obama ensures the continuation of the limited role of the government, along with the market, in shaping the future of Americans.

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