

Obama's victory: Lessons for Hasina

MANZOOR AHMED

THOUGH it was predicted to be a nail-biting finish of an acrimonious and expensive campaign, in the end, Barack Obama sailed to an easy Electoral College victory. The country remained divided in popular vote count, with 61 million supporting Obama and 58 million standing behind Governor Mitt Romney. Are there parallels and lessons for Bangladesh, which is facing a general election in a year?

Before all the votes were counted in many states on the evening of November 6, based on statistical projections from state-by-state early returns, national TV channels declared Obama re-elected for the second term as the president of the United States. From his Chicago hotel, Obama called Romney, congratulating him for running a strong campaign and wishing to meet him on the challenges for the country.

Mitt Romney, in his turn, soon after midnight, came to the ballroom of his Boston hotel to concede defeat. "I have just called President Obama to congratulate him on his victory," said Romney. "The nation is at a critical point... Our leaders have to reach across the aisle to do the people's work... I pray that the president will be successful in guiding our nation."

Mind you, all this happened much before the official counting of the returns was completed. But the trend was clear enough, which the contending parties had the sense and the civility to accept. This is a parallel we are not likely to witness in Bangladesh in the next general election.

In 2008, Barack Obama made history by becoming the first African-American to be the president of the United States. Obama had forged a grand coalition of young people cutting across geography and economic background, women, and minorities including African-Americans, Latinos and Asians, to steer the country in a new direction.

Obama's triumph provoked visceral reaction from older white males, the Christian right, and the conservative mid-west and the south where not-so-subtle racial prejudices remain alive and well. The detractors spread rumours that Obama was secretly a Muslim,

that he was a closet "socialist" (a dirty word in the US), and not even an American citizen by birth.

Obama tried to reach across the aisle on key agendas overhauling the broken healthcare system, resuscitating the economy with a stimulus package, stemming the rising debt burden, bringing financial market and Wall Street under regulations, and creating a sustainable budget and taxation structure.

Facing animosity from the Republican opposition, Obama gave up hope of bipartisan accord and pushed through a comprehensive health care law, a stimulus package, and a financial regulation package. He failed to adopt tax restructuring and budget package that would maintain economic growth and reduce deficits eventually.

What mandate does Obama's re-election indicate? It is clear that the majority of voters rejected extremist Republican positions. The majority, though not a resounding one, bought the prudent and moderate Democratic position about the role of the government in building infrastructures, supporting education and research, balancing economic growth and environmental concerns, and making the playing field even with tax structures and economic regulations.

In 2008, Sheikh Hasina was given an overwhelming mandate to lead the nation back to the path of democracy after two years of a military backed caretaker regime. This unelected regime came about because of the machination of the four-party coalition in power during 2001-5. The coalition tried to control and manipulate the Election Commission, voter list preparation, and the then prevailing care-taker government system, which supervised the election.

One major accomplishment in the convoluted story of the army-backed government was the preparation of an acceptable voter list and holding of an orderly general election in 2008, which gave Sheikh Hasina and her coalition partners the resounding victory.

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The electorate was persuaded by the coalition's promise of change -- *din bodoler shopno* the vision of progress towards a more prosperous and just society by 2021, when the nation turns 50.

Amazingly, the regime managed to upset the whole international community, whose goodwill and support we should be able to count on, by creating a "Yunus Affair" out of nothing that concerns the vital interest of the country, and by handling with utter ineptitude the Padma bridge loan agreement with the World Bank and other donors.

The election manifesto pledged to make local government at the union, upazila and district level the pivot of development activities with control and accountability

vested at these levels. In fact, anything less is unacceptable by Article 11 of the Constitution, which is being flouted continuously. The pressure and vested interests of parliament members, overwhelmingly businessmen, obstructed the devolution of authority and resources to the local government bodies.

The crusade against pervasive corruption was a key election pledge. But the public perception and the outcome of its work suggest that the Anti-Corruption Commission is weak, inept and hardly independent. Government foot-dragging can be seen in the lack of

support for all public accountability and statutory bodies such as the Human Rights Commission and the Information Commission.

The nation welcomed the promise to put on trial those responsible for crimes against humanity in 1971. A delayed start in this regard has been followed by slow and lackadaisical progress. Concerned citizens are frustrated and dismayed by poor professionalism, leadership and resources for this vital endeavour.

With only a year remaining before the parliamentary election, the regime cannot fulfill many pledges that it has not even begun to address credibly. It now needs to recognise that it has failed to fulfill expectations and

indicate how it would behave differently, if given another chance.

Mere words will not be enough. The regime has to provide a preview in the coming months of how differently it would behave if re-elected, instead of claiming successes where these do not exist, blaming all problems on the opposition or a deep conspiracy, or simply blustering.

For a starter, there has to be a serious dialogue with the opposition about finding an acceptable formula for holding the general election. This discussion must have two elements strengthening the Election Commission and the composition, leadership and role of the government that will be in power during the election. This may require modifying the hastily and unwisely adopted 15th Amendment.

Secondly, there must be a hard-headed review of progress on the key promises that gave the regime a large majority in the parliament. An unflinching assessment of what beginning can be made in the year ahead that will continue in the next term should be the task of this review.

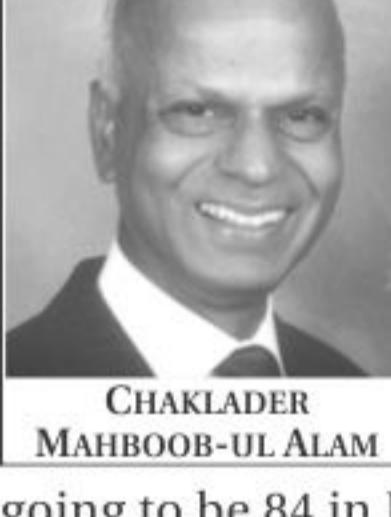
Thirdly, an unequivocal signal must go out that muscle and money will not be the criterion for selecting parliamentary candidates. Rules of the public representation order including declaration of assets, disclosure of business involvements, and all allegations about criminal activities must be seriously followed, scrutinised by independent reviewers and announced publicly.

If a make-over of the mindset and conduct of the ruling regime cannot be made in a way credible to the public within a short time, the electoral majority may not be as sympathetic to the regime as it has been to the incumbent in the US. Let there not be a repeat of 2001 in 2013. The discerning and observant voter must not be given the reasons to say: "Throw out this bunch of people who have not delivered on their promises; try out the other bunch, since there is little to choose from."

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LETTER FROM EUROPE

Homage to an adopted son of Bangladesh



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL-ALAM

It is Monday, November 12, 2012. I have just come to learn that last night, Don Álvaro Sarmiento, the former Bangladeshi consul general in Spain and the co-founder of La Fundación Latino Grameen (the Grameen Trust in Spain) died suddenly in his sleep. He was going to be 84 in February, next year.

At times, I may sound too sentimental to some of the readers regarding this piece but I hope they will find ways to forgive me for this emotional incontinence because, besides being a distinguished adopted son of Bangladesh who served in the Bangladeshi community in Spain so well and for so many years, Álvaro was also my best friend.

As I write, my heart is aching and tears are welling up in my eyes. And I can assure you that I am not a man who cries easily.

Álvaro was born in a conservative Spanish family in Zaragoza, the seat of the prestigious Spanish Military Academy. His father was a general, who served in the Spanish army as a close collaborator of General Franco, the former Head of State of Spain.

Álvaro studied engineering and earned his doctorate in industrial engineering in 1974. Then using his family connections went into business and became very wealthy. He learnt how to play the piano in a professional manner and took lessons to appreciate works of art. Soon he married into an equally wealthy family and had children. Until then there was nothing in his background to indicate that he had any interest in the poor people in his home country, and far less in the immigrants coming from a far-away poor country called Bangladesh.

A chance encounter in Madrid in the early 70s with a Bangladeshi student called Monir ul Islam (now the internationally recognised artist Monir) changed all that. By his own confession, Álvaro found Monir and his sketches rather exotic. This was the beginning of a strange friendship between a penniless immigrant artist and a wealthy businessman, who belonged to the ruling elite of the Spanish society.

It also marked the beginning of Álvaro's transformation from a fun-loving classist to a generous philanthropist, who became genuinely interested in the welfare of people who were less fortunate.

Other changes came in quick successions. By mid-80s there were already hundreds, if not thousands, of Bangladeshi illegal immigrants trying to earn a living by selling cheap garments and other cotton wares at street corners in most of the major cities of Spain and this phenomenon was creating a tension between the governments of Bangladesh and Spain.

Neither of them had any diplomatic mission in each other's country. Since it was very expensive to open and run a full-fledged diplomatic mission in Madrid (the



Mr. Alvaro Sarmiento

embassy in Paris had jurisdiction over Spain), the then Government of Bangladesh decided to look for an honorary consul in Madrid to take care of the growing Bangladeshi community in Spain and to open up the possibilities of bilateral trade between Bangladesh and Spain.

This was not an easy task. The chosen person had to be wealthy enough to pay for all the expenses of running a consulate from his own pocket and also had to have a genuine interest in helping poor immigrants.

Because of his friendship with Álvaro, Monir recommended him for this position to General Abdur Rahman, the then Bangladeshi ambassador to Paris.

Álvaro took his job seriously and for eleven years (1986-1997) he served the Bangladeshi community in every way possible. He issued innumerable passports, gave legal support and personally attended them at immigration centres.

Sometimes he also gave them small sums of money to get by temporarily. Later he helped their children to obtain scholarships so that they could pursue higher studies.

Álvaro became so fond of Bangladesh and its people that he visited the country fourteen times, three of them in the company of Queen Sofia, who happens to love Bangladesh, too. He had been to every nook and corner of Bangladesh. He came to know Bangladesh so well that he often used to give geography lessons to me, a native son of this very land.

He loved our food, our traditional handicrafts and cotton wares. He had truly become a son of Bangladesh, albeit an adopted one. In 2010, in recognition to his services to Bangladesh and Spain and at the recommendation of Ambassador Arturo Perez, King Juan Carlos of Spain appointed him as a Comendador de la Orden del Mérito Civil. It is a pity that the Government of Bangladesh has not yet found it appropriate to honour him with a similar award.

I must end this article here and now because in a newspaper, space is limited. But I must confess that a deep sense of loss has taken hold of me and I am having difficulty in getting rid of it.

I feel, somewhat irrationally, that I should have had the opportunity to tell Álvaro personally before he went away for good, "Although you are gone, your legacy will live on in the hearts and minds of generations of Spaniards of Bangladeshi origin, who love you and owe so much to you for your selfless dedication to the community."

But alas, now it is too late.

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ROHINGYA ISSUE

Time for reappraisal of our diplomacy

S.M. RASHED AHMED

NOW, as President Obama is undertaking a visit to Myanmar, the issue of ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas and violation of their human rights has gained international prominence as the world's most persecuted minorities involving over 8 million stateless Rohingyas scattered around the world. It is heartening to note that President Obama is expected to take up, among others, the Rohingya issue with President Thein Sein. This is what we expect from the US, to stand by the rights of the persecuted minorities and those subject to ethnic cleansing around the globe.

We seem somewhat quick to blame US when it fails to live up to its ideals in defense of human right and liberties. But it has to be said that it was President Clinton's initiative leading to Nato's humanitarian intervention in Kosovo which saved the lives and dignity of Kosovo Albanian Muslims who were victims of Milosovic's genocidal policy of ethnic cleansing, paved the way for UN presence and eventual independence of Kosovo.

I sincerely hope that President Obama's visit would bring about an end to ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslims and restoration of their fundamental right to citizenship snatched away by the military junta of Myanmar.

At the same time, the Bangladesh government should reappraise its policy towards the ongoing ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas in Myanmar. A poor country like Bangladesh has been shouldering the burden of the Rohingya refugees for years, and we cannot go on accepting more of them. But it has to be understood that Rohingya refugees are symptoms of a disease and not the disease itself. The disease lies in the denial of the fundamental human right of citizenship of the Rohingya Muslims, who have lived in Myanmar for centuries, by the military junta, and in the unabated inhuman ethnic cleansing and persecution of innocent men, women and children by the extremists Buddhist majority backed by Myanmar security forces.

Raising no strong voice against this inhuman ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas and pushing the helpless Rohingya refugees with a bottle of water to the sea is no policy at all; it is inhuman, unjust and contrary to the spirit and ideals of a country which achieved independence through blood, toil and tears; which itself experienced the generosity of neighbouring India, particularly the sympathetic people of West Bengal, which housed 10 million Bangladeshi refugees.

Bangladesh diplomacy would need to forcefully address the issue through national consensus, given the stance taken by Aung San Suu Kyi on the issue. I would request the government, all political parties and civil societies to request our Noble laureate Professor Yunus to take up the issue with Aung San Suu Kyi. A meeting of noble minds can change things for a larger humanitarian cause. This is the time to rise above petty differences and utilise the services of one of our finest national assets.

The Nato humanitarian intervention in Kosovo has sent a powerful message that human rights has to take precedence over sovereignty of states when innocent men women and children are subjected to brutal ethnic cleansing. The world and we Bangladeshis cannot sit idly as mute spectators. Our diplomacy should take advantage of the opportunity which would be opened following the visit of President Obama to resolve the Rohingya issue once for all.



ANURUP KANTI DAS

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